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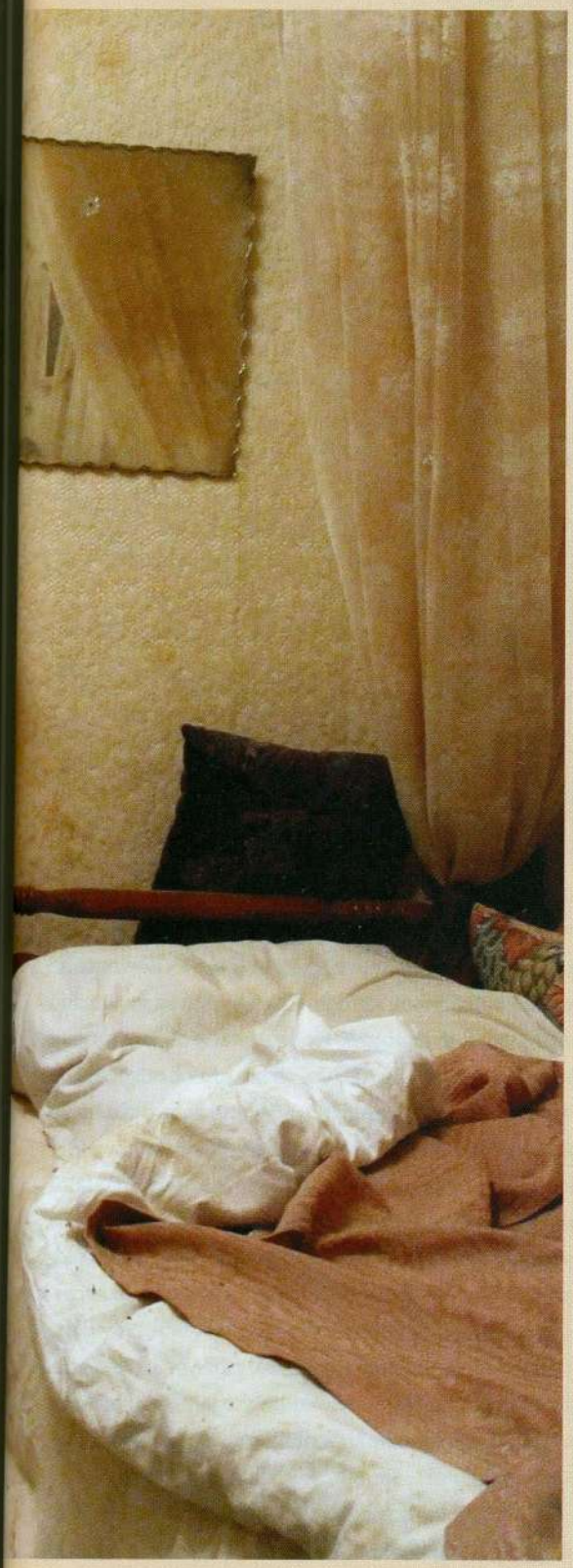

INSIDE THE OUTSIDER'S MIND

Iris Häussler's *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*

BY ANDREA CARSON

Today the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all.

—Theodore Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*

The downtown street is familiar, but unremarkable, its lopsided houses set cheek by jowl, as if the earth underneath has shifted over the years. "Who lives here?" I asked myself as I prised open the low, rickety gate into a garden overgrown with weeds. A sign down the street, advertising a project by the City of Toronto Municipal Archives Assessment Unit at this address, drew my interest but gave no indication as to what I could expect.

The front door is small, as is the vestibule where the City archivist greeted me to lead me through the house. I signed a waiver and began. The front room is claustrophobic, filled floor to ceiling with objects,

left: *Sealed bedroom of the female companion*, Autumn 2006, installation, a small house. Photographs: Iris Häussler, courtesy Iris Häussler.

top: *View from the street*, Autumn 2006.

