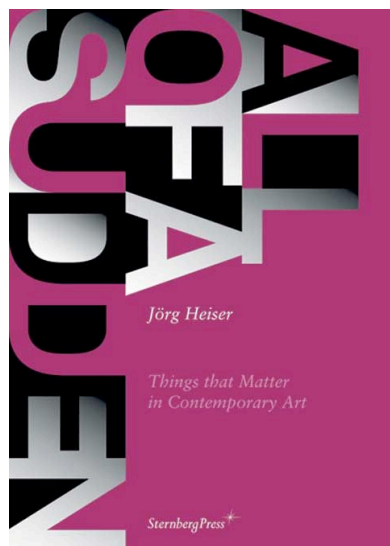


All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art An Interview with Jörg Heiser

Jörg Heiser is co-editor of *frieze* magazine, writes for the national daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and is a frequent contributor to art catalogues and publications. He curated the exhibitions “Romantic Conceptualism” (2007, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, BAWAG Foundation Vienna) and “Funky Lessons” (2004/2005, BüroFriedrich Berlin, BAWAG Foundation Vienna). He is the author of *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press, Berlin and New York, 2008)



Book cover, courtesy of Sternberg Press, Berlin.

In the introduction to your new book, *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art* you content that ‘... in contemporary art, the emphasis has shifted from biography and medium to method and situation.’ (Intro, p. 5) - a statement which echoes in part the position of overviews of contemporary art such as Claire Doherty’s *From Studio to Situation* (Black Dog) – and that we must approach the analysis of contemporary art, therefore, not through simplifying questions of medium, but through exploring artists methodologies (the method of slapstick, for example). Your foregrounding of artists’ methods would seem to speak to contemporary questions surrounding ‘artistic research’. To what extent, in your view, do debates on ‘artistic research’ count among the ‘things that matter’ in contemporary art?

It’s a little tricky. Research as such is not an achievement, and artists impersonating scientists, ethnologists or sociologists have to be careful not to a) underestimate the discourse in these respective fields they are tapping into, and b) keep in mind what they do their research for. Like one could get carried away with self-referential questions of the specificities of a medium – ‘New Media Art’ that becomes techy-nerdy in an unproductive, or even oppressive

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html>

way; or abstract painting that becomes merely tautological and plainly dull – it is equally problematic to be absorbed by the mere aura, or political gravitas, of the material one encounters in the course of one’s research. You can see the effect of that in press releases that highlight that an artist explored this social context or did research on that obscure 1950s phenomenon, without bothering to argue whether the artist then managed to do anything productive with that artistically. If an artist did great research, say, on a case of corruption, why don’t they – to put it very bluntly – do a good reportage rather than a crappy installation, i.e. chose the appropriate context and method to communicate? A productive methodology would be then to remember what really mattered, which I think (in generalising terms) is to remember what art can bring to that research; a sense of form, of perceptive qualities, and conceptual reflection – which would be precisely its political stake in this. To give a recent example: Duncan Campbell has made a fantastic film, *Bernadette* (2008), about Irish dissident Bernadette Devlin. The material he did four years of research on, ploughing through the archives of film stations around the world, is in itself fascinating. Devlin – who was the youngest Member of Parliament at Westminster at the age of 21 – was an amazingly self-confident and charismatic activist. One wonders immediately, however, what the artistic ‘surplus’ is in terms of the way he treated the material, as opposed to just feeding off its aura. In the end, Campbell succeeds because he refrains from the well-trodden ground of the conventional biopic, and – as one would expect of a good, auteur film essay for that matter – instead opts for surprising juxtapositions of uncommented material, amazing footage - like a journalist rehearsing the questions he wants to ask Devlin. It is, again, method and contextualization that make the difference, not just research as such relying on biography and medium.



Duncan Campbell, *Bernadette* 2008, Digitbeta (16 mm) filmstills, courtesy Hotel.

