

Tall Tales and Short Stories

Beatrix Ruf

Tris Vonna-Michell's exhibitions resemble Kafkaesque office scenes or secret workrooms where criminologists juxtapose, superimpose, and even discard materials, summoning them up in endless sequences of projected images and enlarging or shrinking them in proportion to the current state of their findings. Devoid of the artist's presence, the installations may already have been energized by his breathtaking performances or anticipate future activation. Office tables, chairs, and slide projectors, some wonderfully old-fashioned with integrated screens, like the telex; lamps, headphones, and sheets or scraps of paper; photos lying on tables and floors or pinned to walls—everything seems extracted from time, evocative of a great many references without forming a coherent archive. These exhibitions and their performative realizations lodge themselves in our perception as partially disclosed histories that are built into blank spaces on tables, floors, or walls. They are extended through images and projections from still newer versions of stories, and their reception is tinted by all the other histories and by each visitor's background. Vonna-Michell's exhibitions work like three-dimensional books: words and images form situations that elaborate on the facts from multiple perspectives and create an open but inconclusive space for reading.

Vonna-Michell is a traveler. In both his research and performances, he is perpetually in transit physically and mentally, separating real places from those of biographical memory, navigating facts stemming from both historical and present-day places and events. He voyages through stumbled-on interstices and aggregate states of the now, via retrospection and being on the lookout, wandering through a sense of past, present, and future. At once talkative and taciturn, Vonna-Michell is also a DJ of pictures and words, facts and fictions, a mash-up artist who enmeshes his subject matter in an ongoing performance.

His artistic material amounts to pictures he takes on his numerous journeys, compiled in the course of his life, or those an acquaintance made in a certain way at a certain time, as well as found items from magazines, newspapers, and other ephemera. It also incorporates the fathomless flow of words, which become his narratives in the performances, are printed on old printing presses, or are transmitted to the exhibition space via telephone, vinyl record, or other medium.

Each work follows its own idiosyncratic orbit around the primary narrative and the histories evoked, around the relationship between fiction and reality. They reflect alternative possibilities of how history is handed down, which facts and artifacts serve its verisimilitude, and which role the individual, with his life story, emotions, and intellect, chooses to play in its production and reception. No linear progression of history exists; every instant is a potential repetition, interaction, overlay, or shift beforehand and afterward; at any moment it could detour to the left or right and take a different turn.

In addition to this play with truth and time, intimacy is equally vital to Vonna-Michell's works; he speaks in his live performances to a restricted number of people: visitors to his events or people he calls on the phone during the performances. He lends his messages both structure and spontaneity by subjecting their length, course, and flow to the audience's influence. Wielding an egg timer, he begins by asking the audience to focus its attention on him. The installations indicate a path into the story, yet the narrative continually changes course, goes down the wrong track, and is deflected from its logical path of evolution. His stories may or may not be factual; nevertheless, sitting amid slide projectors, recording devices, photographs, photocopies, and artifacts—all visuals that command the respect of authoritative speech—he creates a veritable reality through his



Fig. 1 *Seizure*, 2007–08 (from *Hahn/Huhn*, 2003–11)
Black-and-white laserprints, dry ice, postcard, floor lamp, and black-and-white dual slide projection, dimensions variable. Installation view: Milliken Gallery, Stockholm, September 27–October 20, 2007

stunning high-speed soliloquies, a reality that weaves historical details and fabrications into a multiplicity of possible histories.

Characterized by ceaseless unfolding, interconnection, superimposition, and constant turns in other directions, the projects Vonna-Michell has been developing since 2003 include *Hahn/Huhn* (2003–11, fig. 1), *Finding Chopin* (2005–12, fig. 2); *Studio A* (2008–09); *Monumental Detours/Insignificant Fixtures* (2008–10); *Leipzig Calendar Works* (2008–); *Tall Tales and Short Stories* (2008–); and *Wasteful Illuminations* (2008–11). Each work is reconstructed into unique exhibitions, realizing new constellations of words and images along with novel spatial ensembles and relations to projects past and future. They permanently intermingle and are inseparable because they all travel through the artist's persona, his biography, and uniquely informed perception.