Egg on pedestal, Autumn 2006, cement, plaster, straw, 30 x 30 x 90 cm.

furniture and aged household paraphernalia, but it's the sculptures that drew my attention. Most are tall and thin, some are tiny, and appear to be stuffed animals—bunny rabbits, teddy bears—covered in wax and plaster. Others alluded more overtly to the female form. To one side, stretching from floor to ceiling was a pillar haphazardly made from the inverted plaster casts of flowerpots. The archivist cautioned me as we walked through to the kitchen, where large sculptures hung from hooks like slabs of meat. I had an uneasy sense that I shouldn't really be exploring a stranger's private realm, yet I couldn't help but wonder: Who does live here?

The archivist knows how disconcerting it is at first glance. Her team has been here since August, assessing and cataloguing what remains of the oeuvre of a reclusive man named Joseph Wagenbach. Police forcibly opened the house in May 2006 after neighbours noticed his disappearance. He was found in a deteriorated state and taken to a nursing home. The unusual contents of his house had attracted some public attention and, since he had been declared incompetent by the probate court, an expert commission from the city's Division of Economic Development and Culture was appointed to catalogue and assess his legacy, either for inclusion into the Register of Artifacts or for disposal. During the process, the house was opened to the public.

I was guided through to the office, where papers, personal photographs and blankets were piled up as if by someone obsessed. More sculptures, these in cloth and crudely wrapped with twine, fill the room. Many are covered in plaster, mud, or a combination thereof. The hastily formed layers of poor materials suggest a certain tragedy, particularly those pieces from which stuffed animal fur pokes through. The archivist, clearly impressed by her team's discoveries, excitedly drew my attention to various small details. Did I know, for instance, that the pillar in the front room is reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*? Furthermore, it goes from the basement right up through to the attic, where it is crowned by a dramatically spot-lit sculpture of a rabbit.

I wondered what drove this elderly man to live at such a remove from contemporary life. There is much they don't know but the archivist was able to tell me this: Joseph Wagenbach was born on January 18, 1929, near Bergen, in Germany. His two older brothers died in the war and his father went missing, leaving young Joseph responsible for the family's small rural inn. He lived for a time in Paris in the 1950s, where he worked as a waiter. In 1962 he emigrated to Canada and settled in Toronto. He kept various low-paying jobs and, until the 1970s, shared his house with a woman named Anna Neretti. Neretti may have had a strong influence on him. In the small bedroom, a life-size plaster sculpture of a female nude lies on one of two narrow, single beds. A slightly open drawer reveals a glimpse of women's clothing—several decades old, at least—while bottles of perfume and makeup accessories, obviously untouched for many years, crowd the dresser. At the back of the house, a pile of 1960s girlie mags peeks out from a desk drawer. A glance into the bathroom shows the bathtub filled with artist's materials and plaster.

It felt as though I were in a shelter of sorts. The implied furtiveness of Wagenbach's artistic process gave a sense of desperation to the work as if, for him, life held less importance than art. The small sunroom

View from the study to Wagenbach's sunroom, Autumn 2006.

at the back of the house is used as a makeshift gallery, where sculptures stand on crudely moulded bases and watermarked mirrors send their reflections into the space again and again. The visitor has been made privy not only to this artist's work, but to his entire realm. I imagine what it must have been like to look through Francis Bacon's famously unkempt London studio. For once, the artist's life and work seem to be in their proper context, and the shortcomings of a museum's pristine, white gallery spaces become clear.

Iris Häussler is a Toronto-based German artist who created the identity and environment around the fictional artist, Joseph Wagenbach. *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* was Häussler's first large-scale installation in North America since she had moved here in 2001. The project, whose nature as art was hidden for months and then revealed to the public, was curated by Rhonda Corvese and facilitated by Toronto's Goethe Institute, which subsequently held a documentary exhibition of Häussler's work as a background setting for the house, the artist and the character of Wagenbach.