In the opening chapter ‘Pathos versus ridiculousness Art with slapstick’ - where you speculate that ‘the simultaneous emergence of modern slapstick à la Chaplin and the modern art object à la Duchamp cannot be purely coincidental’ (18) - you write ‘Slapstick as a sudden jolt in a smooth sequence, an absurd attack of hiccoughs in everyday life and world events, allowing us to catch glimpses of the truth about ourselves and our relations with others. There’s something liberating about this, and something moving.’ (13) and later on you describe the tension in maintaining a truly ‘slapstick method’ as a ‘struggle between doubtful constancy and constant doubt’ (90). Might such a reading of slapstick evoke a way to articulate the creative tension in making (good) art in general? Or would this be to risk universalizing and essentializing an artistic method which is culturally specific and historically grounded?

At the risk of universalizing, I’d say yes, it’s a struggle at the heart of much (good) artmaking
All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art. An Interview with Jörg Heiser
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html>

in general. But to be more precise, the humouristically-scepticist admittance of doubt and failure reoccurs throughout history, from Diogenes through Cervantes to Alfred Jarry, but 'reoccurrence' is not synonymous with 'universal'. There are continuities, but the advent of new technologies and forms of organization in Modernity, for example, have certainly changed the way the 'slapstick method' has materialized artistically. The proverbial 'Slapstick' was an instrument of two pieces of wood clapped together by the Harlequin in the *Commedia del'Arte*, but it wasn't until silent film that physical comedy could be chopped up and accelerated technologically, and thus reflect on the chopping up and acceleration of Modern life. So to sum up, there is no contradiction really between asserting a trans-historic reoccurrence of productive modes of humoristic doubt, and those reoccurrences being culturally specific and historically grounded.

How did you arrive at the structure of the book? For example, how much does the fragmentary style adopted within the individual chapters belie an interest in romanticism? Does contemporary art exert a 'fragmentary exigency' on the critic?

The structure of the book was driven by the idea that it should be about ideas and methods, not artist's biographies, and specificities of media. Though the second chapter does concentrate on one medium solely, painting, it does so with a specific argument about the way social behaviour and decisions are reflected in the seemingly solitary decisions and 'behaviours' (i.e. painterly methods) of the picture plane. Accordingly, the book is not a A-Z compendium, but rather discusses artists and their work from the angle of a specific question, be it slapstick or the way video and film are sequenced and choreographed in art spaces.

At the same time, the book was about emptying out my pockets from about 15 years of writing or so, asking myself: what have I done? What is this all about? What is *really* important to me in contemporary art? In as far as Romanticism – in the sense of the kind of essayist writing favoured by German Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel – is about rejecting the idea of a holistic, 'objective' world view, I'd agree, yes, I'm struck by art's 'fragmentary exigency'. I dig open fragment rather than closed system (though I can enjoy the cool, cool aura residing in the *claim* of having created a closed system, whether it's Donald Judd or, say, Kraftwerk; I would say that the claim, ironically, has a romantic kernel). I'm in favour of allowing the inevitably fragmented viewpoint of a singular person such as me to serve as a kind of yardstick measured against other yardsticks (rather than claiming to have access to some kind of transcendental yardstick of beauty norms etc.). This 'relativism' of competing 'yardsticks' is not just arbitrary, but guarantees that a) everyone is allowed to enter the discussion, but b) has to make the effort to justify their judgements, allowing them to be in turn judged by others. Scot Hume and Kraut Kant I guess would have agreed that the foundation for the 'judgment' or 'standard of taste' is the contradiction between subjectivity and universality. Thing is, we have to bring that contradiction to life, keep making the effort to argue in the midst of experiment, arbitrary feelings and perceptions, and doubt.

To what extent is *All of a Sudden* a book written specifically for artists, as a manifesto addressed to artists?

In that it doesn't assume the role popular amongst some critics, which is to act as a kind of advocate of a supposedly healthily sceptical, but actually resentment-driven public suspecting artists to be narcissist idiots or cynical charlatans earning too little, or too much money.

