

Jennifer Allen: Meeting the Future

The encounter lies at the heart of FUTURE7's oeuvre. The first encounter is between Nikolai von Rosen and Florian Wojnar who have been working together as FUTURE7 since 1997. Some of their initial collaborations – like the *Cutting* series, 1999-2001 – created confrontations between two photographs. Each colour photograph was cut into strips of varying width; then the strips were interpolated, one picture strip after another, to produce the generous visual spread proper to a panorama. Far from competing for the view, the two fused photographs resound with curious yet striking harmonies – somewhat like von Rosen and Wojnar themselves.

Cutting #14, 2001, appears as a haunting mosaic, caught between figurative representation and abstract decoration. One photograph catches a skirted pair of legs flowing across a floor tiled with star-like configurations in brown, black and white; there's a sense of rushing away from the heat at high noon. The other photograph presents a row of lofty pine trees, blocked by a lone electrical wire and one of those orange plastic barriers that can usually be found at urban construction sites; it's an unlikely landscape, both natural and made-man. While each photograph remains realist, together they possess a dream-like quality, which pushes their figurative elements towards abstraction and ornamentation. FUTURE7's method of creating the encounter – something akin to weaving with photography, to combining simple handwork with high technology – encourages the eye to search for patterns of recognition and then to forge them. First, one puts together the strips from each photograph, like imagining a picture from the scattered pieces of a puzzle. Then, oddly enough, other similarities arise: between the orange plastic barrier and the red socks moving across the floor; between the electrical wire and the border of the floor; between the white tiles and the white gaps in the barrier; the blurred movement of the green skirt and the distant green tree tops, whose branches are slightly overexposed by the sun. Both images end in a whited-out horizon that suggests a common destiny, if not simply the skies that hover above every photograph.

There are other encounters, which combine photography and architecture, stock markets and art markets, painting and sculpture, gallery publications and gallery spaces. *Säulenordnung* (Order of pillars), 2001, filled the Campusgalerie in Bayreuth with paper columns made of printed images: from a dog pulling on a leash to a lone man navigating his way through a field of plastic white chairs. Some of the images were wrapped around existing pillars in the gallery while others stood alone as colourful yet hollow sentinels, if not ersatz visitors. The project *Landscape Game Memorial*, 2003, is a series of works that matured in 2003 at the Art Frankfurt fair, not far from the home of the European Central Bank. Starting with an imaginary portfolio invested in 1998, this "what-if" financial scenario showed the ensuing profits and losses – the ups and the downs – as a series of colourful paintings of graphics. While confounding two forms of investments – stocks and artworks – the paintings resemble psychedelic mountain ranges, where the highest peak can be seen as both the apex and the bursting bubble. In 2004, FUTURE7 took on yet another piece of history: the expansion of the European Community. In this encounter between politics and art, "a grammar of images" was used as a formula for translating statistics and events surrounding the expansion into artworks, from the sculptural to the painterly. Inspired by European policies, the painting *Eurototale*, 2004, appears as both a colourful statistical chart and a dramatic rocky coastline, sandwiched between the blue of the

sea and the sky. *Monte Video Europa*, 2004, turns the expansion into a sturdy table topped off with a curious emblem – changing colours as it seeps to the edges of the table – which recalls a military map or perhaps a chemical stain.

For the exhibition *Tarantella* at Berlin's Galerie Crone in 2005, FUTURE7 confronted the gallery with its own history, architecture and surroundings. Their goal was to unsettle the tendency of all galleries – the archetypal white cube – to favour the display of artworks over the production of them. The painting *Concept Car*, 2005 – which depicts a car as a solid black shadow, if not a cut-out silhouette – mirrors the existence of an automobile dealer's showcase which is located close to Galerie Crone. In fact, *Concept Car* is a composite of the outlines of four top-of-the-line German limousines – Audi 8, VW Phaeton, Mercedes S-Class, BMW 7 – whose distinct shades of black are integrated into the painting. Mirroring the automobile dealer's showcase with a painting underscores the artwork's status as a commodity whose mere display can be the source of both fetishism and value. Indeed, the car's mere shadow – like the shadow of Peter Schlemihl which the character sells off in Adelbert von Chamisso's tale – can have a greater value than the car. The sparse painting is also doubly framed; first, on its white canvas, and, second, on a temporary white wall, which the artists added to the gallery. *Concept Car* is a painting that comes with its own mobile wall (supported by a series of sandbags sitting on the frame behind the wall). Instead of presenting their own works in the main room of the gallery, FUTURE7 headed into the archives, took various sculptures out of storage and placed them on display. In *Coffeetablebooktable*, 2005, a collection of booklets published by Galerie Crone since 1982 were arranged on a table, like over-sized cards in a giant gameboard. The arrangement of sculptures in the main room finds an echo in the arrangement of booklets on the table. Of course, *Coffeetablebooktable* would also anticipate FUTURE7's later collaborations with books, both their contents and their readers.

