

and only later as fiction, or as art:

My work was created to be experienced as historic fact, as a method for a direct and personal involvement of the visitor. It creates an experience that is not filtered by the categories of contemporary art that we would normally apply to such a tour, it provides a participatory sense of discovery. This principle has been called "haptic conceptual art," a practice that deals with deep questions of the human condition, but initiates them through direct experience, rather than through theoretical discourse. If this work were labelled as a project of contemporary art, would this protect the visitor, or deny the key experience?"¹

When visitors first encounter the deeply evocative story spun in *Amber* and believe it to be true, the quality of their attention is both keener and more innocent; they become absorbed in its intricate unfolding narrative, assuming the role of investigators, gathering clues and guessing at the shape of the history behind them. Mary, the butler and Dr. Lee then exist as more than products of the artist's mind or of her research. They become focal points of shared imagination and invention, constructed through the communal labour of art production: the labour of the artist, curator, gallery workers; the labour of attention and discussion performed by visitors; the labour of the docents who tend the secret.

Häussler's work owes something to that of Louise Lawler, who emphasized that art is a collective endeavour, stressing the often-unseen role of such work within cultural institutions. Lawler also invited critics to collaborate with her in the

production of art, just as Häussler and the AGO asked art critics to participate in the ongoing production of *Amber* by breaking the secret to the public. Like Lawler, Häussler also frequently makes herself invisible to audiences. Although it is more meditative and less pointedly trenchant, *He Named Her Amber* also recalls aspects of the institutional critique of Andrea Fraser (another artist indebted to Lawler), who once posed as an art-museum docent and conducted gallery tours, commenting on the institution's educational practices, audiences, and support system of volunteers. Before Häussler, when the Grange was staged as a historic home with colonial furnishings, its docents conducted tours in period costume, lending authority to their re-enactments of a putatively more authentic version of history through their expression of the possession of—to borrow Fraser's words—the "cultural capital that defines a museum's patron class."² Many of today's visitors to *He Named Her Amber* evidence the trust the viewing public typically places in such figures of identification, which represent and carry all the legitimating force of the institution. Like Fraser, Häussler negotiates the ethics of deceiving audiences in order to convey truth in a new way.

He Named Her Amber subverts conventions of artistic exhibition and participation as well as of site specificity, requiring new forms of critical attention and audience engagement. That the spell has been so resilient is testament to the power of the work's radical form, which is precisely what enables it to intervene so effectively in the realms of history, science, art and museum education, challenging them all equally. ▶



Iris Häussler, *He Named Her Amber*, 2008–2010. Installation view of the ongoing assessment of discovered artifacts, temporarily housed in the historic Goldwin Smith Library of The Grange. PHOTO: IAKUB HENSCHEN, 2009

YVONNE SINGER – RANDOM OBJECTS : RANDOM THOUGHTS

Akau Inc, Toronto

by SARAH ARANHA

Yvonne Singer's most recent exhibition, *Random objects: random thoughts*, is framed by a quotation by Walter Benjamin included in the artist's statement: "Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre." In the dramatically lit gallery space of Akau, the stage appears to be set.

In the first piece you see upon entering the gallery, magazines are stacked high upon an angular wooden veneered tower topped by a bronze sculpture of hands grasping ankles, which sits precariously close to the edge. In another piece, vintage bronze mirrors on stands are grouped together in a corner of the gallery space, a needlepoint tapestry hung on the wall nearby. And in another corner, an assortment of small resin cabinets, a plaster cast, a doll and a briefcase are arranged on and around a wooden table that has been turned on its side. Walking into the gallery, it is difficult to determine whether you are early for the performance, or if you have missed it altogether.