And in that it ignores, if only for the length of the book, the attempts of some parts of the art world to create a linear connection between artistic value and monetary value.

Why did you become interested in the idea of Romantic Conceptualism and to what extent does the method of slapstick inform your take in the work included in the exhibition *Romantic Conceptualism* and how does this exhibition relate to your previous work as a curator, eg. *Funky Lessons*?

I became interested when I first saw Warhol's film *Kiss* (1964) projected in 1999, realising that it blew me away even though I had assumed it was just the cool conceptual execution of a simple idea, which is to ask couple after couple – men and women, men and men – to kiss for the duration of a three minute film role, and nothing else. The point is that it's precisely that simple set-up dictated by the limits of the medium that creates the libidinal 'surplus' of the piece. I realised that conceptualist artmaking a) doesn't have to neglect emotion to make a 'depersonalised', i.e. anti-narcissist statement and b) that that is the case because emotions themselves have a 'conceptual' side to them: they are cultural techniques of coming to terms with ones environment, whether productively or destructively.

Romantic Conceptualism questioned the still prevalent assertion that cool depersonalization is the precondition of an art that makes itself checkable, revisable (when the actual aim is to become unassailable, not to expose any tender spots). *Funky Lessons* questioned another still prevalent assertion: that Conceptualism is too didactic. And so the show brought together work that undermines authority by claiming it, wittily. The title of the exhibition was inspired by Adrian Piper's pivotal piece *Funk Lessons* (1982-1984), a video based on a performance by the African-American artist teaching – a mostly white – audience of students basic, and advanced dance routines of funk and soul music.

Slapstick is the missing link between those two exhibitions: it creates a connection between the humoristic strategies, and the romantically emphatic strategies, aimed at eroding heroism. Bas Jan Ader's work is the pinnacle of this, and even when people now start to get weary of seeing his small body of work slightly over-exposed over the last couple of years, it remains so. To quote from my book, in regard to a work that was included in *Romantic Conceptualism*, if I may do so: '*Broken Fall (Geometric), Westkapelle, Holland (1972)* shows Ader falling sideways onto a saw horse and into the bushes. The bushes line a path that leads to the "Westkapelle" lighthouse—visible in the background—that features in an early series of paintings by Piet Mondrian. The action is reminiscent of the classic comedy gag of leaning sideways, of listing heavily like a drunk or a sailor at sea; but it refers to Mondrian's Modernist rejection of the diagonal in favor of the rectilinear that caused a quarrel between the artist and his friend Theo van Doesburg. Where Mondrian manically abstracted from physicality, Ader brought it back into play. In this way, he exorcised modern art in general and Conceptualism in particular, driving out their poses of heroic unassailability.' (82)

Bas Jan Ader seems of key importance to both your and Jan Verwoert's understanding of romantic conceptualism. In *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous*, for example, Verwoert writes: 'By fore-grounding [the] evocative, suggestive and open-ended quality of the conceptual gesture, Ader shows how deeply indebted conceptual art is to the aesthetics of the sublime.'¹ However, in 'Emotional Rescue, Romantic Conceptualism', you write: '*Farewell to Faraway Friends* suggests that the seeming incompatibility of the Conceptual and the romantic goes back to the historical roots of artistic production in

Modernity at large.² Is Conceptualism ‘indebted to’ and ‘incompatible’ with Romanticism at the same time?

Yes. Conceptualism is indebted to Romanticism precisely in that the latter movement already embodied, and explored, the incompatibility of trying to create ‘closed systems’ on the one hand and allowing artistic experiment to happen on the other. There was a ‘seed’ of Conceptualism in Romanticism as much as there is a ‘trace’ of the latter in the former, and in both cases the ‘official’ rhetoric often rejected or denied that connection.

