

# **Tobias Kaspar**

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# Daniel Horn

## New \_\_\_\_\_ Address

What better place than Cinecittà—the legendary film studios on the outskirts of Rome, to take in a gathering of Tobias Kaspar’s up until now rather discrete and reserved body of work. In spring 2016, the artist staged there the culmination of his multi-venue and multi-format project *The Street*. (Previous versions of *The Street* included a denim launch held in the gardens of the Villa Maraini in Rome, as well as iterations with other artful products and props: in front of a Basel cinema; in a Sao Paulo exhibition space and a Rio de Janeiro concept store.) To date, each of Tobias Kaspar’s projects I have witnessed, or rather *consumed*, has in one way or another, been infused with a measured dose of event-ness, a quality which renders them both vaporous and visceral—the stuff of fashion shows, of standing in line entering a new club.

For *The Street*, which unfolded in-situ throughout various spaces of Cinecittà’s set depicting a brownstone block in Downtown New York erected for Martin Scorsese’s film *Gangs of New York* (2002), Tobias essentially went all out, dramatising the discriminating codes and gestures attached to his own “gangs” of work to date by activating them within this completely fabricated and now largely redundant setting. Fittingly, when I arrived, local news media had already been on location covering this one-day spectacle-cum-company outing. As if in a Robert Altman movie or an HBO art-world mockumentary to come, a cast of friends, colleagues, dealers, curators, collector—all performing as themselves—strolled around this show-within-a-show-within-a-show. Corner shop windows of the *The Shop Around the Corner* displayed

Tobias Kaspar (aka TK) paraphernalia such as his Valentine's Day teddy bears with fluffy butts graced by poetry; his selectively branded bobo-trash/artifacts-from-a-sunken-civilization works ennobled in bronze were casually placed just so, "littering" the steps of a brownstone walk-up; parked on the street of *The Street* was a SUV with its trunk open loaded with goods from the TK-branded *HOME* series of drab household objects; a "Bar" hosted by artist friends was decorated with snapshots of the very same people running and hanging around the bar in the course of the afternoon, producing in parallel a downtown glamor, a 15-minutes of fame temporality already rendered not only vintage, but transactional.

More than just riffing on dusty formats like *Scene & Heard* and *Purple Diary* or on the curatorial mass imperative upon which Instagram is built, the installation and this very publication, continue to inscribe these characters into select production stills from an as yet non-existing biopic—a "making-of" à la "the Artist and his Times". Every move already conceived to serve future quotation, historicisation and indeed valorisation. That same dynamic, albeit in the digital social realm, also played out via Tobi Maier's concurrently updating blog *The Street*. It also played out in a mini-yard-sale where the artist's closest circle sold copies of *Vogue* and other bric-a-brac commonly sought out by students and aficionados with a creative bent—selling off this personal stock of their younger-selves to the next generation eager to emulate them, as well as to a prospective clientele eager to own such relicts related to the artist's coming-of-age. One might say that with *The Street* the roles

and motivations of the artist's *Friends, Lovers & Financiers* became ever more diffuse and entangled. Seeing all these works and interventions gathered together produced a strange shift. The works' hallmark of a coolly conceptual, yet appealing reticence suddenly gave way to a fiction less tightly controlled in that it was allowed to unfold in "real" time and space, while still directed in the spirit of the various dandy-trickster characters Tobias has frequently drawn on for projects over the years. *The Street* climaxed (or actually, unwound) at an "informal dinner" held literally behind the scenes—when the play is over and the curtains come down—which followed a rather formal "Gallery Opening" that featured untitled metallic-grey fabric reflector "paintings" which, I suspect, have already literally become bestsellers.

This ostensibly "mature" tone of this work, derived from Tobias' novel approach to more explicitly personalise the overlapping individual-institutional-commercial temporalities as his subject matter, is encapsulated by *New Address*, the title of this book as well a presentation of works at \_\_\_\_\_'s new home in \_\_\_\_\_ last year. A set of large business cards attached to an antique key belonging perhaps to that substantial town-house announced both, the conversion of prime family real estate into this latest venue to show and sell contemporary art, as well as the artist's own recent move to Riga and thereby communicated their respective private residences as business addresses. With a nod to a similar invite once conceived by the designer John Galliano in the mid-1990s for what would be the first of his several dramatic comebacks, the object here thus

either represented new beginnings or the final settling down with, and/or for, the so-called establishment. During the opening dinner guests were treated to a first-person account of Tobias's peripatetic career to date by Vienna-based artist Alexander Hempel who acted as an impersonator (or, arguably, as an impostor). Moving from table to table and from city to city, the storylines of the art and life of "Tobias Kaspar" became at turns inconsistent and truncated. Simultaneously an intimate improvisation and a rehearsed number, the piece threw into relief Tobias's coming-of-age plot as not merely serving as a conventional point of entry to a (his) practice for a less familiar audience, but also as reified content to entertain and manipulate. In retrospect that performance within that rather domestic setting served as a prelude for the subsequent public talk at the Städelschule in Frankfurt/Main, entitled *Some Apartments (2005–2016)* at the end of 2016. As Hempel has done in the past at other institutions, he again passed himself off as Tobias. The performance thus undermined the institutional convention of the artist talk in more ways than one: it voluntarily dispensed with the relative power ascribed to any uniquely trendsetting young artist by deploying a surrogate to one of the most influential art schools of the last two decades, essentially a fraud planted in the very place that highly cultivates select peer recognition and sophisticated casual networking.

