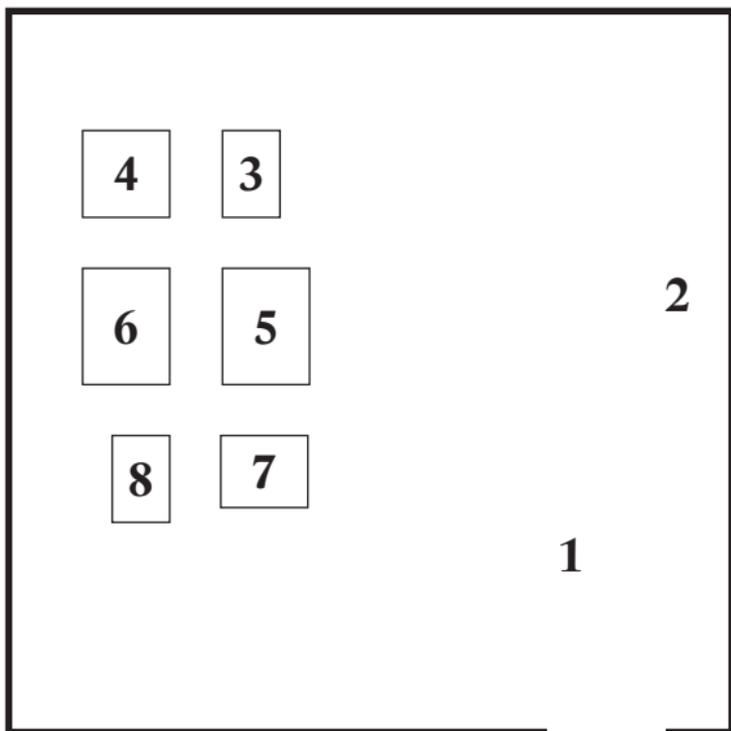


Exhibition Guide

PETER BUGGENHOUT
NO SHADE IN PARADISE
July 14–September 24, 2017

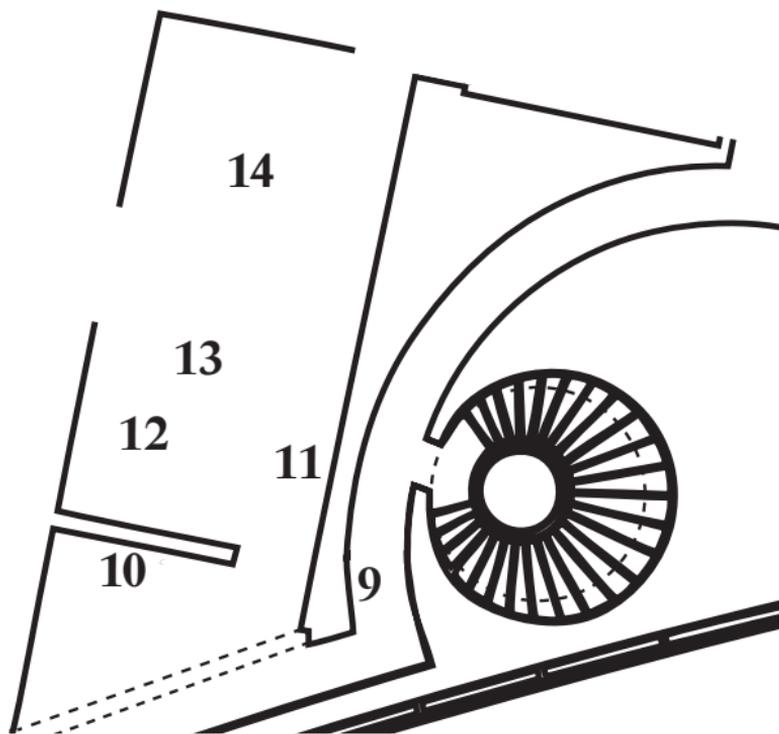
NEUES MUSEUM
State Museum for Art
and Design Nuremberg

Exhibition Hall



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“As I see it, the artistic process is an approach to reality, not a reduced symbolic form of expression for a complex truth.”¹

Introduction

The first impression left by Peter Buggenhout's sculptures is their impact in terms of material, the complexity of form and surface structure, their inexplicability and puzzling origin. It is virtually impossible to discern their form, materiality, and history by just looking at them. They are indefinable, fascinating, and frightening at the same time.

The complexity and unpredictability of our life reality is central to the work of Peter Buggenhout. In his attempt to capture this complexity and represent it, the Belgian artist (born in 1963, lives and works in Ghent) also explores the limited capacity of our perception and imagination. The core of his sculptural achievement consists in capturing the disorderliness of the world in a way that can communicate all its beauty and hideousness.