In his essay, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’ Walter Benjamin states: ‘The category under which the Romantics conceive of art is the idea.’³ Benjamin’s assertion seems to suggest that a nascent conceptualism is imminent to Romantic aesthetics and thus romanticism and conceptualism and are not as incompatible as we might expect from a reading of Sol LeWitt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ (1967) where he famously outlawed the ‘emotional kick’ associated with ‘Expressionist’ art. However, you argue that *Romantic Conceptualism* does not intend simply to redeem Romanticism and the sublime for conceptualism, nor does it intend to present a soft focus revision of conceptualism. Rather, the exhibition claims to refute any easy binary opposition or final resolution between these terms. How is this balancing act sustained in practice?

On the part of the artists? I can only guess – in the way they use contradictions and tensions between pre-existing parameters and ones own experience of them as a motor, rather than trying to resolve these contradictions and tensions. For example Susan Hiller, for her *Dedicated to the Unknown Artist* (1972–76) used the pre-existing parameter of postcards of the ‘Wild Sea’ on the UK coastline, and the pre-existing parameter of sociological categorization of popular artefacts such as these postcards, and the pre-existing aesthetic parameter of using a grid for display, to fuel her own enquiry into what it means to be an artist, and what it means to be letting others – in this case the unknown artists who took these photographs, or handcoloured them – speak through one’s work.

The balancing act on the part of me as a curator was to pre-empt easy assumptions about feelgood, ‘soft focus revision’, as you aptly put it, by allowing each work a space of their own while creating tensions between works that set off the respective qualities, bringing out the stern and no-nonsense side in the one work while highlighting the latently delirious in another (say, an Allen Ruppersberg poster wall which is poppy-coloured, yet is just as conceptually driven and earnestly thought through as a black-and-white sentence by Lawrence Weiner). That said, it was also important not to become apologetic about the ‘vulnerability’ of these works, their daring leap into possible embarrassment, for the sake of lining them up with cooler, more guarded conceptual strands.

In *Political Romanticism*, Carl Schmitt contends that ‘romantics transform every thought into a sociable conversation and every instant into a historical moment... just as the romantic emotion moves between the compressed ego and expansion into the cosmos, so every point is a circle at the same time, and every circle a point. The community is an extended individual, the individual a concentrated community.’⁴ What does romantic conceptualism contribute to questions of community (I’m thinking of the series of micro-maintenance works by Didier Courbot, for example), to the question of simultaneously ‘being-together’ and ‘being-apart,’ to borrow Rancière’s terms?

It brings to ideas of community precisely the insistence on being allowed to be a single individual. That is its contribution: not in the sense of hedonism or egoism, but in the sense of allowing the imaginary to continue being a resource for new ideas in the socio-political sphere. ‘Romantic Conceptualism’, as opposed to Romanticism per se, would however be aware of the pitfalls of romanticising – in that sense, rendering sublime – that single individuality, the ‘artist’s soul’, itself. It would, rather, use the single individual as a ‘medium’ through which the community speaks, like the unknown artists speak through Hiller (and Hiller through them, of course). In that sense, Romantic Conceptualism is Romanticism secularized, stripped of any pretension that the artist’s soul is a medium of the otherworldly or godly (while allowing a sense of tragicomic mourning for that secularization to linger on).



Allen Ruppberg, YOU AND ME PLUS, 2007, Poster Installation, silkscreen on paper, dimensions variable. Installation shot, Romantic Conceptualism BAWAG Foundation Vienna, 14 September – 1 December 2007. Reproduced with kind permission of BAWAG Foundation, Vienna.

According to Guy Oakes, for Schmitt ‘the favourite occupation of the political romantic is criticism. Discussion or conversation is the vehicle by which the romantic poeticizes politics.’⁵⁵ (p. xxvii) This depiction of the sociability of romanticism appears to resemble the conviviality which Nicolas Bourriaud attributes to relational art as a critical and political practice. How does Romantic Conceptualism relate to these terms of ‘critical’, ‘political’ or ‘relational’ art?