Collecting, Collectors

FUTURE7 has taken the encounter far beyond their own collaboration and the diverse materials and themes they unite in individual works. The encounter – as a face-to-face meeting – remains a key moment for both inspiration and production. In 2004, von Rosen and Wojnar began the cycle *Kollektor* (Collector), 2004-2006, which is based on seven private collectors living in Berlin: Moi Soltek, Albrecht Kastein, Stefan Maria Rother, Bernhard Martin, Ivo Wessel, Raimar Stange and Christian Bauschke. Von Rosen and Wojnar met with the collectors individually, inspected the artworks they keep in their homes and had long discussions with them about their often complex relationships to art. The result of these encounters was a series of "solo" exhibitions: part loan, part installation, part homage. After asking each collector to loan certain artworks for public viewing, von Rosen and Wojnar created a unique installation which reflected their vision of how each collector lives with his treasures. The exhibition functioned as a kind of "portrait" of the collector seen from the perspective his relationship to his collection (the pair would also produce individual artworks as portraits to reflect their encounter with each collector and their working process for the exhibitions). While each collection temporarily moved from the private space to the public space, the exhibited artworks entered a custom-made environment: a portrait functioning as a double, if not an ersatz, for the collector's body. Where a public museum often opens a new wing named after the collector who has financed and filled it, FUTURE7 named the exhibition after the collector and created the

custom-made exhibition space as an alter ego with a different name.

Thus, the exhibition *Kollektor Kastein* in 2006 featured artworks in black-and-white from Kastein's collection along with several books from his vast art library. FUTURE7's installation for the exhibition reflected the black-and-white theme with white showcases, a television set dipped into white paint, a carved white styrofoam object and drawings sealed in neat black frames. To underscore Kastein's attachment to both prints and books, the books from his library were shown closed inside a long glass case so that the book covers – often illustrated – came to resemble the print hanging behind glass on the wall above. There is the portrait *Klau mich* (Steal me), 2006, which takes the form of a miniature wooden bookshelf, albeit jutting out from the wall and encased in transparent plastic. The title comes, not from Kastein, but from Rainer Langhans and Fritz Teufel's classic book *Klau mich* (1968), which bears the imprint of a hand and tells the story of the court case made against the West Berlin commune Kommune I during the sixties. The mini shelf brandishes the *Klau mich* hand logo on each side, almost as a provocation for the viewer to become a thief. The shelf is also a popular culture compendium from the sixties, which holds other books, such as Herbert Marcuse's *Der eindimensionale Mensch* (The one dimensional human) from 1964 as well as the movie *Viva Maria* and the record *Psychedelic Underground* from the German band Amon Düül. Far from an accusation, *Klau mich* attests to the hand-held nature of prints and books as well as the tendency of popular culture to exist in multiple editions: books, films, prints, records are all made for the mass. Perhaps even the commune can be seen as a valorization of the multiple against the singular, the group against the individual. Moreover, popular culture thrives on copying, if not stealing, themes from other cultural forms in cross-overs and quotations, parodies and caricatures. While *Kollektor Kastein* presents the collector as bibliophile in a world of endless copies – or the collector as just another member of an art commune – *Kollektor Stange* portrays the collector as a DJ appropriating images as easily as musical riffs. While Stange provided several small-format works from his collection, FUTURE7 set up part of the exhibition on a broad white panel so that Stange's possessions were displayed much like records on a turntable. To reflect the DJs changing tune, the panel displayed a different cluster of artworks at the vernissage and at the finissage. Here, the portrait included *Moduludus* (#2), 2007, a modest wooden box with separators inside: perfect for storing record albums or small-format artworks.

