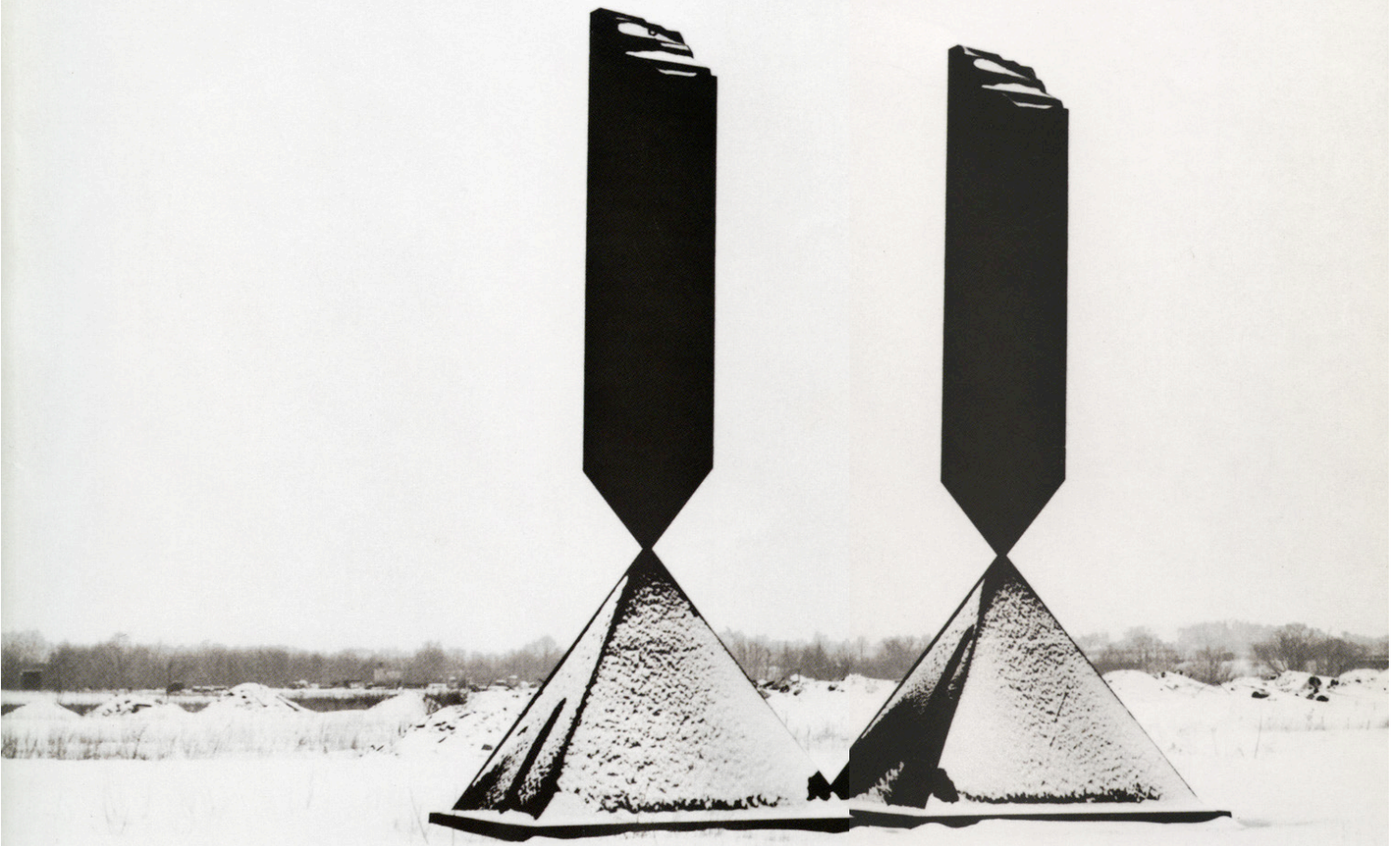


ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2007

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

The Art of Production

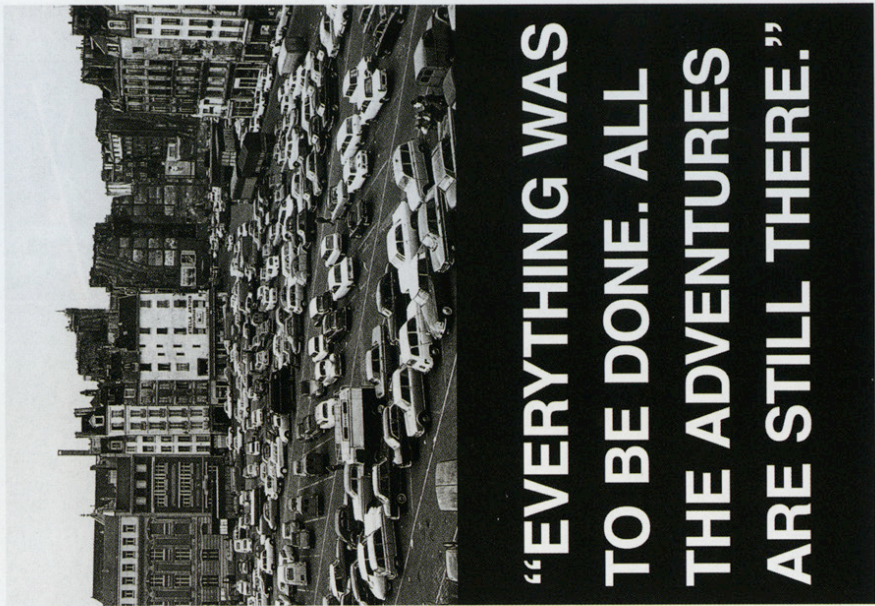


\$10.00



The View from Below

ELIZABETH SCHAMBELAN ON THE SO-CALLED UTOPIA OF THE CENTRE BEAUBOURG



“EVERYTHING WAS TO BE DONE. ALL THE ADVENTURES ARE STILL THERE. ARE STILL THERE.”

Luca Frei, *Everything Was to Be Done*. All the Adventures Are Still There, 2003, poster, dimensions variable.

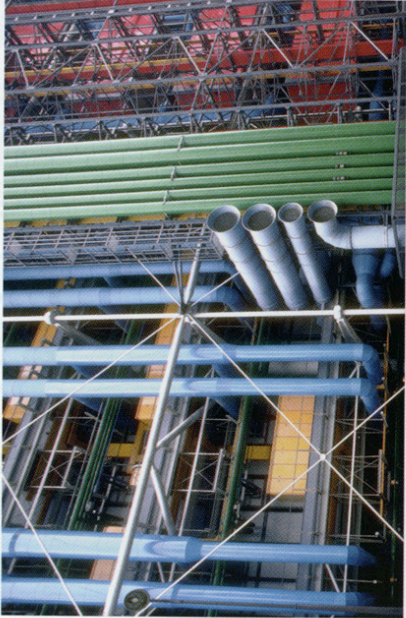
screens an interior “upright with old values.” He expresses his umbrage at this dissimulation via cascades of mixed metaphors and a stuttering, spluttering cadence (“... Beaubourg-Machine ... Beaubourg-Thing—”), creating the impression that he is expiring from sheer disgust but is nevertheless compelled, like a poisoned man struggling to name his murderer, to muster the strength for a climactic utterance: “MAKE BEAUBOURG BUCKLE!” Yet toward the end of his screed he returns, as if in spite of himself, to May ’68, citing it as the first in a series of “implosions” that may eventually topple social structures, power itself, and the Pompidou’s polychrome carcass. This implosive force “continues underlying working against simulacral behaviors like Beaubourg.