The exhibition *Peter Buggenhout. No Shade in Paradise* is the first solo show in Germany by this internationally renowned artist. Consisting of fourteen works, it presents a cross-section of his work until now: large-scale works and an immense, elaborate sculpture developed especially for the exhibition hall of Neues Museum. In dialogue with the architecture of the building, the exhibition engages with individual works in the stairwell and in the permanent exhibition on the upper floor.

“All the materials that I use have one thing in common: I didn’t choose them because I like their shape or appearance. The objects that I find are all objects that have the quality that they do not really refer to a meaning in their formal self. For instance, I might not use an old chair but I might use a piece of a chair in such a way that one cannot determine what object it was before. This is, so to speak, the quality of garbage. The same quality can be found in dust. All materials I work with are very abject. The abject as described by Georges Bataille² is a material that is withdrawn from its original state and has lost its form and meaning because of it.”³

No Shade in Paradise

Transformation of Material

Peter Buggenhout works on the remains of everyday life, detritus of various origins and traces of different living beings are layered on top of one another, pressed together, inflated, welded or screwed together, glued or mounted onto one another until they provide no clue of their origin.

The transformation of material is one emphasis in the artist's work. His sculptures and spatially expansive installations attest to processes of becoming and passing, existential forms and states of being. They refer to the presence, mutability, and fragility of material, and ultimately of humanity itself. And yet the material here is never divorced from its social, physical, and psychological and historical dimensions. Instead, Buggenhout's works reveal how systems grow, change, separate from one another, or how they are linked.

Remains

Peter Buggenhout uses industrially manufactured materials, divorced from their original context of use, construction materials of all kinds, industrial waste and garbage, and organic substances like hair, blood, and stuffed innards of animals, dirt and dust to create his large format sculptures and expansive installations, utterly redefining the material in the process.

*“While I would like to go beyond the field of the explicable,
I want to distance myself from all religious issues ...
I don’t think my works possess an animistic power or have
a soul, as is sometimes claimed: they are just material,
just like us, incidentally.”⁴*

“My works emerge analogously to reality.”⁵

What is otherwise leftover, declared worthless, torn of its former context of meaning and function is now granted a new existence. Often requiring the extreme physical exertion of the artist himself, these remains of human civilization and detritus of animal existence become expansive, abstract structures with an unusual physical density and presence.

References

The sculptures are, as Buggenhout repeatedly emphasizes, not narrative in structure, but instead open a field of associations. At the same time, several work titles contain mythological, philosophical, or biblical references. The artist comments on this as follows: “The titles refer to a mental state and reflect a view of the world. But they have no link to the sculptures themselves as abstract objects.”⁶

With this statement, Buggenhout clearly expresses that his sculptures are never illustrations of their titles or the names of the work series: *Gorgo*, *Mont Ventoux*, *The Blind Leading The Blind* und *On Hold*. Instead, they stand for a conceptual basic attitude, the subjective view and position of the artist vis-à-vis art and life in general that is reflected in his works, with numerous facets and aspects of the social, political, and historical, along with issues that pertain to art itself, the discovery of expression and form.

The Everchanging Repetition

Peter Buggenhout’s oeuvre consists until now four workgroups, whereby the material constitution of the individual sculptures



Mont Ventoux #3, 2009

(dust, blood, animal innards, remains) is decisive for the group to which they belong. Despite dividing his works into various series, the artist insists on seeing them as overlapping with one another and understanding them as a *gesamtwerk*. Emerging over long spans of time, but also in parallel, these works comment and complement one another. In a process of “everchanging repetition,”⁷ Buggenhout creates sculptures with an unmistakable similarity, but that are clearly distinctive.

Mont Ventoux

In the series *Mont Ventoux* (begun in 1995), Peter Buggenhout explores questions of perception, perspective, the gaze and the subject of self-referential experience of nature. At issue here is always the link of aesthetic and contemplative points of view.

Alluding to the Italian poet and philosopher Francesco Petrarch, who climbed this mountain in the south of France in the 14th century, Buggenhout refers to the link between perception and imagination, the gaze and desire (in Petrarch longing) and to the impossibility of capturing a comprehensive notion of one’s own standpoint. In this sense, Petrarch, too, was doomed to failure in his attempt to attain an overview and clarity on the mountain summit.

The surfaces of the sculptures in this series, which seem painted, consist mainly of cow stomachs, which at first are turned inside out and then stuffed with various materials like plaster, paper, papier-mâché, polyester, metal, and wood. Prepared in this way, they recall landscapes in which viewers can become fully absorbed, just



Gorgo #36, 2015

like Petrarch. The gaze is forced to wander, viewers move about and are only able to see a small section of the world and our existence.

