Annunciation

On Chris Evans' Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle

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Essay – July 4, 2014

Curator and author Tirdad Zolghadr tries to frame Chris Evans' new artwork *Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle, After a Drawing Produced by an Anonymous Philanthropist* by de-framing it as well as returning it to its essential materiality and site-specificity. Evans' work, commissioned by Sculpture International Rotterdam, was recently placed at a local branch of the Rabobank in Rotterdam.

Coptalk, 2005 – ongoing (image: 5th May 2008. La Cambre, École nationale supérieure des arts visuels, Brussels, Belgium).

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Chris Evans' 2014 piece for Sculpture International Rotterdam *[www.onlineopen.org/portrait-of-a-recipient-as-a-door-handle]* is located on the elegantly named street, the Coolsingel in Rotterdam, which, according to Sculpture International, betrays itself, "an ugliness which is paraded in all shamelessness…" The "ugliness" in question leads back to the city's appetite for repeatedly erasing and re-erasing its own textures, which means that the very bank that sponsors and harbours the new sculpture "is probably about to disappear too". Indeed, it is "against the backdrop of these historical and future developments [that] Sculpture International Rotterdam is commissioning artists to develop a work that anticipates these transformations". Programmatic amnesia, pre-emptive oblivion.

As for the host edifice itself, Rabobank boasts a proud history, having been founded in the 1860s to alleviate the widespread misery among farmers in the Netherlands. The term "cooperative" is still key to the self-understanding of the organisation. More recently, however, the international press has been replete with phrasings such as, "Three former Rabobank traders have been charged in the US with engaging in a five-year scheme to manipulate benchmark interest rates as international probes of rate rigging escalate".[1]

I admit that I do not fully understand this sentence. I do know what benchmark interest rates are but I couldn't really tell you how to successfully "manipulate" them. (Maybe you need to smile, make them feel wanted?). I probably understand as much as a banker would, reading your typical Chris Evans quote.

As a writer/curator, I don't think I am alone in these disciplinary restrictions. If I need to know about rate rigging, I ask my friend Britta who works at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. I don't ask a curator on some panel at the Stedelijk, which is why there was something endearing about us standing around in the Coolsingel Rabobank, sipping prosecco at the reception. It was as if we were trying to absorb the complexities of finance by osmosis.

Proxemics can be a strange thing in the arts. Not only do we actually attach the art to bank doors, we get close to the artist even as we say it's all about the work (not the maker). Sometimes we huddle close to the art, to signal our sincere commitment to it. On the

other hand, we go to openings not to discuss what's hanging there but to stand around in its immediate vicinity. Bankers, by contrast, don't hold meetings in bank vaults; the proxemics/osmosis thing is specifically an art thing. And there's nothing wrong with that, it's just something we do. What I'm wondering, however, is whether it goes back to a particular sense of confusion regarding power and location.

Allow me to take a specific Evans quote lifted from the press release for the Sculpture International Commission: "My methods are simple: conversations that are bombastic in their connotations of power and influence dissolve into mute objects, leftovers from these hidden negotiations". There are at least two things worth highlighting here.

One is the issue of "dissolve", of transfiguring process into art. When students ask me how to allow the backstage stories – the procedural challenges – to appear within the final work, but without being coy, tedious or otherwise annoying, I refer them to Evans. Chris Evans is an artist who tells the stories without any need for "reading rooms" or "shifting archives"; he conveys the research without any xeno-epistemic rhetoric, yet also renders visual the superstructure (usually) without the self-serving critique that often comes with artistic gestures of this kind.

This brings me to the second thing I'd like to highlight, namely the topography of self-effacement: "dissolve", "mute", "leftovers", "hidden". A barrage of meek humility. It's true, Evans' public sculptures are not exactly Henry Moore. Neither in the dimensions, nor in the rhetoric. One sees no hubristic hope for public edification, cast in crushing tons of stone and bronze. And yet, the rhetoric is monumental and big in another way entirely. It's big in that it corresponds to an orthodox tenet of contemporary art as we know it. As in something like, "The artwork itself is not even the real thing, just the echo of conversations past, or a trigger to some aftermath down the line" and so on. To evoke this scenario is to dress down in a manner we're all pretty comfortable with. *C'est le bon ton au bureau*. The humble referral. The modest proposal. We can call the piece a "speed bump" and remember Latour, or a "buried time capsule" and think about Benjamin. (Consider also the programmatic amnesia and pre-emptive oblivion of Sculpture International's take on the urban setting – more self-effacement even here …)

Actually, Evans' work is an unapologetic take on complicity and identification. In this, it is not exactly unexpected. Compare the new sculpture to previous commissions, such as *Cop Talk* (2005-ongoing), *Existential Retreat* (2006), or *I Don't Know If I've Explained Myself* (2008-ongoing). Cops supplant teachers, audiences and speakers are crassly divided, artists are submitted to harrowing conditions of production.

And yet, typically, we are loath to say that the work is actually doing something forceful, or taking forceful decisions on its own account. We prefer to say it "challenges" our notion of art education, "critiques" our notion of the institution, and "questions" our notion of authorship and so on. Writer-curators can never get enough of these teeny-weeny tropes of micro-subversion. Sometimes we don't even bother to say what exactly is being subverted, or why; instead we hint at mysterious "new meanings" without specifying what they could possibly be. I myself am no exception to this ethos. Allow me to quote at length from an older text of mine on Chris Evans' oeuvre.