The house received much attention, particularly in the mainstream media, before it was unveiled as an artwork. Both national newspapers featured extensive coverage, as did several local papers, radio, television and on-line blogs. "The intent was to provide the public with the opportunity to experience something that they would not have experienced otherwise," said Corvese, "to get inside the psyche of another human being, someone who might possibly have lived in their community." According to Doina Popescu, deputy director of the Goethe, "It was the development of the artistic personality within the community that made this work interesting and that convinced us to join the project." Then, Popescu said, the house became a bridge between the neighbourhood and the public, and those interested in art. That *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* bore no apparent relationship to an artwork created a unique reaction among visitors. It was

Corvese's sense that it was the emotional engagement with Wagenbach that was really interesting.

Häussler's interest was in an older generation's sense of history. "I was fed by my parents' generation," she says, "by their silence, their inability to deal with the past." More than a fictitious narrative, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* is a dense psychological portrait of how needs and traumas are processed. For Häussler, the experience was harrowing. Eight weeks spent living and working in the house—wearing his clothes, even his shoes—took their toll and, occasionally, she said, she felt her link to reality was tenuous. She said that as an artist, "At some point I gave up intellectual control and through Joseph Wagenbach I was liberated—he legitimized my actions in the studio."

Hyper-real installations deliberately recreate environments—down to the dust on the floor and the half-eaten sandwich. Contemporary artists such as Thomas Demand, Peter Fischli and David Weiss have been exploring aspects of this genre for some time, and Ilya Kabakov, Christoph Büchel and others have created installations within museum settings. Büchel, a Swiss artist, often creates spaces that convey extreme psychological mindsets. His recent installation, *Simply Botiful*, at Hauser & Wirth Coppermill in London (October 2006 to March 2007), was a meticulous recreation of a series of squalid rooms including a scrapyard, prostitute's quarters and concrete bunker.

Artists are separating their work from the museum and other traditional exhibition settings. German artist Gregor Schneider began *Totes Haus ur*, an installation of false walls, windows and doors built inside his home in Rheydt, in 1985. *Haus ur* was reinstalled in the German pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, where it won the Leone d'Oro prize. For an Artangel commission in 2004, Schneider created hauntingly identical environments in two East London houses where visitors—allowed inside, one at a time, after taking the key from an Artangel representative—found candy-filled cupboards in the basement, a locked nursery and other unnerving experiences.

Iris Häussler's past work has often dealt with fictional narratives centring on obsessive, outsider characters, whose psyches seem filled with symbolic portent. By using hotel rooms, apartments and, for *Wagenbach*, a house, her work makes the familiar unfamiliar. Häussler says her work—and *Wagenbach* in particular—expands the boundaries of visual art, with its dimensions of art history, literature, archaeology and theatre. In a 1993 installation titled *Pro polis*, she covered every inch of a hotel room in Milan with a thin coating of wax. Significantly, propolis is a waxy substance used by bees to seal their hives and to mummify intruders. In 1989 and 1990, she created two environments, one in Vienna and the other in Munich, both titled *ou topos*, meaning "Utopia," no-place. The first was an abandoned workspace, whose occupant had apparently been in the furtive process of wrapping hundreds of cans of food in lead foil. The other was an apartment where the visitor encountered thousands of candles upon which newspaper photographs of criminals and victims had been pasted. Häussler's open-ended narratives suggest psychological suspense—fear, anticipation and the need to control. The viewer gets a peek into another psyche, one affected by history and reflected in extreme, obsessive behaviour. "People are always talking about working outside the frame," said Corvese, "and this was exactly what this project allowed us to do."

facing page, top: *The archivist in the sunroom*, Autumn 2006.

lower left: *Hare woman*, Autumn 2006, mixed media.

lower right: *Sunroom*, Autumn 2006. Photograph: Marcus Schubert.

Portrait Anna Neretti?, Autumn 2006.