Gorgo

With the title *Gorgo*, Peter Buggenhout refers to the three female monsters from Greek mythology. The Gorgons, three sisters, the most famous of whom is Medusa, are depicted as winged figures with snake hair, long fangs, snake belts, gleaming eyes and a penetrating gaze. They turn anyone who looks at them to stone.

The myth of Medusa speaks of transformation, punishment, and calamity. Medusa, once the most beautiful of the Gorgons and the only mortal, was turned into a figure of horror by Athena to punish her for her beauty. Depictions of her severed head were thereafter used as talismans to protect from demons and bad luck.

Decisive here is that Perseus uses his shiny shield as a mirror when he severs Medusa's head. He saves his life by not looking directly at the "real" Medusa, and can thus escape being turned to stone under her gaze. He thus "only" sees her mirror image. *"The representation is the only shelter we have to defend us against a cruel and petrifying real world: this shelter can be a word, a story, a picture, a film. In fact also this is what I mean with the shade lacking in paradise, no shelter in a world where everything is real."*⁸ Reproducing life reality, be it in an image, text, language, or sculpture, is something that Peter Buggenhout sees as the only possibility of a human being to defend himself against the challenges of life or being turned to stone.



The Blind Leading The Blind #28, 2009

This is also how the artist understands the title of the exhibition *No Shade In Paradise*. In his notion of paradise, there is no illusion (as in Plato's cave allegory) and no need of protection: everything exists equally next to one another, appears in the same light.

As already in the work series *Mont Ventoux*, the series *Gorgo*, which he began in around 2005 with small format sculptures, is also a conglomeration of inorganic and organic substances. Its foundation consists on the one hand of found materials like paper, cardboard, plastic, metal, plaster, polyurethane foam, while at the same time Peter Buggenhout also uses horsehair for these works, saturated with pig's blood. The hanging, tangled and dark shags are indeed reminiscent of the ominous snake hair of the Gorgons. The metaphor of turning to stone and the linked image of a state of standstill continues in Buggenhout's other works as well.

The Blind Leading The Blind

Since the turn of the century, Peter Buggenhout has been working on the series *The Blind Leading The Blind*. "They surface like shipwrecks that have been raised from the depths, gigantic bodies covered with dense layers of dark dust. Objects that seem to come from another era, imprisoned in themselves, preserved in decay. This image is materialized through the dust that serves as the incarnation of time."⁹

The base of these works are conglomerates of the most various materials, like cardboard, plastic, metal, wood, plastic. Glued and welded together, they result in a "raw sculpture," which is then partially lacquered and subsequently covered with a mixture of or-



On Hold #4, 2017

dinary dust and fixative. The dust applied in several layers was cleaned previously, then frozen for several weeks and distributed across the entire structure.

The title of this group of works refers both to a work by the artist Louise Bourgeois and to the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This painting in turn refers to the Christian parable: “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?”¹⁰ The blind following the blind do not know where they are going. Ultimately, this allegory stands for the insecurity of humanity in general, for we hardly know where we come from or where our life paths might ultimately lead. *“In the dust sculptures, dust piles up on top of rubbish assembled haphazardly. It covers the shape underneath like a warm blanket, hiding the primary form from view. Knowing-unknowing, attraction-repulsion, the beauty of the light caressing the dusty skin—these are the nuances that make you shiver; a myriad of different emotions, thoughts and feelings condensed into one small moment.”*¹¹

On Hold

The most recent group of works by Buggenhout, begun in 2014, seems on first glance unlike the other series due to its accents of color. At the same time, these sculptures seem to sum up all the qualities of their predecessors. The artist calls these works *On Hold*, and they once again show the freedom with which Buggenhout approaches in part gigantic assemblages of the most various materials. He plays out all the possibilities available to him in transforming the material. He squeezes, bends, crushes, creates linkages, inflates elements, stuffs them or fills them with foam.

*“I make objects that cannot be classified, that are self-referential, where it is impossible to say whether they are sculptures, archaeological remains, found items, or just trash. In the end, the beholder can only take the objects for what they are—even I’m not always sure what they are supposed to be.”*¹²

A characteristic aspect of these sculptures is that their outer form betrays nothing of the construction of the sculpture: this is particularly true of the large sculpture installed in the exhibition hall, where it remains unclear where the supporting scaffold ends and the composition of the sculpture begins. The supporting elements of the expansive sculpture are invisible and thus an unsure factor. As in the other work groups, the materials are more or less recognizable, but ultimately indissolubly interwoven with one another.