In this installation, Singer stages a conversation between art history and the more intimate stories of domesticity and personal history, echoed by the variety of materials she uses. Each of the objects included in the installation can be traced back to an aspect of the artist's life, either by having been included in previous exhibitions, or because they belong to her. A touchstone for her own identity as a sculptor, the geometric "Brancusi column," which is the artist's informal name for the wooden-veneered tower, references art history overtly. The piled-up *Artforum* and *Canadian Art* magazines are drawn from among Singer's personal effects, and serve as ongoing documentation of contemporary art, or art history in the making. Those familiar with Singer's practice might also recognize the bronze mirrors from a 2003 show at The Red Head gallery entitled *Le stade du miroir*. In their original placement, the six mirrors were arranged in a circle, inviting viewers to glimpse their own reflection, though the mirrored surfaces have been obliterated, thwarting self-reflection and the suggestion of self-understanding. In the exhibition at Akau, these same mirrors stand in a gaggle, except for one that

- 1 Iris Häussler, "The Grange Excavation Project 2008/2009 (He Named Her Amber): Excavation Notes 01/2009," <http://haeussler.ca/amber>, accessed February 4, 2009.
- 2 Andrea Fraser, "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk," in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005), page 111, note 4.

has fallen onto the floor. Similarly, the overturned table is from a work entitled *Staging Memory*, which was shown at the Montreal Holocaust Centre in 2000. By repositioning these earlier artworks within this current installation, the artist revisits and engages her own practice to produce new meaning—an alternative to the linear trajectory of art history suggested by the art magazines.

Contrasting Singer's reference to art history and contemporary art practice, the needlepoint tapestry and hand-made doll function as reminders of art forms that remain undervalued or relegated to the realm of "craft." Made by Singer's grand-

mother, the needlepoint tapestry features a young girl sitting demurely under a tree, in a scene that could have been sourced from any number of 18th- or 19th-century romantic paintings. The perceived divide between domestic concerns and fine art is evident again in the presence of a life-like brown-haired doll crafted by Singer's cousin. Everything about the doll, including her porcelain face, her clothes and her footwear, was painstakingly hand-produced. Her intricately painted eyelashes and the countless minute stitches in her clothing are all the result of a labour of love, produced through intimate and careful attention.

Also included are objects that were wrought by Singer herself, using processes that require similar care, attention and intelligence to those used by her grandmother and cousin. The bronze cast of the artist's hands gripping her ankles, as well as the bronze cast of her hands wrung together, are part of a larger unfinished series. The labour-intensive nature of traditional bronze casting parallels the tense positions in which the artist's hands and feet have been captured: veins are visible, knuckles are taut, toes appear to grip the floor beneath them. What did the rest of the body look like? We can just about see it, perhaps awkwardly and painfully doubled over to grab onto the ankles, or a brow furrowed in thought as hands are clasped together in worry. A rumination on the passage of time and its effects on the body, the casts arrest the artist's body at one particular moment, preventing the further changes that age will inevitably bring. By their very nature, the bronze casts affirm the artist's presence while exposing her absence.

The small resin dressers, teetering on the upturned wooden table, elaborate on this duality of change and permanence. They were recently made for a group exhibition at York University that never came to fruition, and were cast digitally using a contemporary sculpting process where digital images of the dollhouse dressers and a conch shell were first scanned into a computer, and then cut in resin to create a three-dimensional form. The result is both an original sculpture and a mould that can be used to create additional works. By pausing in this in-between state, Singer maintains the inherent potential of these sculptures and refers again to domesticity; the miniature resin dollhouse dressers allude to the instability and impermanence of childhood.

Stepping back from this close inspection of the smaller narratives, it is possible to see the way in which the threads are woven together. The three groupings of objects within the installation enact distinct processes of remembrance whereby memories are forged neither chronologically, nor factually, instead occurring episodically, thematically, and affectively. Encountering this exhibition, viewers bear witness to a life, and by moving through the different histories of art, craft, the home and the artist's body, they are able to trace how these practices and spaces intersect. By overlapping new and old ma-



Yvonne Singer, *random objects : random thoughts*, 2009, detail, bronze cast of feet and hands, art magazines.

art-making processes, and by reusing and repositioning her own earlier works of art, Singer illustrates the cyclical character of memory and personal history, and confronts the steady forward movement of time. Whether you arrive at the beginning or at the end of the performance becomes irrelevant. The palpable sense that the exhibition suspends an otherwise fleeting moment enables viewers to animate the scene before them and recreate a story of someone else's life from the fragments offered to them, in their own time. ▶