The conflation of art and reality as we know it today stems from a long history of media, including theatre, performance, literature and film. In the 1930s, Brecht coined the term *Verfremdungseffekt* to describe the "alienation effect" that deliberately kept the audience at an emotional distance from the illusory narrative world. Yet, the speed of technology and the reproduction of the original throughout the 20th century have led to what Daniel J. Boorstin (*The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Harper Colophon, 1961) has termed the "pseudo-event," where the orchestrated event "is more vivid and more impressive than the spontaneous original." Hyper-real installations use the "pseudo-event" to tap into a sense of the uncanny, sending the viewer into a state of fear or destabilization that seems to reflect the West's collective uncertainty. Our sense of disconnectedness, from the earth, from one another and from ourselves, may be attributed to the lightning speed of technology, to ever-increasing information production, the fracturing of ideologies and a general sense of suspicion and isolation. Today, we regularly take as reality events on television and film that are

Livingroom, Autumn 2006.

highly orchestrated. Artists making staged and digitally manipulated photographs are challenging photographic "truth," and others are using film to further this idea.

In the late 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism dominated the artistic landscape in America, a younger generation began to look beyond the limitations of the canvas. In the late 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg's works began incorporating everyday objects, and Allan Kaprow presented his first Happening. In New York, John Cage's teachings were an influential presence; indeed, it was Cage's collaboration with Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham that set the tone for the blending of artistic disciplines. Claes Oldenburg opened the Ray Gun Mfg. Co. in 1961, a store selling plaster food and merchandise that he constructed in his studio at the back of the store. In Los Angeles, Ed Kienholz was creating human-scale environments filled with the clutter of a darker side of American life, and a few years later, artists such as Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria took their Land Art into nature, where it could, as Michael Heizer said in a 1969 *Art Forum* interview, "become part of the material of its place and refer beyond itself." In Europe, artists were similarly experimenting. Jean Tinguely, Eduardo Paolozzi and others had been creating post-Dada assemblages that sought to erase the distinctions between art and life. In 1923, Kurt Schwitters devoted himself to *Merzbau*, "a constructed autobiography," which was his self-proclaimed life's work, and in 1961, Piero Manzoni presented his sculpture, *Base Holding Up the World (Socle du monde)*. Perhaps the most significant examples of art entering the public realm were Christo's interventions into landscape in 1962 with *Rideau de Fer*, a pile of oil drums blocking a Parisian street, and, in 1967, Allan Kaprow's *Fluids*, a performance of ice blocks simply left to melt around the city. The audience could now be entirely unaware of the artwork as such. More recently, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Sophie Calle and others have made artistic interventions into society, working with environments and people, few of whom realized they were engaged in art making.

Hyper-real installations confront the viewer with an illusion of which we are aware. Or are we? The historic, ages-old idea that the world as we experience it is an illusion reaches back to a branch of ancient Hindu philosophy called Advaita Vedanta, which teaches that Brahman (consciousness) represents the Infinite Reality, and the world (Maya) is merely an illusion; likewise, Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, in which prisoners, deep inside a cave, face shadows that they perceive to be "reality." As in Plato's story, hyper-real installations destabilize the viewers' perception of truth, by presenting one reality beside another.

The idea of the world as illusion engaged the 19th-century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who, in *Will and Representation*, wrote, "It is Maya, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and causes them to see a world of which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not; for it is like a dream." Schopenhauer might have appreciated hyper-real installations. He believed art should communicate a certain existential angst to the viewer, and that the successful art object should allow the viewer to be lost in the aesthetic experience.

Hyper-real installations represent a turning point in the viewer's relationship to the artwork. Häussler says her work is detailed enough to draw the viewer into the story, and open enough to be used as a framework in which they can project their own stories. From Marcel Duchamp, for whom any object could be art, to John Cage's inclusive view of artistic media, through to contemporary artists who use the workings of urban society as subject, the hyper-real installation's importance, as exemplified by artists such as Häussler, Schneider and Büchel, lies in its ability to move the viewer's focus away from the art object, toward their own intimate experience. ■

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