Based on a long investigation sparked by a newspaper report, *Puzzlers* (2005–08, fig. 3), a version of *Leipzig Calendar Works*, is inspired by the extensive destruction of files held by the Stasi, the East German



Fig. 2 *Finding Chopin*, 2008 (from *Finding Chopin*, 2005–12)
Performed at the Experiment Marathon Reykjavik, Reykjavik Art Museum, May 16–August 24, 2008

security service, during fall 1989. After visiting Leipzig in the former East and Zirndorf in the former West, where he met with thirty-one puzzle experts who were piecing together documents out of hundreds of millions of shredded scraps, the artist returned to Leipzig with his childhood photos, calendars, decals, and clippings from newspapers and magazines as accompanying material, all in a green suitcase. He spent one month in a former *Plattenbau* (an East German prefabricated building, often a high-rise, built with individual precast concrete slabs), shredding all his materials and then fastening them back together again. Finally he organized the glossy photos into Ferrero Rocher chocolate boxes and the matte images and materials in envelopes. Fragments of his real past are collaged into a new identity, reconfiguring a history made of pictures and words.

Through extended investigations that lead him to public monuments and buildings, the artist finds connections that he incorporates into his own history, relationships that he persistently abducts and carries off into absurdity time and again. For *Hahn/Huhn*, the artist traveled to Berlin to research the links between three people in the city's postwar history, including Reinhold Huhn, a guard at a train station near the border:

After August 13, 1961, the Anhalter Bahnhof functioned in the West sector of Berlin, but the S-Bahn was run by the East German government. Reinhold Huhn was one of many guards situated beneath the Anhalter Bahnhof, controlling the expansive underground tunnels. . . . Reinhold Huhn, a 21-year old East German border guard, shot dead by a West Berlin escape agent on June 18, 1962. The Communist party commemorates him as a hero in the fight against the West. A pretext for furthering the perfection of the border system.

A school was erected in memory of Reinhold Huhn, and a monument ensued. Reinhold-Huhn-Straße existed. He gained cult status in the GDR and the authorities were eager to exploit his death for their political goals. There was little evidence that a monument ever stood, although I located where Reinhold-Huhn-Straße might have been—now named Schützenstraße. I wanted an image of the street sign, from above—an overview, a conclusive image to put it all in perspective. My only souvenir, a chink of spray-painted rubble: found, hand-held and photographed, depicted and printed on a loose sheet of paper, formerly a marker between words, between these words, but now a loose association, another fleeting image.¹

The artist book from which the above quote is excerpted realizes the indefatigable flow of his process, this perpetual reconfiguration of facts and stories. After writing the full book, integrating all of the works he had selected, he improvised, making variations and changes throughout the entire text. As with his work in general, there is no conclusive version, merely ongoing iterations. Two different renditions of the book circulate in stores, each bearing the same cover. Both editions, indistinguishable at a glance, contain tales written by the artist about his works and performance transcripts. Vonna-Michell developed the variations through improvising performances on top of previous versions of the text and adjusting various visual elements. The first book grew out of a project *Capstans* (2009) at the Halle für Kunst in Lüneberg, Germany, in which several parts of the book were printed in the space. Created in 2010, the second book, an improvisation of an improvisation, expanded the first version through further revision of the texts, images, and inserted material.



Fig. 3 *Puzzlers*, 2008 (from *Leipzig Calendar Works*, 2005–11)
DVD, 35 mm slide projector, 6 x 7 cm slide projector, puzzles, black-and-white laserprints, paper shredder, and lamp, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist
Installation view: *Auto-Tracking*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, April 12–May 18, 2008