FRANCIS ALÿS: FABIOLA

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

by STEPHANIE ROGERSON

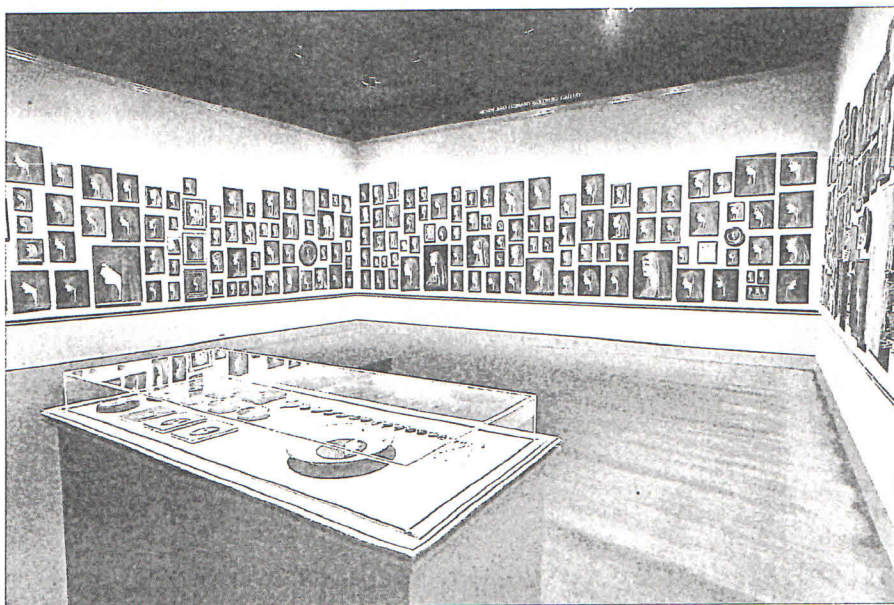
Much of Francis Alÿs' art practice centres on the act of walking. For his series *Doppelgänger* (1999), made in Mexico City, he photographed pedestrians who looked like him. For his piece *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political And Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic* (2005), made in Jerusalem, he walked an invisible yet politically charged border between Israel and Palestine with a leaking can of green paint. And for *Zapatos Magnéticos*, creat-

ed during the 1994 Havana Biennale, he walked through the Cuban city in magnetic shoes that attracted metal detritus. Mapping and collecting cultural artifacts are thus continuous threads in Alÿs' art practice.

For *Fabiola*, his recent exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which was also mounted at the National Portrait Gallery in London, Alÿs ambled through flea markets, swap meets, thrift stores and street sales across the Americas and Europe, searching out portraits of Fabiola, the patron saint of domestic abuse and divorce. Fabiola was sainted by Saint Jerome between 382 and 384 C.E., and her entrance into hagiography was no small feat. Due to the extreme domestic abuse she endured, she divorced her first husband, which required proof from the Catholic Church that the marriage was completely untenable. To be granted a divorce during Byzantine Rome, the abuse would have had to have been life-threatening. In this exhibition, Alÿs gives new meaning to abandoned images of Fabiola, which present an alternative approach to collecting with a distinctively feminist bent.

Alÿs' collection of Saint Fabiola reproductions suggests that used goods and refuse have cultural value. The idea of repetition, reflected by the number of almost identical images, and by Alÿs' compulsive collecting process, has particular significance. Presenting a twist on his piece *Doppelgänger*, where Alÿs sees himself in others, these Fabiolas reflect the exact same subject but without an "original." The original Fabiola painting made in 1885 by Jean-Jacques Henner, which provides the basis of these images, was lost in transit during the early 20th century. Made by anonymous and non-canonical artists, the images in Alÿs' collection are reproductions of reproductions and the doppelgänger in this case is not the person, but the image. Through the repetition of the collected portraits, Alÿs collapses their individual makers into a collective consciousness, shifting the sanctity of hagiography into a commodity of the discarded.

Repeated in over 300 pieces, Fabiola's image is hardly altered. The differences between these reproductions and Jean-Jacques Henner's original painting are largely distinctions in technical skill, quality of line and use of materials. Some of the portraits are enamelled onto small delicate containers, painted onto velvet, rendered



Francis Alÿs, Installation view of *Francis Alÿs: Fabiola*, 2009, LACMA
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