A key element in these works are the originally inflatable objects used for the first time in these sculptures. Removed from their original location, they seem forced into a structure in which their former shape has to adapt to the limits of its surroundings. Buggenhout's intuitive approach and the entire process of his work's emergence are always closely related to the respective materials used.

The large structures in this series of works communicate recognizable references to life reality: they illustrate the fragility of the equilibrium, reveal the necessary balance between small and large, light and heavy elements, between proximity and distance; visualize constraint and liberation, dialogue and silence, taking pause and the state of waiting: on hold.

Correspondences

Peter Buggenhout's complex structures refuse any clear classification. They recall for example *gesamtkunstwerks* like the *Merz-Bau* by Kurt Schwitters from the 1920s, the expansive, complex and confusing structure of this unusual spatial construction, but also



Installation view, exhibition hall, 2017

are vaguely reminiscent of the surface structures of sculptures by Franz West or the informel painting of an artist like Emil Schumacher.

The artist himself mentions two colleagues who had a decisive importance for his work: Constantin Brâncuși and Paul McCarthy.¹³ Buggenhout thus names two very contrasting positions of sculptural art, which in light of his works are plausible and understandable, for his accumulations of detritus develop in dialogue with or in the field of tension of beautiful form and the ugly, disgusting, and inscrutable.

Projection Surfaces

Buggenhout's works are often associated with scenes of disaster, or even read as such. His sculptures are also often attributed something essential, a soul. Due to their inscrutability, the works, which the artist calls "autonomous objects," are projection surfaces for various interpretations and readings, the legitimate and perhaps the only way, according to the artist, of approaching his works.

Perhaps several of the sculptures suggest something essential about them because they show no clear reference or communicate no message, because on the surface they want to be nothing more than what they are. Accordingly, they communicate character, idiosyncrasy, and despite their aesthetic, which recalls decay, dissolution, and finitude, possess an enormous resilience and presence in the here and now. In an encoded way, they might well refer to catastrophes, but in doing so they are entirely fearless and attest to



On Hold #5, 2017

self-confidence. They bear history within them, with all its highs and lows, triumphs and defeats, all its gratifications and violations (just as we human beings do as well).

Parables

In his sculptures, Buggenhout tries the “capture the world in its entirety,” to show it in brutal reality, without symbolic references. To this extent, all layers of meaning and significance seem turned inside out, nothing seems hidden. The “dark” sides, the ugly, the frightening, the inscrutable, are not hidden, are not forced to lead a shadowy existence.

This title of the exhibition *No Shade in Paradise* alludes to this, linked to the idea that in paradise the difference between good and evil, true and untrue, bright and dark is abolished. At the same time, the title also refers to Plato’s cave allegory. Here, shadows seem real to the viewers captured in the cave. The source of the light shining into the cave cannot be seen and recognized. The parables and metaphors explored by the artist deal primarily with phenomena of perception, especially vision and the gaze. They circle around the human sensual world, particularly the importance of light. Here, the link between light and visibility and awareness plays an important role. The question of whether the human being can be truly cognizant of the world and life itself or its truthfulness can be traced throughout Buggenhout’s entire oeuvre.

***“I want to show that there is no right perspective.
Each angle is worthwhile.”¹³***

Notes

1. Peter Buggenhout in an interview with Eva Kraus, in: "Kein Schatten im Paradies," *Museumszeitung der Nürnberger Presse* 60 (June 27, 2017), p. 3.
2. Peter Buggenhout refers to several texts by Georges Bataille, especially *Abjection and Miserable Forms*, 1934.
3. Peter Buggenhout in conversation with Barbara Martin, in: *Peter Buggenhout, caterpillar logic*, Kunstraum Dornbirn (Nuremberg, 2010), p. 42.
4. Peter Buggenhout in an interview with Eva Kraus, in: "Kein Schatten im Paradies".
5. Ibid.
6. Peter Buggenhout in conversation with Barbara Martin, *Peter Buggenhout, caterpillar logic*, p. 43.
7. *Everchanging repetition: Peter Buggenhout*, Museum Louvain-la-Neuve, 2015, cover.
8. Peter Buggenhout in an email, July 9, 2017.
9. Eva Kraus, "Prelude," in: *Peter Buggenhout. Kein Schatten im Paradies*, Neues Museum Nürnberg (Cologne, 2017).
10. Luke 6:39.
11. Peter Buggenhout, in: *Streamlines. Ozeane, Welthandel und Migration*, Deichtorhallen Hamburg, ed. Koyo Kouoh and Dirk Luckow (Hamburg, 2015), p. 42.
12. Peter Buggenhout in a conversation while installing the exhibition at Neues Museum in 2017.
13. <http://mu-inthecity.com/en/2015/03/the-world-as-seen-by-peter-buggenhout/>

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