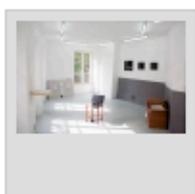


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THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL HYPOCRISY

Damien Airault

Damien Airault was locked up for a whole week inside the Institute of Social Hypocrisy, one of the very few artist-run spaces in the French capital. After such an experience he's well positioned to explore the intentions of this mysterious venue nestled at the heart of the Marais.

That night, there were about twenty people around, and they all spoke Norwegian – rather surprising for central Paris. I grabbed a beer, heard a bearded guy shouting in English that 'it was about to start' and sat down against the wall like everybody else. It was my first time at The Institute of Social Hypocrisy. The guy introduced the speaker – in English – saying how delighted he was to welcome the

anthropologist Theodor Barth who was about to give a lecture on 'I am not: a Jew (I exist) – I'm not talking about a calculated space – nor of the space for calculations – I'm talking about a place where someone I know took me'.

His presentation was a whirlpool of ideas including the status of Jewish people during the war in the former Yugoslavia, Hebrew symbols, Giorgio Agamben, Emmanuel Levinas, Nicolas Bourriaud, linguistic diagrams, aesthetic speculations, methods of cross referencing in sociology, what had to be read upside down, what can be read both ways or from bottom to top. A few members of the public dozed off, but most of them looked quite happy, acquiring food for thought for the following few weeks at least.

An hour and half this went on. The bearded guy tried to stop the lecture, but the speaker harshly answered that his presentation was nowhere near finished. Tension rose as the two men started a polite argument. The ambiance turned weird, we had no idea what was acted, what wasn't, what was real, what was made up. A lecture on identity in a place called 'The Institute of Social Hypocrisy' can be an unsettling event indeed.

Ambiguous situations

A regular at The Institute of Social Hypocrisy (as if, like beauty, hairdressing or contemporary art, deception could be granted its own institute), I soon became used to these kinds of ambiguous situations. The ISH is both a satire of the traditional exhibition space and an artist studio. It's an unstable place where nothing is credible even though the apparatus of the artistic institution is perfectly imitated. There's a white cube-type space, alcohol is served during the private views, there are very official looking business cards, a simple and elegant website, headed paper, and a flag on the façade – in short, all the elements are there to give the impression of a contemporary art space managed by professionals. Here, the word 'hypocrisy' isn't a provocation but a communications trick used to advertise an ambitious discourse and a coherent ensemble. The artist behind all this, Victor Boulet, dreamt up a context to promote and support his own practice, this very context becoming in turn an integral part of his work. At ISH, everything ought to be thought of as a performance.

Hypocrisy is ISH's governing principle. It gives an absolute freedom to those who dare to use it openly. Everything at ISH is shown and thought of through this prism. Hypocrisy, lie, trickery can be very meaningful postulates when one thinks of the modes of interpretation of the work of art. They highlight the gap between gesture and words, words and thoughts, thoughts and gesture. Attempting to understand Victor Boulet's intentions (or the intentions of his guests) leads straight into a dead end: one has to confront the project head on, without trying to pre-empt the various actors' objectives or their moral position.

In someone else' s nest

To finish, I cannot resist talking about a project in which I was personally involved, even though the idea didn't come from me. 'The Brooding Parasite Feeding Week' was conceived in November 2010 by Victor Boulet at The ISH and at the small gallery of which I'm director, Le Commissariat. Suffice to say that I ended up confined to the Institute for a whole week. For seven days and seven nights, Victor fed me at fixed times with dishes all based on whale meat. In order to get them, I had to attach a basket to a rope and send it down to the street from the second floor where The ISH is located. Victor had left me enough to live with minimum comfort: I had a mattress and a couple of sheets, coffee, tea, alcohol and bits of toiletries. Stuck behind a security door, I also had a phone and a computer connected to the Internet. Beforehand, Victor had asked me for the Commissariat's keys, and during my incarceration he covered its shop window with images of birds - cuckoos, to be precise.

The animal metaphor could easily become a symbol for ISH's modus operandi: first there's a species known to steal the nest of others, dispose of them and pose as a fledgling in order to be fed by the female bird (the cuckoo); then there's a threatened species, protected against hunting, whose meat, distributed illegally, is particularly tender (the whale). Combining the aesthetic of plagiarism with the one of spoliation, the ISH is a project where savagery serves intelligence - and vice-versa.

Damien Airault is a curator and an art critic. He is director of Le Commissariat in Paris, where he is based.