

The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person
who knows only the laws of nature,
confronting an apparently supernatural event.
Tzvetan Todorov

Unknown facts from the biography of Elvis Presley

A note on Simon Lewandowski

What we need is software that can recognise stupidity. But nobody has yet managed to write it, not even Jimmy Wales, one of the founders of Wikipedia. In fact, he himself has recognised the need for such software when responding to those who repeatedly remind him how easy it is to write nonsense on the site. While we wait for someone to succeed in this task, let us console ourselves with art, an effective remedy to the absurdities of the world. It seems to me that the catalogue of works of a contemporary artist already represents an out-of-control, accordion-like book: it has the power to confer economic value on the system, political engagement, moral reflections, aesthetic research, visibility and success, infotainment, mental well-being, management and/or survival techniques, the collecting of materials, education... The art world is a polygon, a hotbed for the testing of technology, organisational processes and social practices (other hotbeds for innovation are the military complex, the porn industry and Formula 1). We are pleased that art is so alive and connected, that it escapes from the ivory tower and is superimposed upon the global glamour. However, do not all of these tasks risk shifting the focus from basic research to applied research? Do we not risk making the works of art themselves do the work that somebody else should be doing? It is a risk not run by Simon Lewandowski, who has taken a classic route: the search for the meaning of things by upturning or overthrowing them. The route of the absurd, just so we're clear. The tools of his trade include delay, erosion, the stripping to the bone of concepts, and always irony. The laws which govern his search are clearly located. From literature, the references range from his native Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear to the Russian Daniil Kharms (is it mere coincidence that the masters of contrary logic are recalled thus from the books of childhood?). It is that path which scours parallel universes – those which drip with poetry, depth and the abolition of boredom – without worrying about their real existence or on what conditions they may be found. It is also the path of fantasy fiction, from which it differs only by a sudden deviation in the last mile. An *absurdist* is a professional of the unconstrained imagination, managing to remove himself from cultural patterns like a Zen monk from the cares of the world. They work on the reduction, on the flight, on the mirrors of reality, arriving at times at extraordinary and absurdly plausible results. It suits me to anchor Lewandowski to the literary panorama rather than to that post-atomic coliseum, so violently shaken by enraged mobs, which contemporary art has become. After all, in its production the text duly returns.

Lewandowski masters several languages: design, video, installations and web design. He creates objects and assembles devices with electric mechanisms. He knows how to do many things and if he does not know he learns them, with confidence and the unshakeable positivist faith of the Great Nation of Self-Assembly. This nation which, with just a few taps on the keyboard, knows how to find the instructions on the net to assemble celibate machines and hifi systems with gold pins and thermionic valves of Soviet production, to hijack aircrafts and, essentially, to use objects designed for A for function B, awaiting somebody else to find the way to make them work also for C. Ah, the DIYer, this eternal

reincarnation of Robinson Crusoe and Benjamin Franklin in the same body, this hunter of happiness with bare hands, always alone when at work but so generous in sharing his own knowledge with others! He confidently attacks fortresses of unknown knowledge, feeling his way along, without ever losing heart and without the pretext of acquiring the whole body of skills contained within the Official Manual. He is the mayor of a small industrious city in which everybody has a different task. A typical feature of DIY is that others can repeat what you have done; the know-how is circulated from below. The work of Lewandowski can be read as a great, unique tutorial for how to live without damaging one's soul and, at the same time, without being driven entirely mad. This explains the high rate of interactivity developed during his exhibitions: the public must draw near, speak, listen, touch, take objects home with them, write, collect, reflect... In his book, *100 Things with Handles*, we find a further confirmation of his tutorial nature (perhaps his university work is a contributory cause). Useless objects so beautiful that you want to find an adoptive use for them; a manual of the absurd which recalls, in order: Bruno Munari's forks, Vladimir Arkhipov's collection of objects from everyday people, Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, and Martino Gamper's *100 Chairs in 100 Days*.

All that, on the part of the artist, without giving the impression of great effort (just like the British officials in the desert covered from head to toe who do not even break a sweat). Without taking ourselves *excessively* seriously – naturally the trick is all in the temperature of this word, *excessively*. Lewandowski must undoubtedly have read Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*; he will have learnt them by heart and then thrown the book away so that it never fell into enemy and cannibal hands. Neither does he lack a certain dose of cruelty. You must remain alert and keep your safe distance when you adventure into the world of the Big Questions, as do those who face life with a moral attitude. *Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?*, followed by the illuminating reply *I don't know*. Lewandowski's questions are interesting and do not demand responses in a coercive manner. To the contrary, they leave the mind free to process the message even at a later date. They produce, in us dead frogs, small electric charges which last for some time. His art belongs to the world of nomadic and portable art, and, whatever else one may say about the art of today, it does not require all of these technical terms in order to be understood.

The art, thus, of asking questions by looking you straight in the eyes.

If I were ever to win the Ambrogino d'Oro,¹ it would be because I have helped introduce Lewandowski into the cultural life of my city. The specific event dates back to 2006, when the Mediateca di Santa Teresa played host to a strange machine which, all by itself, produced drawings, signed them with a stamp and then immediately destroyed them. It was an *Artistmachine*, so much wittier than so many of those Japanese robots which only know how to play football. The mountain of shredded paper grew day by day. Pure poetry in a primary centre of knowledge. Suggestion, mystery and sweet unrest. It was one of the most beautiful installations that I can recall in recent years, but naturally I am not an authority (officially I was responsible for the logistics; I received in exchange a bottle of fine whisky and, on that occasion, I had the great honour of introducing Lewandowski to Orio Vergani). Two years later, Lewandowski landed at Nowhere

¹ The Ambrogino d'Oro is the unofficial name for honours awarded by the city of Milan in recognition of specific achievements and/or specific contributions made to the city of Milan.