The installation-portraits produced in the *Kollektor* cycle gain a new relevance in light of the rise in private collections in the public realm, whether in state museums or in private institutions open to the public upon invitation or appointment. Berlin has become a center for such ventures, beginning in 1997 with the opening of the Sammlung Hoffmann in the home of Erika Hoffmann and the late Rolf Hoffmann. Indeed, the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Hamburger Bahnhof reflects the collector's desire for more visibility with its shift from mere loans to a new space. The Erich Marx collection appears throughout the museum close to artworks in other exhibitions while the Christian Friedrich Flick collection was set up in a separate space, which appears to have grown out of the main building like a branch on a tree. Following in the footsteps of Sammlung Hoffmann, collectors like Axel Haubrok, Christian Boros, Wilhelm Schürmann, Thomas Olbricht and even Ivo Wessel have established their own independent spaces outside the public museum and without public funding: spaces where the collectors can live with the artworks and invite the public to see the

collection at their leisure. These are semi-public and semi-private zones, where visitors are treated, not as members of the public, but as guests. These are also heterogeneous zones, where a painting might show up near a writing desk, a sculpture beside the dinner table, a video on the bookshelf. As such, the private collections shown in private institutions challenge not only the state's general monopoly on culture but also public expectations that art should be viewed and experienced far away from domestic spaces and the everyday routines that animate them. The private collector's challenge to the autonomy of art, as protected by the state, has been long coming – and gets full treatment in FUTURE7's *Kollektor* cycle. In his homage to his own habit of collecting books "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus" (Unpacking my library) from 1931, Walter Benjamin spoke of the age-old conflict between public museums and private collectors. While siding with the collector – as the only individual who could truly bring collected objects to life by living with them and through them – Benjamin both recognized and accepted the public mistrust of the collector figure. Indeed, almost a century later, the public still regards the good collector as the one who wills his treasures to the state with absolutely no strings attached. FUTURE7 not only brings the private collector back into the public light but also leaves the attachments intact.

FUTURE7's *Kollektor* raises a series of questions. What is the private collector's offense? Where does the public mistrust of the private collector originate? Why does the public expect art to be presented and appreciated in the autonomous manner of public museums? The rapid answer can be found in the French Revolution, which saw the public museum established the right of every *citoyen* emerging across Europe. Of course, there were earlier examples of collections opened to the public: from the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford to the British Museum, from the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel to the Prussian royal *Kunstammer* which was open to the public although it was located inside the royal residence in Berlin. Even the Palais du Louvre, which eventually became the Musée du Louvre, had been open to the public for the Salons since the 17th century. But the French Revolution was decisive for uniting art with revolution in the Louvre. Not only the people but also the artworks were finally freed from serving royalty, aristocracy and the church. As the new French state took over from royalty and gradually established its own monopoly on culture, two marginal figures emerged in its shadow: the vandal and the collector. The vandal destroyed without the permission of the new state, which was selectively eliminating traces of the power of the *Ancien Régime*, from fleurs de lys emblems to Gobelins tapestries. Indeed, the term vandal, as we understand it today as an anonymous attack on public property, was coined by Abbé Grégoire in 1794, just one year after the Louvre opened its doors in its new function as public museum. The collector, while more socially acceptable than the vandal for saving culture instead of destroying it, saved without the participation of the state, which was also protecting the new collective good of French heritage. Indeed, the public mistrusts the private collector because art is viewed as public property, not a private possession; it's not clear if the collector is saving for the state and thus for the public until his will is read. Since the vandal and the collector acted alone instead of acting in solidarity with the majority of *citoyens*, both were viewed as too closely embodying the sole body of the monarch. Indeed, the state and its collections would be fully disembodied in order to eliminate all traces of royal and aristocratic possession along with daily use. Looking at artworks hanging autonomously in the museum – freed from serving royal, aristocratic and even religious ends in rituals – the public was very much looking at reflections of their

freshly-liberated selves. To place an artwork back into a domestic private space or in the service of a ritual – even an everyday one like dining – would serve as a reminder of the fallen regime and its old oppressive power. A painting near a writing desk, a sculpture beside a dinner table, a print on a bookshelf would remind *citoyens* of their own former servitude. Art, like the people, should remain free.