"Have you ever stopped and wondered: Whatever happened to Andrew Ridgeley? As a member of WHAM!, Ridgeley rarely played guitar, he couldn't dance, and he wouldn't sing. He just hovered there, looming about, a bit like a Chris Evans structure lurking in the wilderness. Gently wagging his fist in the air as he smiled at the camera. Ridgeley was the curatorial gesture par excellence. He did write the blockbuster "Careless Whisper", but the ballad only kick-started George Michael's solo career, propelling him far beyond Ridgeley. After which he launched attempts at the surfboard industry, Formula Three, Hollywood acting and a solo LP. None of these efforts bore fruit, not even the surfing. A *Daily Mail*

article claims whenever Ridgeley fell off his board, he had someone shouting “Wham! Bam! I am a man!” To top it all off, Ridgeley was hospitalised after surfing through raw sewage. This unlikely baptism marked a turning point. Ridgeley became a forefront environmentalist fighting for UK waters, and together with the registered charity ‘Surfers Against Sewage’ he successfully lobbied for legislation which wiped out E. Coli in the country’s waters. The tide had now turned”.

To me, Ridgeley was irresistible as an allegorical foil. A set of colourful opposites, all in limbo, the man embodied the contemporary art temperament with chilling precision. Comical but heroic. Hovering close to glamour without being glamorous himself. Weak but persevering. Handsome but tragic. Part French, part Egyptian, part British. Obvious but unpredictable. Decisive but indeterminate. Agency suspended. Lurking, hoping, waiting.

Might there be another way to frame Chris Evans? We could begin by acknowledging that his body of work is not self-effacing or evasive at all, but refreshingly assertive. Not only does Evans’ oeuvre hold its own vis-à-vis its respective host institutions; it has no problem being part of them. Evans’ work is a residency, it is an invitation to join the police force, it is a discursive format – but also, indeed, a doorway to an influential bank, not to mention a key component within the apparatus of patronage. And not just a cutesy subversion thereof.

When it comes to the Coolsingel commission, maybe the work doesn’t imitate or explain the bank, but it certainly asserts and explains its relationship to it. If it is true that Evans’ intervention goes mostly unnoticed, it is actively unnoticed, by thousands of patrons per day. And in this it is less like an ageing pop star, and more like architecture. Evans’ piece is massive to the touch; heavyset, solid, reassuring, even promising. It is functional in that it swings open a hefty door; it is access, an emotionalised moment, especially in bad weather, which often prevails. It presents a given philanthropist as a gatekeeper with the philanthropist’s anonymity emphasising structures over individuals, systems over personalities, emblems over anecdotes. And the work is a trust-broker of sorts, in that it is the depiction of a moment: the overcoming of suspicion and reluctance, and a move toward acceptance and relief.

Moreover, it is a work that hovers at eye level, a human face interpellating you – face to face – and inviting you to identify. In this sense, you could make the case for a populist subtext here. After all, a philanthropist and beneficiary are represented as identical sides of the same coin. The philanthropist as messenger, vis-à-vis the beneficiary, one-to-one on a level playing field. All he does is invite us to share in his garden of delights. He brings the good news of redemption. (It bears mentioning that the most prominent motif in the history of Christian art is the Annunciation – a comparative approach for another paper, perhaps, by a more informed historian than myself.)

Finally, the door handle is physically touched a thousand times a day or more. With the sweat and the snot, the soy sauce, coffee and ketchup, not to mention the skin creams leaving many visceral traces behind. Which brings us back to osmosis. Does it work?

In one sense, the answer is no. In that the art remains doggedly Other to its environment, submitted to a dynamic that remains its own. For all its comparability and complicity, the work does not dissolve. Its contours remain stark and clear. That said, it must work in some sense, or we wouldn’t keep doing this type of thing. After all, you could just as well plop the door handle on a plinth somewhere?

Physical, site-specific attributes aside, some would say the physical proximity works because it offers the warm sunshine of power without the need to take responsibility for it. And, because of our melancholic hunger for the Real World beyond the world of

representation, it has us staring at the world of banks, for example, while reassuring ourselves that we are not part of it. But it also works by way of the visceral frictions, the mutual infections, the aesthetic pheromones, contagious as influenza, or erotica, triggering micro-epiphanies of various kinds. Moreover, it works at the level of identification.

To argue this last point, I'll end with a catchphrase from the TV series House of Cards that I do like to quote from these days, perhaps a little too fanatically. The protagonist looks the audience in the eye and murmurs, "Power is a lot like real estate. It's all about location, location, location. The closer to the source, the better". It's not that contemporary art likes to cuddle up to the "real estate", but that it has recently become a "source" in itself. Art, in this scheme of things, is not a parasite or Trojan Horse, but a form of aesthetic, material and ideological infrastructure, pure and simple. And maybe this identification is not cynical but important at this point in time.

Other theme article *Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle*

Essay Marina Vishmidt *[www.onlineopen.org/a-heteroclite-excursus-into-the-currency-that-lives]*

Tirdad Zolghadr is a writer and curator. The working title of his third novel is *Headbanger*.

Footnotes

1. *The Guardian*, January 14, 2014

Crosslinks

A Heteroclite Excursus into the Currency that Lives: www.onlineopen.org/a-heteroclite-excursus-into-the-currency-that-lives
Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle: www.onlineopen.org/portrait-of-a-recipient-as-a-door-handle

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