Gallery with *Investigations of Marginal Phenomena (from the British School of Telepathy Archive)*. It was the result of a study into the possibilities of hypnotism, in which he convinced people that on the blank white wall in front of them were works of art, or something of that nature. Obviously, he succeeded. On display was a strange machine from the forties, but constructed recently, which substituted the hypnotist. Among the works exhibited today at the Nowhere Gallery in Milan, we find emotional maps, astral geographies, existentialist posters, and fake labyrinths in which to drink fake Negroni cocktails. There is much technical knowledge, as in Jules Verne's fantastical universes or in Georges Perec's ironic take on science in *Cantatrix Sopranica*. In a box containing publications by artist friends, I keep a sealed cellophane bag which contains adhesive pictographs of men and women with deer antlers attached; its title is *New Symbols for a New Century - No.1 The Presence of Atavism, a Charlatan Productions Multiple*. I would not want to insult the intelligence of the twenty-five visitors by adding redundant comments, so I instead refer you to the explanatory text by the author himself for those wishing to know more about the background of the exhibited art.

However, I feel compelled to say that this way of proceeding, by which I mean using the freedom of art to ask questions in several directions, renders it terribly current. Lewandowski is the perfect interpreter of this season of crises that the West is facing. When the fog falls and you do not know which way to walk, somebody tells you that you must try to make so many small steps in various directions. Lewandowski effectively moves in various directions, and every one of his new exhibitions is unpredictable and thrilling. The collapse of certainties remixes the cement right from the foundations; you must ask yourself the fundamental questions (if not now, when?). The economists who study the crisis argue in dry and smooth tones about the values of u and v , but they are not able to bring into focus the Ultimate Causes. Indeed, the Queen of England herself asked the academics at the London School of Economics how on earth they failed to predict the current crisis. People like Lewandowski are carriers of more cultures and have had to scale the Hill of Integration (to remain in the literary field, I am thinking of Joseph Conrad, whose complex and strange language has so fascinated the English, due to its mysterious roots which stir the deep waters). These people move around more comfortably in times of crisis because they were brought up in crisis, with the anxious desire to please in order to gain acceptance. Like Gary Shteingart, born in Leningrad and raised in New York, whose third novel *Super Sad True Love Story* is a Pompeian fresco of the way the world could go. The future becomes a trimalchian feast in which the value of individuals is continually reconfigured according to three sole principals: economic solvency, *fuckability* and degree of immortality. The people in the novel do everything with their *äppäräts*, they take to compulsive shopping and regress to the state of perpetual teenagers. America succumbs (almost). These people, the Transcultural Pollinators, are precious because, unlike most people, they do not struggle to adjust their gaze when things go wrong.

The verb of the absurd is, more than the subjunctive, the conditional. Every event has more potential outcomes within itself; why leave out such a fertile slice of life for the neurons? The conditional is always in existence, and if you decide to tell a story in the past, it can also become retroactive. It is called Uchronia. In *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) the baddies win (the further back you go the more exciting; just imagine if at the Battle of Marathon the Persians had won). In *Past*

Conditional: A Retrospective Hypothesis by Guido Morselli (1975) the Austrians excavated a secret tunnel in the Alps and flooded the Po Valley. Life becomes a football pitch in which to move around gaily in search of useful questions, or useless questions which produce useful answers. The power to doubt reality is the cornerstone of Socratic philosophy, the Great Weapon of Thought. The seed of doubt, sown into the complexity of life, whispers in your ear: that which yesterday may have been false, today is true. The complexity grows, and this does not always please us. Lewandowski forces you beyond the yellow line, beyond the vertigo. His irony is the antivenom which you must carry with you on this kind of journey, because if you discover that the solution you were looking for was right under your nose, I can assure you that it is very useful to have to hand something to shoot into your veins.

Aquarium are a particularly long-lasting and karstic band, who were early pioneers of soviet rock. Their leader is Boris Purushottama Grebenshikov, a mathematician by training and a translator of Hindu and Tibetan texts, imbued with absurdism and St Petersburg spirit, or, to put it better, with melancholy, snobbery and mists of the north. In 2006, he composed a beautiful song which is worth citing in its entirety. It is an essay in Lewandowskian art, and perhaps to a lesser extent Lebowskian, by which I am referring to the Cohen brothers' film, *The Big Lebowski*:

*Oh you have such kind ways,
Or else I am truly an untouchable.
Elvis Presley was a son of the Empress of Venus
And a smuggler from Taganrog.*

*He came down to this earth to save us from pain
Leaving his pink Cadillac in heaven;
He has travelled from the White Sea to the Black Sea,
He shook his shoulders and sang "Oh baby, baby, baby!"*

I like to imagine a world in which Elvis is born from the meeting of two civilisations. The translation into Italian is my own.² I have used the title of the song for this piece that is now drawing to a close. I cannot help asking myself why on earth Boris did not dedicate it to Simon.

Eugenio Alberti Schatz

² Translated again from Italian to English by the translator.