



From the Bins

Thorsten Brinkmann's Caveman Dreams

In an increasingly nomadic, if not to say disposable age, the bulkier tools of domesticity seem to impose a totem-like force of their own, gleamingly alluring, yet defiantly unwieldy (have you ever tried to move an expensive German washing machine, concrete base and all?) In the great mercantile port of Hamburg, Thorsten Brinkmann tangles with a modern-day caveman's dreams.

text SANDRA HOFMEISTER

Noisy trucks, carrying large containers with Chinese inscriptions, rattle past the highway along the canal. The surface of the water is covered with sheets of ice that drift towards the Elbe River. It's a cold and grey winter's day on Peute-Island in Hamburg. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of the motorway rumbles on. There are no pedestrians in this almost forgotten zone of the harbour-area. And as I pass by a deserted petrol station and turn right onto a row of partly shuttered storehouses, there among the parked heavy-duty trucks is Thorsten Brinkmann's white VW van.

The neighbourhood of the artist's studio could not be more appropriate to his work: Brinkmann is a serious collector of the discarded and disregarded; household items and second-hand-objects that he finds at scrapyards or in rubbish collections on the streets. So while some young artists gather soon-to-be valuable pieces by their colleagues and sell them for amazing prices, Brinkmann accumulates piles of unprofitable scrap whose speculative potential has seemingly been thrown out with the rest of the trash. How to house all this stuff? To my eye the studio resembles a messy stockroom fit to burst: mountains of used cloth are heaped

on the dirty floor, and despite the simple storage racks that Brinkmann built some time ago, high walls of stacked finds surround the narrow pathway to the desk in front of a dingy window. For Brinkmann the scene is 'quite normal', and he moves like a seasoned navigator through the oceans of stuff.

Arranging and decomposing

Dumped urban detritus and its transformation through combination and recombination is the material oxygen for all of Brinkmann's work, whether it be in the form of installations, videos or photos such as self-portraits and still lifes. Take the Variable Struktur (Variable Structure; 2000/2001): an impressive cube of carefully piled white goods and other objects that reach more than 3m high. The component pieces, which include a washing machine, several mattresses and plastic buckets, are instantly recognisable, and yet several variations of the same items result in incredibly different structures, with each one set apart by its mix of unique detail and familiarity. This fascination with the things that go straight from the house onto the street saw Brinkmann progress from taking photographs in his college years to taking his 'work' back home with him. As an artist, the pull

Soviel wie möglich auf einmal tragen, 2003
C-Print, 170 x 124cm
Sammlung Museum Salzburg



Das Prinzip Sockel, 2001/02
(all images)
C-prints, 40 x 30cm



Variable Struktur 1-8, 2000/01
(all images)
C-Prints, 95 x 95cm



was the array of casual combinations that are simultaneously concrete and abstract. Arranging and recomposing the installations is also very physical work. 'I even joined a gym in order to be fit for doing this,' Brinkmann says matter-of-factly. As such, the actual process of 'fixing up' naturally evolved to become a focus of his art, and Brinkmann documented it in a series of performance-like videos. *Gut Ding will es so* (2003) shows a young man, fighting with different awkward objects and searching for their function. In the case of the flowered chaise longue that was so beloved by couples in the Seventies, the recollection of the frustratingly cumbersome foldable bed strikes an emotional chord. The artist himself is unidentifiable in his videos, since only the acting body and not the face is visible. Hiding identity is characteristic for the *Portraits of a Serialsammler* (*Portraits of a Serial Collector*; 2006 - ongoing) as well. A group of self-portraits produced by the artist using the delayed action release of the camera in his studio, he presents himself each time enveloped in some sort of disguise. His face is never shown but masked with old pillowcases or other items from his collections. There are several references to art history in these portraits, but Brinkmann alludes to them in an ironic way. Resisting parody, subtle humour also frames the series *Das Prinzip Sockel* (*The Principle of a Plinth*; 2001), a playful testing of a two-object combination, one as plinth and the other as a kind of superstructure. His latest works are also rubbish – that is to say, in content not effect – and he shows me a series of photographs of multicoloured still lifes. He knows where they are heading – Berlin's *Kunstagenten* gallery in May – but as yet a satisfying title eludes him.

Beyond-the-grave

Sitting in his studio, my attention is drawn to some fabrics on the floor. I've seen these somewhere before, only in a different place and with another 'face'. And it seems that Brinkmann often extends the life cycle of his beyond-the-grave material, reusing single items from his collection in a number of pieces. With this waste-not want-not approach, Brinkmann recently confronted every serial collector's premium concern, that of space. 'I rented a fourth room for my studio. I have more space for all the stuff now,' he explains, although one wonders how long before he needs a fifth or sixth. The most emblematic photograph of the way the artist works is the self-portrait *Soviel wie möglich tragen* (*Carrying as much as possible all at once*; 2003): traced in that image are the informal and humorous exercises that Brinkmann 'performs', in this particular case showing his body disguised and draped by several objects of civilisation's waste. Invited to exhibit at the contemporary art fair *Scope* in Miami in 2007, Brinkmann remembers having found a collection point of sorted rubbish that had been left in the wake of the



latest hurricane hit, which provided an unfortunately excellent and convenient place to find the basics for his exhibition. When the show was finished, he uncharacteristically discarded those items – carrying them on an overseas flight to Hamburg was too complicated. But then an interested client showed up, presenting something of a problem for Brinkmann. 'I had to find similar [stuff] again, not in Miami but in the streets of New York, where the collector lives,' he recalls.

There is only a narrow gap between art, flea market and everyday life in Brinkmann's works, and the artist experiments with this space in a playful manner. During the solo exhibition *Alles hat kein Ende* (*Everything has no end*) in 2006 at the *Kunstagenten* Gallery in Berlin, Brinkmann configured a bulked-up waste structure on the street in front of the gallery doorway. In order to enter, visitors had to cross through an inconspicuous closet. Parts of this arrangement disappeared during the exhibition's run – people from the street took the 'rubbish' and reappropriated it. 'I liked this,' Brinkmann chuckles. 'The items are back in the circuit of using.'

www.kunstagenten.de

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Karl Schrank von Gaul, 2008
C-Print, 171 x 130cm

Donna Delle, 2008
(facing page, top left)
C-Print, 100 x 76cm

Drune Quoll, 2007
(facing page, top right)
C-Print, 76 x 59cm

Untitled # 17, 2008
(facing page, bottom left)
C-Print

Untitled # 5, 2008
(facing page, bottom right)
C-Print