In \_\_\_\_\_ the aforementioned reflective fabric wall-works were paired with some of the antiseptic silkscreen works first shown at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis in 2013. In the latter works Tobias engaged the clean modernist-

inspired layout of *The Gentlewoman*, a fashion and lifestyle glossy, returning its bland graphics to their former glory as prized Western tropes by way of re-institutionalising them in the white cube where they "belonged". The female companion to *Fantastic Man*, *The Gentlewoman* is equally devoted to everything sophisticated, whatever gets to qualify as such, which I assume, is what Tobias was interrogating through this transference, i.e. how the distinct hierarchy of a visual vocabulary that once connoted pristine and now gutted abstraction gets currently monetised and traded; naturally in and as hard currency but more interestingly as mercurial promises of acquired taste and social mobility; anything but water-proof investments, unless in the shape of a Burberry coat. But this side-by-side of the two series now opened up a more complex, less dualistic engagement, precisely due to the banal but enthralling effect produced by tracing the appearance of fleeting bands and squares generated by the fabric, by positioning oneself vis-a-vis the "immanent" properties of these perpetually reactive surfaces. If the Minneapolis panels were unbearably clinical, the fabric paintings manifest their next incarnation as spectral vehicles that have progressed from life support to a life of their own.

Another body of work, already on view as part of *The Street* was the *Kale* photo-text series consisting of what looks like stock imagery of this winter green that has come to epitomise sought after superfoods packing high nutritional value rich in vitamins and minerals. Dewy in some pictures and misty in others, just like the complexion and hair the people detoxing on this plant hope

to attain, this foodie soft-core content evoked the recent “Zero Mile” trend for foraging in a fantastically unspoiled and verdant “local”, perhaps while wearing the heritage Hunter rubber boots that Tobias previously cast in bronze in his ongoing homage to footwear symbolising countercultures turned creative workforce. In \_\_\_\_\_ Tobias showcased the latest iteration of this series, a Stan Smith sneaker, simultaneously a nod to the young (at heart) collector (or art director/brand consultant/personal trainer or what have you) both this “authentic” shoe as well as kale consumption have come to be associated with. Neatly cropped and matted, each kale money shot is captioned by snippets that range from flat aperçus like “She looks good in everything but she won’t just wear anything” to more uneasy hints at struggles to keep up with some larger dictate involving status, career moves balancing family and work or simply looking the part and “keeping it together”. This anonymised polyphony composed from a wide range of sources—from highbrow literature to gossip columns and style blogs—to caption and frame a correspondingly eclectic source of images has become something of a trademark of Tobias’s work. This can be thought of as a technique that still consults Twentieth-Century detachment and *détournement* as a means to an end—one that for better or worse, is dependent on the “system”, which the work both contends with and arguably aspires or indeed “manages” to participate in.

In an earlier work *Lumpy Blue Sweater* (2010), which operates in a similar vein to his *Kale* series, Tobias combined excerpts of a con artist’s diaristic divulgences from a Guy de Maupassant novella

with attractive images of a model posing with André Cadere’s minimalist *barres du bois rond* sculptures from the 1970s, as well as a monologue from the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). For his 2016 Valentine’s Day celebration staged in Milan, Tobias outfitted a boutique Bed & Breakfast with On Kawara-inspired “paintings”, all bearing Valentine’s Day’s date: “14 FEB. 2016” applied in Kawara’s signature font. In fact, both of these frequently referenced artists’-artist positions, Cadere and Kawara, were discussed as the pioneers of a new nomadic art in art historian’s James Meyer “Nomads”<sup>1</sup> essay published some twenty years ago. Meyer delineated this nomad artist as a figure that was on the one hand investigative, and on the other hand prone to aestheticise and thus to marketability, the forerunner to so far trending and expanding economies like art tourism. While generally being indebted to the legacy of the itinerant and potentially deterritorialising artwork by the likes of Cadere and Kawara, Meyer claimed to identify two branches of this new nomadic, one being “lyrical” the other “anti-aesthetic” and thereby “critical”. Lyrical because for Meyer, that kind of nomadism failed to describe or indeed: “veiled the material conditions in which this mobility [of the artist] occurs”, “the actual material situation through which the artist himself circulates” while the critical camp’s reason for employing the nomadic was “to locate the structures of mobility within specific historical, geographical and institutional frameworks”. His conclusion: “The contemporary glamorizing of itineracy is revealed to be another of so many Bohemian returns”.

1 First published as “Nomads” in *Parkett*, No. 49, 1997, pp. 205–209

The many black and white images in *New Address* depict carefree yet also fastidiously edited scenes, settings, individuals, groups and objects mapping the artist's career, moving around the kind of places one has come to expect from a certain resumé; from Hamburg to Frankfurt, from Paris to Los Angeles, from New York to Berlin and so forth. The youthful circle of friends making an appearance here—many of whom would go on to make a name for themselves in the art world—expands to or evolves into Tobias's professional itinerary and network over the years. Browsing this book-length editorial spread with the jittery, self-conscious voices of the *Kale* series echoing in the background makes any critical differentiation of artistic itineracy in Meyer's manner outlined above rather complicated if not a total mess, and adds complexity to Tobias's ongoing anthropology of contemporary art as an organism that is among many things as generic as it is complicitous, self-devouring and above all worth pursuing. *New Address* as a document revisits the commodities and subjects that together have then and now informed the curated lifestyles the artist and his circle are authors of; models for; consumed by. Boundaries and signifiers of so many "institutional frameworks" and "material situations" casually lurk around in these images, acted out by the individuals and reified as the works appearing in *New Address*—their former notions as critiques wholly absorbed and exhausted by the social energy this never-ending trip runs on.