Imagine Baudrillard’s reaction, then, had he discovered that a space in direct opposition to the Pompidou really did exist “underground,” in the most literal sense of the word—right beneath the crowds and color-coded tubes. The diaries of one Gustave Affeulpin tell us that there was such a space—an eighty-story subterranean “beaubourg,” the lowercase *b* signaling its difference from the institution above. In this sunken retreat, bankers, bikers, junkies, criminals, schizophrenics, and students came together to realize a radical vision of creative production and communal life. The idea was not to “consume culture” but to “make it”; and to this end, the beaubourgeois created theatrical

ense boutique,” “complete failure”; “ve-new cobweb”; “right paragraph, like” a “black monomorph.” Architecturalists of that generation greeted the “Richard Rogers” only for its intended appropriation came hard. For in many an institution, after once occupied its edge of avant-garde umankind from morality of earliness of Pontus med the program one long happened itself at the social practice. at affinities that left, as architect, the Pompidou appropriate and tame g attendance figure well those efforts erable, in other estured toward agendas, for in deviousness and its things explicit. The Beaubourg-line’s *Death on* display of Gallic d, is a “model cialization”: the functions of the lauded “transmodern” exterior

never really took off. According to Switzerland-born, Sweden-based artist Luca Frei, who has translated Meister’s book into English for the first time, the Italian edition sold three hundred copies in ten years.

Indeed, perusing Frei’s newly released, annotated translation, one can’t help but wonder whether Meister himself is fictional. The sociologist is not credited on the book’s cover, and there is a suspicious whiff of the Borgesian about his biography, at least as summarized on the dust jacket: His career, we are told, took him to Kyoto, Belgrade, Geneva, Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Tucumán; and his patron was leftist typewriter mogul Adriano Olivetti—just the sort of improbable figure you would think a contemporary fabulist might be tempted to press into service. In fact, an alternate history of Beaubourg attributed to an imaginary author would not be wholly out of place in Frei’s oeuvre. Since graduating from Sweden’s Malmö Art Academy in 2002, the artist has built a practice that ranges across media, from artist’s books to performative actions to site-specific installations that reflect his interest in architecture and evoke the clean, bright geometries of Swiss modernism. But these diverse forms are unified by a playfully pedagogical impulse and a recourse to the poetics of the archive. The central element of Frei’s 2003 project *Minich Readings*, for example, was a library of texts revolving around themes of temporality, the production of space, and everyday life. The texts, photocopied onto colored paper and offered as take-aways, were housed in a modular Plexiglas structure that, for Frei, was both “a stage and a kiosk,” functioning to “activate the audience from being spectator to being actor.” Elsewhere, under the moniker Gruppo Parole e Immagini (a “gruppo” in name only, since its only member is Frei), he conducts analogous activations of text, retrieving and disseminating theoretical and political writings such as Peter Kropotkin’s 1897 essay “Anarchist Morality,” which Frei printed as a booklet with an elegantly designed green, red, and black silk-screened cover. The artist has also made several works directly relating to the Pompidou. A 2003 poster juxtaposes a photo of the parking lot on which Beaubourg was built with a Kodwo Eshun quote—“EVERYTHING WAS TO BE DONE. ALL THE ADVENTURES



Top: Exterior of the Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985. Photo: Sheldon Collins/Corbis. Bottom: Luca Frei, *Untitled*, 2004, single 35-mm slide projection, dimensions variable.

book, *La Soi-Disant Utopie du Centre Beaubourg* (The So-Called Utopia of the Centre Beaubourg), is fiction. “Gustave Affeulpin” is the pseudonym of Swiss sociologist Albert Meister, who published his imaginary chronicle in 1976, projecting it a decade into the future with a preface dated 1986. The book first appeared in French and was later translated into Italian, but it

Italian translation
 of *Beaubourg*
 by Barbara
 Butnera, 1988.