Auto-Tracking (2008, fig. 4) links another investigation into Berlin, which was initiated for his participation in the 2008 Berlin Biennial and extends from his temporary residence in Detroit in December 2007. The journey was catalyzed by the artist’s seemingly unremarkable discovery in a second-hand charity shop in Southend, U.K.: VHS tapes of old *RoboCop* movies (1987–93). These gloomy and brutal science-fiction thrillers depict a corrupt and criminal Detroit in a dystopian future. In Detroit itself, Vonna-Michell encountered its now-iconic ruins of industrialization, including the Michigan Central Station. He then returned to Europe with recordings of urban soundscapes as well as pictures of abandoned neighborhoods, buildings, and the skyline. The artist proceeded to combine various narrative tracks with variations of older works and biographical elements, mixing images and stories related to both Detroit’s and Berlin’s modernist ruins. Refined during the 2008 exhibition *Auto-Tracking* at the Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, which coincided with the biennial, the work included another layer of mediation: “Vonna-Michell sought to establish contact with the public regularly via a telephone station and elaborated his stories *viva voce* directly from Berlin, interconnecting two exhibition spaces.



Fig. 4 *Auto-Tracking*, 2008
Table, chair, telephone, and black-and-white laserprints, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist
Installation view: *Auto-Tracking*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, April 12–May 18, 2008

... The parallel narratives leading into diverse plot lines cumulated in an archival-like recording station within the exhibition in Zurich.”² Collapsing time and space while updating private histories also pertains to *Wasteful Illuminations*, in which he interlaces a trip to Japan made in his youth with a new experience of the country, based on the places and people he revisited.

Vonna-Michell’s talking performances and installations of images and texts stimulate and quicken a continuous historiographic process centered on the now of the factual, the now of experience and interpretation. The stories’ claims to validity, however, lie solely in their live realization, through the production and unfolding of language issued from the artist in propria persona. Vonna-Michell harnesses and simultaneously expands the tradition of oral history in ceaselessly morphing narrative modes, in the literary tradition of a teller of tales who streams language spontaneously. His works are both performances and mental processes that perhaps indicate the absurdity of truth telling in their obsession with how the real can be elicited from individual as well as collective history.

¹ Tris Vonna-Michell, *Tris Vonna-Michell* (Trento, Italy: Fondazione galleria civica–Centro di ricerca sulla contemporaneità di Trento; Bergamo, Italy: GAMeC–Galleria d’arte moderna e contemporanea di Bergamo; Lüneberg, Germany: Halle für Kunst; Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich and JRP Ringier, 2011), p. 15.

² Press release for *Auto-Tracking-Auto-Tracking*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, June 8–August 16, 2009.

Selected Exhibition History

b. 1982, Southend-on-Sea, United Kingdom
Lives and works in Stockholm, Sweden, and Southend-on-Sea