FUTURE7's portrayal of the collector is an important historical one of a figure that has long remained invisible. In their treatment, the private collection is no longer a set of artworks, which might be loaned and eventually donated to the public museum (where the works can appear in any order, on any wall, in any room, in any exhibition). Rather, FUTURE7 considers the artworks in the private collection as belonging to a kind of habitat, which determines how they will be displayed in public. These individual portraits allow each collector to remain present, alongside his treasures. An artifact of the collector's relationship living with the artworks everyday – that intense relationship described by Benjamin the bibliomaniac, who brought life to his books and lived through them – the portraits come close to both the death mask and the magic amulet: showing the collection's moment of passage from private to public space while animating the artworks during the collector's absence. Does FUTURE7's homage to the collector celebrate art's old bondage or even restore its servitude? The rise of private collections in Berlin and elsewhere may well be viewed with mistrust: as a sign of the crumbling of the state and the privatization of the public sphere. Yet it's not clear that the French revolutionary liberation of art did not end up simply shifting art from one form of servitude to another: from the monarchy to the state. In fact, the state freed only certain forms of art for public viewing: sculpture, painting, prints and antiquities. The decorative arts – from tapestries to teacups, which would always openly display their usefulness in daily routines and thus their proximity to the *Ancien Régime* – were eliminated from the realm of proper public appreciation. It is also unclear whether the public museum supported the autonomy of art – with carpeted, coloured and white walls – or simply severed art forever from everyday life and placed it in the protection of experts: curators, conservators, historians and critics. Perhaps if art had not been freed, it might have thrived with the more pervasive decorative arts, which live on in design and fashion. FUTURE7 – by presenting private collections not only as artworks but also as environments and portraits – initiates a missing dialogue between what are essentially two different ways of collecting, displaying and interacting with art. A collection – whether private or public – is never just a list of artworks. While the private collector is always easily identified as the source of every decision, the public museum attempts to disembodify its decisions, from the lighting to the walls, through the neutrality of expertise. Yet as Brian O'Doherty noted long ago, even white cubes are far from neutral. In many ways, FUTURE7's *Kollektor* cycle can be understood as an extension of the museum critiques of the seventies and eighties, albeit updated for our era of private collecting. Private collectors and public museums should never be judged alone on their holdings but on what they do with them: be it putting the artworks on white walls, viewing them with books or "playing" them like music.

The Art of Conversation

Initiated as an encounter, the *Kollektor* series culminated in the group of artworks *Cabinet de Réflexion* (Cabinet of reflection), 2007, which was shown in the exhibition *Square Dance* in the same year at Berlin's Ballhaus Ost. An echo of the collector

collaborations, the exhibition included the individual portraits that FUTURE7 produced to reflect their working process: from the Kastein miniature bookcase (this time filled with two copies of the German translation of Richard Rorty's 1989 book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*) to the Stange wooden storage case. Of course, the title *Cabinet de Réflexion* carries a historical echo of French "cabinet de curiosités" (curios cabinet) – and the German "Wunderkammer" (cabinet of wonders) – which were the private precursors for public museums across Europe. With a cabinet of *reflection* – a collection of artworks that mix mirror-like resemblances, past reminiscences and serious thoughts – FUTURE7 revives the many societies and salons that formed around the cabinets before the public museum took over from the private collector as the main source of artworks, aesthetic experience and knowledge. The period dating from the reign of Louis XIII to the French Revolution – roughly spanning the 17th century – has been described by Benedetta Craveri as "the age of conversation," which began as a harmless pastime and developed into an elaborate forum for exchanging ideas with the aim of aesthetic perfection. Cabinets, salons and societies flourished as unofficial spaces outside the official Cours royal, where politics, science and philosophy might be freely debated. In the German-speaking world, the art of conversation would find a certain perfection in Johann Peter Eckermann's monumental *Gespräche mit Goethe* (Conversations with Goethe), the record of close to a decade of talks with the great thinker from 1823 to 1832. While suggesting that this past has once again become part of our present, FUTURE7 offers an homage to the encounter around artworks and the ensuing dialogue about them. That's another lively contrast to the public museum, where silence usually reigns along with the order of "Do Not Touch," and where visitors tend to refrain from interacting with each other and with the artworks.