I’m sceptical of the conviviality often associated with relational art, in terms of an assumption that it is established against, rather than with, the means of mass media or the means of the ‘spectacle’. Favouring a kind of ‘direct’ exchange between artist and audience (sharing meals, or producing a film together, or whatever) over more ‘anonymous’, indirect ways of critical reception and interaction I think runs the risk of being romantic in the regressive sense (‘true’ physical exchange versus estranged electronic exchange, or none at all). I think anonymity is a very important factor in Romantic Conceptualism: ‘I’m too sad to tell you’, Bas Jan Ader’s statement of the artist weeping for the camera, includes a rejection of exchange, crucially (i.e. he doesn’t give us a reason for his sadness). If relational practice includes the right to remain silent, or to take part without having to confess, I’m all for it. That’s the irony of Romantic

Conceptualism: the artists take on all the embarrassment, leaving it open whether we shall embarrass ourselves as well. It counters the imposition of having to merely fulfil ones role as a dependable member of the community. Maybe all of this connects to the contradiction between communitarianism and individualism that became so central to the protestant movements of the US throughout the centuries, which is maybe also why Conceptualism seems so at home there.

All of that said, I don't want to generalize too much and say that I can see full on hardcore political art with not the slightest romantic touch being of great value and importance, depending on the situation and context. I think there is a time for this, and a time for that.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write of the 'romantics' that 'Regardless of the form it takes, their literary ambition is always the result of their ambition for an entirely new social function for the writer – that writer who was, for them, a character still to come, and in the concrete form of a profession, as we read in *Athenaeum* fragment 20 - and consequently for a different society.'⁶ **Does your practice as a writer, editor, curator, researcher and musician conceal a 'romantic' and contradictory call for a different society? Contradictory, inasmuch as such a multifaceted practice seems on the one hand to refuse to accept disciplinarity and to embrace Rancière's concept of 'indisciplinarity' and on the other hand to reproduce capitalism's de-categorization of work which exploits 'typical characteristics of the artistic condition' as outlined by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.**⁷

I think what is often ignored in critical discussions of artistic or 'romantic' role-models for artists and writers, which in turn get adopted by the larger economic sphere to justify exploitative working conditions, is to insist that what makes the difference is to what *end* these ways of producing are being established. It does make the *deciding* difference whether I work long hours for little money to create a great novel or song, or whether I do it to help a company to become richer while feeding off the illusion that I do something creative. The thing is, that sometimes the lines blur between those two states (the song may turn out to be not very creative, while the company who sells it still gets richer). Still the difference has to be asserted. In other words, I'm weary of attempts to discredit artistic 'flexibility' and 'precariousness,' etc. on the grounds that it is a blueprint for exploitation elsewhere. I'm equally weary of talk of 'creative industries' à la Richard Florida which gloss over the difference between genuinely creative work that, simply, put something out into the world that didn't exist before, and merely 'interpretative' work that may have creative aspects in continuing a certain tradition or craft. In the current development of Capitalism, I think it is more crucial than ever to re-establish evaluation of *to what ends* one works or 'self-exploits', rather than just how. Maybe someone is underpaid and exploited, but doesn't it make a difference whether he or she is so for an NGO fighting against landmines, for example, as opposed to say a company producing such landmines?

As much as I always ask for an emphasis on the 'how' of artmaking (the methods) rather than its 'what' (the subject matter), in terms of 'work' as such and 'artistic disciplines' etc. I'd rather always ask to what effect someone works the way the work.

¹ Jan Verwoert, *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Afterall, 2006), p. 15.

² Jörg Heiser, 'Emotional Rescue, Romantic Conceptualism', *frieze*, Issue 71, November-December 2002.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, 1913-1926, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004), p. 179.

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, translated by Guy Oakes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1986 [1919]), p. 74.

⁵ See Guy Oakes' 'Translator's Introduction' to Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, p. xxvii.

⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (NY: Suny, 1998), p. 6.

⁷ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 422.