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PIONEERING THE IN-BETWEEN by Judith Vrancken



Installation view of "Part-Time Pioneer" by Beny Wagner 2011 (Photo: Wiley Hoard)

Walking into the patio at the Humboldt University feels like walking into a contemporary version of Johannes Vermeer's private studio. It's hard to tell whether such an impression comes from the amazing natural light filtering in through the glass rooftop, the tiled floor, or the show's main installation of what seem wooden stretcher bars draped with impressive rolls of white paper or all of the above, but the room exudes a quest for time, presence and sense of space. For his show 'Part-time Pioneer' German-American-Israeli artist Beny Wagner (1985) produced three new works: *The Barber Can't Cut his Own Hair* (2011); *Rabbit, Rabbit, White Rabbit* (2011); and *Part-time Pioneer* (2011).

Most prominent and aesthetically appealing is the installation *The Barber Can't Cut His Own Hair* (2011) consisting of five half-finished wooden assemblies, different in width, height, and apart from one, all loosely draped with immense white paper rolls that carry the imprint of the title's letters. They appear to be easels supporting a daunting white canvas that immediately evoke the fear of the empty page, which is accentuated by the callously excessive amounts of paper rolled down on the floor, in anticipation of the author's signature. *The Barber Can't Cut His Own Hair* displays an inherent capability of effectively staging a sense of temporal awareness, as the piece seems to exist in an eternal 'in-betweenness' vacillating between start and finish. A gap is opened up in the work-in-itself and work-as-idea that addresses the viewer with an imperative to build. The frameworks that indeed are reminiscent of half-finished stretcher bars could function as the blueprint: work addresses itself, in part, to the mental plane of the understanding, asking to be completed as an imaginary work as a studio set-up or a collection of empty paintings. Corresponding to Derrida's formulation of the idea of trace, the elements of the objects are neither presence nor absence and here, Wagner produces traces as potentialities that materialize into actual beings.

This also appears to be true for *Rabbit, Rabbit, White Rabbit* (2010). In this video the viewer bears witness to the artist's search for the supposedly hundreds of rabbits that come out of their underground labyrinth to confiscate an open field in the middle of a park, although the exact location of this park remains unclear. Here, the search for the vast amount of rabbits becomes the effect that acts as a

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trace trajectory of desire. In expectation of finding the evasive animals by walking through the park, over an old fortified building, through the forest, gazing upon boys playing soccer and oblivious strollers, it becomes clear it's not about fulfilling the desire but about the search itself. The viewer expects to be led somewhere, indeed with anticipations of arrival. It is in spite of his awareness of the impossibility of ever fulfilling that desire, Wagner nevertheless addresses the necessity of longing. Again, there is no completion, no conclusion, just the in-between.

The work that shares the exhibition's title, *Part-time Pioneer*(2011), shows something different. It is comprised of ten copies of a note Barack Obama wrote when running for president and which he placed in the Wailing Wall during a visit in Israel. They are printed on different luxury hotel letterhead and laid out in a glass showcase. The real work however is the booklet laying on top of this (which somewhat defeats the purpose of the showcase), consisting of the same notes but this time in the shape of postcards that the reader can tear out and send as a personalized card. Where in the previous works the 'in-betweenness' is eternal, here the artist encourages the audiences to complete the work by sending out the cards. However, where will they be sent to? And when sent, does this actually complete the work or will it remain in a state of perpetually incompleteness? *Part-time Pioneer* deposits something that can be reactivated later in the viewer's memory, thus becoming active only at "second moment". This 'deferred action' acts as a circular complementarity of directions of time that indeed turns the delay into the beginning.

Wagner engages in this abstract metaphysical desire, extending any sense of arrival, resulting in an eternal flow of experience that never really stops or stays still. Instead, there are partial flows and displacements, which carry us off in our desire to know. Where one expects art, art has been voided, put under erasure, producing art where you least expect it, in the in-between of the blanks, of that which is lacking. This "nothingness" is the canvas on which Wagner produces meaning, the phenomenological condition for the possibility of things.

***Part-time Pioneer* is on display at the Lichthof in the Humboldt Universität, Unter den Linden 6, from 29 March to 24 April 2011**

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A nice and vivid review that makes you picture what it describes, but even more makes you want to see.

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