...ence of the beau-
 to make itself felt
 e globe. Renault
 e orders to their
 Coca-Cola; the
 new beaubourgs
 Affeulpin can hap-
 the rehearsals,
 the only big Art.
 of the art of living,
 list, however. He
 ce, with politician
 within the Socialist
 is big as anywhere
 e revolutions have
 abouturgians want
 ipation." Nor do
 ture is not hedon-
 and pain too, and
 ng the world." As
 er was not a utop-
 no-place. If any-
 of the dystopian

Most of Meister's sociology is firmly rooted in data he collected in far-flung locales, but in one section of his 1972 book *Vers une sociologie des associations* (Toward a Sociology of Associations) he indulges in some uncharacteristically macroscopic musings. It's an unnerving disquisition. Extrapolating from Alain Touraine's 1969 book on postindustrial society and from nascent trends, Meister seems almost to be prognosticating—diagnosing the ills of our own present, of informational elites, he speaks of a “widening gap between masses and powers” and of a society in which authoritarianism does not manifest itself as outright oppression, because it doesn't need to. In this society, Guy Debord's vision of a collapsing public sphere is playing itself out, people are withdrawing into their “increasingly comfortable home[s],” where they are held in thrall to the “totalitarianism of mass media,” too dazed to protest the surveillance that intrudes further and further into their private lives. Participatory democracies are faltering as citizenries turn into vast “commercial clientele[s],” bent on the purchase of “immaterial products.” The counterculture has been neutralized, and a toxic “symbiosis” has developed between capital and the “neourtsanal sector.” There is one glimmer of hope—but this is Meister's eeriest proposition of all, for it appears to forecast not only the Internet but the liberatory discourse that would come to surround it. Perhaps, says Meister, the system can be turned against itself via the subversive use of science and electronics: “The rationality of our postindustrial societies—does it not prepare the way to a utilization of information at the level of daily life and participation? . . . Cannot one dream of a ‘computer hypothesis?’”

Still, computer hypothesis aside, this is a fairly grim state of affairs, and one can presume that it is this dark vision that *The So-Called Utopia* is really militating against. And militate it does, if a bit perversely, in the sense that the most concise strategic pronouncements in the book could be read as rejections of the very concept of strategy. “All we want is to refuse what will continue to keep [the world] in its grip for a long time: money and power,” Affeulpin says at one point. The notion of refusal comes up again: “The only way to refuse the system is to negate it, to ignore it.” And again: Henri Lefebvre, he says, has declared the beaubourg the impetus of “a new

phase of history, in which the strength of progress won't be based on contest, revolution and the assumption of power, but on refusal.”

Although autonomist Mario Tronti is not one of Meister's dramatis personae, the echo of Tronti's essay “Strategy of the Refusal” is unmistakable here. In this seminal 1965 work, which continues to influence theorizations of nonstatist resistance, Tronti asserts that traditional forms of mass struggle merely prop up the existing order. Therefore, he argues, true revolution—what he calls “revolution *tout court*,” an irrevocable and global transformation of society—must be predicated on the refusal to “act as active partner in the whole social process, and furthermore, the refusal of even *passive* collaboration in capitalist development.” This total refusal will allow for the creation of “an autonomous power of decision in relation to the whole of society, a No Man's Land where the capitalist order cannot reach, and from which the new barbarians . . . can embark at any moment.” While we don't know whether Meister had read Tronti, the “strategy of the refusal” does seem to reconcile the tension in *The So-Called Utopia* between, well, *so-called* and *utopia*—between, that is, Affeulpin's disavowals of revolutionary ambition on the one hand and the vision of a worldwide proliferation of beaubourgs on the other.

Per the sentiments, he attributes to Lefebvre, the “new phase of history” that Meister imagined was not to be brought about through the assumption of power. Maybe Meister's vision of revolution was too big to be contained in the word *revolution*—what he had in mind, maybe, was revolution *tout court*. His beaubourg, in fact, sounds much like Tronti's No Man's Land—not a utopia, but a site of refusal and a staging ground from which revolution *tout court* might be launched. What is particularly compelling is Meister's transitive equation of the practice of art and the politics of refusal—his suggestion that the two are congruent, one and the same. After all, the locus of the implosive force he imagines is a space beneath Beaubourg, not beneath a Renault factory or a Coca-Cola plant. There has been an effort of late to rethink and retheorize the relationship of politics and aesthetics, and perhaps this discourse, like every discourse, needs a good parable. In retrieving Meister's odd and moving document from obscurity, Frei has provided one. □

ELIZABETH SCHAMBELAN IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.