

Jérôme Zonder. The Dancing Room

Museum Tinguely, Basel: 7 June 2017 – 1 November 2017



The presentation of Jean Tinguely's *Mengele-Totentanz* (Mengele-Dance of Death) (1986) in a new, purpose-built exhibition space also marks Museum Tinguely's launch of a series of exhibitions of young artists who reference this major late work of the artist and engage with its enduring topicality. The series starts off with Jérôme Zonder (b. 1974 in Paris), who counts among the most outstanding draughtsmen of his generation. His grotesque inventions, not unlike those of Hieronymus Bosch, Paul McCarthy or Otto Dix, lend expression to the unspeakable acts of depravity and catastrophic moral failings of the last 100 years, which the artist reworks as contemporary *danses macabres*. Some forty drawings, a monumental wall-sized

work, and a sculptural construction will be assembled to form an installation in direct dialogue with Tinguely's *Mengele-Totentanz* and will be on show in Basel from 7 June to 1 November 2017.

As recently as 2016, Jérôme Zonder was invited by Museum Tinguely to create a room of his own as part of its thematic show 'PRIÈRE DE TOUCHER – The Touch of Art'. He responded with a series of drawings of hands clutching each other as well as the large-format, four-part female nude called *Autopsie de la jeune fille* (2015). Here, the sensuous perceptual impulse that informs nude drawing and that was replicated on the support as graphic tactile energy extended even to the walls, which Zonder covered in an all-over of graphite fingerprints.

Zonder's solo show at Museum Tinguely in the summer of 2017 will take its cues from a major late work of Tinguely himself, his *Mengele-Totentanz* (1986), a fourteen-part mechanical sculpture that is to be re-installed in a specially built, chapel-like room inside the museum. It owes its name to the 'high altar' in the middle: a maize harvester – so drastically deformed as to be barely recognisable – made by the firm of Mengele, the family of the notorious Nazi concentration camp doctor. All the parts used for this work are relics of an infernal blaze at a farm not far from Tinguely's studio in Neyruz, near Fribourg. The theme of the Dance of Death has a long tradition in Basel. It reached its apogee in the famous Basel Dance of Death of 1450, a widely cited and reproduced mural painted on the inside of the wall enclosing what was then the Dominican convent. Its row of dancers conveyed several messages at once: it reminded viewers of the transience of life and the egalitarian nature of death, but at the same time took up some of the ideas behind the Humanist ideals then emerging. Tinguely's sinister, multi-sensory installation and the iconographic tradition of the Dance of Death on which it rests reverberate in Zonder's drawings in a way that is at once astounding and disturbing. Tales of human cruelty, Nazi atrocities, rape, genocide, and everyday violence are a staple of the media's visual repertoire to which we have long since become inured and hence tend to disregard.

In Zonder's drawings, these repellent images of human depravity drawn from the history of the twentieth century force themselves back onto our critical radar screen as visual constructs with an inescapable, macabre presence.

What makes Zonder's works so compelling is their exposure of the extremes of both content and graphic technique, which at the same time provide the underpinning for his treatment of emotive and controversial themes. Played out on what Hartmut Böhme, in his essay *The Sense of Touch within the Plexus of the Senses*, calls the "claviature of the line", the very act of drawing, like a squeeze of the hand, unleashes a tactile, haptic energy. The empathy it manifests is not confined to the human body in Zonder's work. Applying a maximum-precision graphic method, he demonstrates his command of every technique, combining charcoal, pencil, and graphite on diverse supports and exploiting to the full every possible nuance between black and white. This enables him to unite on a single sheet a broad range of styles extending from (hyper)realism to pointillist finger-drawing, from *disegno* to childlike scribbling and cartoons. Drawing, understood in the classical sense, is that means of expression whose intimacy puts it on a par with writing, which is also what lends it to the unmediated visualisation of conceptual processes, cognitive reflections, or an associative automatism. A young generation of draughtsmen, to which Zonder himself belongs, is now taking this process beyond the confines of the single support. Since many works make an impact when grouped in thematic and stylistic collages, Zonder combines single drawings to create wall-filling assemblages. These can grow into quasi-architectural spaces which, being inseparably linked to places of remembrance and reflection, appeal to body and mind, with all the senses.

The topical urgency of Zonder's drawings is most glaringly apparent in the execution scenes camouflaged as *jeux d'enfants* – grotesque, nightmarish collages in the manner of Otto Dix or George Grosz that start with familiar situations, the playroom in the private home for example, only to confront viewers all the more forcefully with scenes of horrific violence. Others, such as the series *Les chairs grises* (2013), rest on documentary photographs of the atrocities committed inside Nazi concentration camps, but instead of merely reproducing them in another medium, he reworks them as a trail of fingerprints so that the drawing itself becomes expressive of our sense that some things are simply beyond our comprehension. Zonder's hybrid image worlds draw on a repertoire that combines the individual with the collective; he intermingles these elements in an open-ended, creative act entailing the constant interplay of intuition with a clear focus on the object of study, the manner and style of its representation, and its development. The conceptual core of this 'recipe', which enables the artist to get inside his images, as it were, to subjectivise them and to develop his own picture narratives, lies in the artist's on-going inquiry into what images today can achieve. For an artist like Jérôme Zonder, whose thinking combines cultural pessimism with profound humanity, who reflects on war and violence, anti-Semitism, the destruction of humanity, and consumer society's destruction of culture at the individual level, the grotesque is at once both a style and a method of illustrating the contradictions that characterise the times in which we live. Presented in his 'cellular' drawings with unprecedented polygraphic accentuation, therefore, are mirth and morbidity, cruelty and comedy, mockery and menace, the speakable and the unspeakable, the delicate and the diabolical.

Publications

“Jérôme Zonder”, Galerie Eva Hober, édition Galerie Eva Hober, Paris.

The catalogue will be published in French, English and German, with a preface by Eva Hober and contributions by Roland Wetzel and Catherine Francblin, price: 32 CHF.

A lavishly illustrated book marking the re-installation of Tinguely's Mengele-Totentanz (1986) with essays by Sophie Oosterwijk, Sven Keller, and Roland Wetzel and with an interview between Jean Tinguely and Margrit Hahnloser recorded in 1988 is to be published by Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg/Berlin. The book will be published in German, French and English. Available in the Museum Shop and online: 24 CHF, ISBN: 978-3-9524759-1-1 (EN).

The exhibition is curated by Roland Wetzel, director of Museum Tinguely, and has been set up in an intensive collaboration with the artist.

General information

Title: Jérôme Zonder. The Dancing Room

Address: Museum Tinguely | Paul Sacher-Anlage 1 | 4002 Basel

Duration: 7 June – 1 November 2017

Opening: Tuesday, 6 June 2017, 6:30 pm

Press conference: Tuesday, 6 June 2017, 10:30 am

Opening hours: Tuesday – Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm daily

Special opening hours during ART Basel (12 – 18 June 2017): Monday – Sunday, 9 am – 7 pm

Website:

<https://www.tinguely.ch>

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