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

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|------|---|------|--|------|---|
| 2010 | Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea, <i>No more racing in circles—just pacing within lines of a rectangle</i> , Jan. 11–Mar. 20. | — | WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, Belgium, <i>The Other Tradition</i> , Feb. 26–May 1. | — | New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, New Museum Triennial: <i>The Generational: Younger Than Jesus</i> , Apr. 8–June 12. Exh. cat. |
| 2009 | Jeu de Paume, Paris, <i>Finding Chopin: Endnotes 2005–2009</i> , Oct. 20, 2009–Jan. 17, 2010. Exh. cat. | — | Grimmuseum, Berlin (organized with the Museet for Samtidskunst, Roskilde, Denmark), <i>Never odd or even: A text spaced exhibition</i> , Jan. 9–Nov. 20. Traveled to Museet for Samtidskunst, Jan. 14–Apr. 8, 2012. Exh. cat. | — | Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis, Miss., <i>Tris Vonna-Michell</i> , Apr. 1–12. |
| — | Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, <i>Tris Vonna-Michell, New Work</i> , Oct. 10, 2009–Jan. 23, 2010. | 2010 | Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (organized with MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst and Städtelschule, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt), <i>New Frankfurt Internationals: Stories and Stages</i> , Dec. 11, 2010–Feb. 13, 2011. Exh. cat. | — | Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d’art moderne Grand-Duc Jean, <i>The Space of Words</i> , Feb. 19–May 25. Exh. cat. |
| — | X Initiative, New York, <i>Phase 2: Tris Vonna-Michell</i> , July–Oct. | — | FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Fonds régional d’art contemporain, Troyes, France, <i>Storytellers</i> , Nov. 26, 2010–Feb. 5, 2011. | — | Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, <i>I Repeat Myself When Under Stress</i> , Feb. 13–May 3. Exh. cat. |
| — | Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, <i>Auto-Tracking-Auto-Tracking</i> , June 8–Aug. 16. | — | Centre Pompidou, Paris, <i>Les Rendez-Vous du Forum, Session 4: Fun Palace</i> , Oct. 21–31. | — | Tate Britain, London, Tate Triennial: <i>Altermodern</i> , Feb. 3–Apr. 26. Exh. cat. |
| — | GAMeC, Bergamo, Italy, <i>Eldorado: Tris Vonna-Michell, Studio A: Monumental Detours/Insignificant Fixtures (2008–ongoing)</i> , May 28–July 26. | — | Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Murcia, Spain, Oct. 9, 2010–Jan. 9, 2011. Exh. cat. | — | BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, United Kingdom, <i>A Spoken Word Exhibition</i> , Jan. 16–Mar. 15. |
| 2008 | Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, <i>Auto-Tracking</i> , Apr. 12–May 18. | — | Castello di Rivoli museo d’arte contemporanea, Turin, Italy, <i>Exhibition, Exhibition</i> , Sept. 21, 2010–Jan. 9, 2011. | 2008 | Kunstverein Hildesheim, Germany, <i>Lieber Künstler, erzähle mir!</i> , Nov. 15–Dec. 21. |
| 2007 | Cubitt, London, <i>Tall Tales and Short Stories</i> , Oct. 25–Nov. 25. | — | Witte de With, Centrum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Morality: <i>Act IX: Let Us Compare Mythologies</i> , June 18–20. | — | BAM/PFA, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, <i>Bending the Word/ MATRIX 226</i> , Sept. 28, 2008–Feb. 8, 2009. |
| — | Kunstverein Braunschweig, Brunswick, Germany, <i>Puzzlers</i> , Sept. 1–Nov. 11. | — | Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, <i>NineteenEightyFour</i> , May 27–Sept. 5. | — | Yokohama Triennial: <i>Time Crevasse</i> , Sept. 13–Nov. 30. Exh. cat. |
| — | Witte de With, Centrum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Rotterdam, Netherlands, <i>Tris Vonna-Michell</i> , May 20–Aug. 19. | — | Witte de With, Centrum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Rotterdam, Netherlands, <i>Morality: Act VII: Of Facts and Fables</i> , May 13–Sept. 26. | — | California College of the Arts, San Francisco, <i>Self Storage</i> , Apr. 18–May 18. |
| 2006 | BOZAR EXPO, Palais des beaux-arts/Paleis voor schone kunsten, Brussels, Belgium (organized with NICC, Antwerp, Belgium), <i>Faire un effort: Tris Vonna-Michell: Down the Rabbit-Hole</i> , Oct. 27–Dec. 3. | — | Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, <i>Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance</i> , June 4–Sept. 1. Exh. cat. | — | KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art: <i>When things cast no shadow</i> , Apr. 5–June 15. Exh. cat. |

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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| 2011 | Kunstverein Ludwigshafen, Germany, Fotofestival Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Heidelberg: <i>The Eye Is A Lonely Hunter: Images of Humankind</i> , Sept. 10–Nov. 6. Exh. cat. | 2009 | Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne, <i>Lecture Performance</i> , Oct. 24–Dec. 20. | — | De Hallen Haarlem, Netherlands, <i>The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future</i> , Sept. 1–Nov. 25. |
| — | Creative Time, New York, PLOT09: <i>This World & Nearer Ones</i> , June 27–Sept. 20. | — | Färgfabriken, Stockholm, <i>Spatial Works</i> , May 22–Aug. 9. | — | European Kunsthalle, Cologne, <i>Köln Show 2: Was einmal über heute gesagt werden wird</i> , Apr. 19–May 26. |