Ultimately, FUTURE7's work can be understood as an art of both encounter and conversation. A dialogue becomes an artwork that gives rise to yet more discussions and artworks *ad infinitum*. Their oeuvre attests to a particular mediation between art and people, between objects and subjects, the inanimate and the animate world, the material and the immaterial, where the two poles end up becoming confused with each other. A portrait might become truer to the person than his own appearance; a fingerprint might come to exist independently of the hand. A case in point is the exhibition *Emil Johanna* which took place in 2008 in Berlin's Projektraum Ackerstrasse. Taking on the role of collectors themselves, von Rosen and Wojnar acquired seven artworks from just as many artists between 2002-2004 and transformed their acquisitions into the *Register, 2008*, of seven collages. Each collage reflects the artist's work as well as the new owners' relationship to it, from the moment of purchase to the lingering installation, from pining after the work to possessing it. For example, the collage inspired by Thomas Scheibitz features foldable measuring sticks unfolded into various configurations over a colour wheel, running from blue to red to orange to yellow. Appearing in squarish configurations – an octagon, a zigzag, twin boxes – the measuring sticks recall the multiple planes in Scheibitz's complex sculptures; measurement remains both a practical and a symbolic character of an artwork for any collector, who will calculate the space taken up by the work in the physical terms of meters and the psychological terms of attachment. Both the measuring stick and the colour wheel gain a fixed specificity as the lines and the hues in a portrait instead of being used indiscriminately to calculate any distance and any hue, anywhere and anytime. In short, the artist's tools to make an artwork become the artwork itself. Apart from the portraits in *Register*, *Emil Johanna* included *Française #13* (French

#13), 2008, a wall-drawing made up of hearts, diamonds, spades, clovers along with arrows and dots. It depicts, not a card game, but rather a square dance with the foot moves of all four swirling partners. Like the *Kollektor* series and the portraits, the square dance diagramme is the material manifestation of a face-to-face encounter and its intricate rules for gestures, movements and moments of contact. Of course, the exhibition took its name from the installation *Emil Johanna*, 2008, which consists of two cement blocks sitting on the floor in front of a free-standing canvas. The cement blocks were found in a shed near a lake and were likely the abandoned remains of an amateur building project. Hardened in their paper packages, the blocks displayed all the wrinkles and creases of their former paper containers, but they appeared more like two stubborn viewers staring at the canvas standing before them. While taking the form of a painting, the free-standing canvas was actually wallpaper stretched over a frame and features a pattern from the historical Vienna designer atelier Werkstätten – a pattern that dates from a period when von Rosen and Wojnar's great-great grandparents would have been the artists' age today. *Emil Johanna* – perhaps a double for von Rosen and Wojnar – depicts a kind of family reunion. While the encounter takes place in the imagination, the results remain real through genealogy – indeed, just as real and lasting as the imprint of the paper bags on the abandoned cement.

Above all, FUTURE7's strategy – transforming encounters and conversations into artworks – is a way for relatively private dialogues to be shared by the public. The art of the conversation transforms a private event into a public one that is always accessible to people who did not or could not directly participate. Far from valorizing the private sphere over the public sphere – the private collector over the public museum, the ownership of art over its reception and appreciation – FUTURE7 transforms the particular event into a collective experience for shared reflection. In their hands, secret relationships – such as a collector's particular relationship to his possessions – suddenly become visible to a larger audience. There's a definite logic in the shift from FUTURE7's early interest in the statistics of financial markets and the European Community to their later exploration of encounters with collectors and artists. What else is a statistic, if not a picture of a social relationship? The masses, reduced to a neat colour coded diagramme? Of course, there are several ways of making the social sphere visible, as the wide variety of statistical practises attests: pies, flows, columns, tables. By turning social relationships into artworks, FUTURE7 searches for a new visual vocabulary that might explain an emerging sphere lying right between the private and the public, if not defying the once-strict division between these two realms. Indeed, the private collector showing his treasures to the public by appointment only might just be one of those new yet cloudy social relationships that cannot quite be captured by traditional statistics, precisely because its qualities defy quantification. For FUTURE7, the only generalization that can be made about the social space is that it's always filled with particular characteristics.