ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2007

Lothar Hempel

MAGASIN—CENTRE NATIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN, GRENOBLE, FRANCE Claire Moulène

IN 1996 Nicolas Bourriaud included Lothar Hempel in "Traffic" at CAPC in Bordeaux, France, placing the German artist alongside numerous others of his generation such as Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Since then, Hempel's star has perhaps not burned as brightly as these other artists', but this spring saw him return to France for his first retrospective—or "flashback," as the dreamlike nature of the show at Grenoble's Magasin seemed to suggest.

Organized by curator Florence Derieux, "Alphabet City" featured more than sixty pieces, spanned eleven rooms, and was bookended by an emblematic pair of works. At the beginning was Vorwärts! (Forward!), 2006—appropriately titled but, given the date of its making, also an indicator that the show was more thematic than chronological—in which a photograph of a girl with a drum (at a Swiss festival in the '60s) sits atop a small Indian bronze horse crowned by a lightbulb. And at the very end of the show was Untitled, 1998, a color photograph of a young man (drink and cigarette in hand, flower in shirt pocket) wearing several crosses and amulets around his neck. He is one of sixteen Uruguayan rugby players—

out of a group of forty-five—who survived the infamous 1972 plane crash in the Andes; the original photograph was taken at a reunion of the survivors one year later.

Traversing all Hempel's work are such borrowed images, lifted from history and from a wide range of disciplines and media, such as psychology, geology, cinema, and music; at the same time, his strategies for object making variously conjure the Bauhaus, Constructivism, and even Joseph Beuys. Yet all these references are left by the artist in a kind of suspension, like pendulums in midswing-their significance subsequently as uncertain as that of the sculptural ensembles in which they are often housed. With these first and last works it was clear that Hempel's very practice was, from beginning to end, being presented here in a manner befitting the unclassifiable, atemporal quality of his installations: ceaselessly hesitating between narrativity and formalism, playing with codes of representation, perpetually staging itself. Hempel's pieces seem to be both character and setting, and viewers wander through his installations as though in a theater of appearances. We find ourselves in a story, but one that we do not know.

Indeed, certain installations—such as a new work (ABC, 2007) featuring a '70s photograph of dancers in the Bronx—seemed to operate within a floating spatiotemporal zone, transformed into ghostly and cinematic presences even while their sculptural compositions might bring together such disparate elements as lightbulbs, pink Plexiglas, video monitors, and a small wooden boat. Despite this mix of materials, numerous Hempel works are distinguished by their flatness, inviting viewers to walk around them only to have any illusion, or narrative, vanish when they turn the corner to discover all is decor. This flatness also arises clearly in his colorful, friezelike paintings. These single "portraits" of men and women standing in profile form a series of oblique

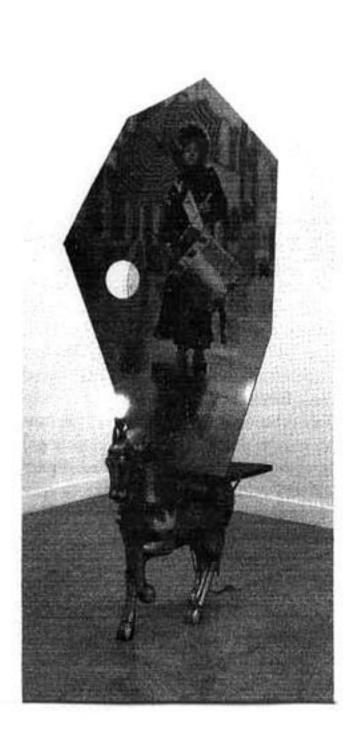
symbols. But a kind of two-dimensionalit even Hempel's almost clownish mannequiied heads as well as full figures, typically of which seem more like concepts than chat than finished objects.

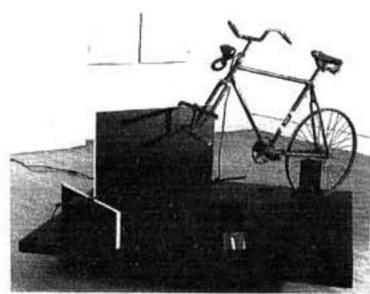
This sense of diminishment is apparen Hempel addresses culture at large, as who the bankruptcy of ideologies—as well as ment with a world merely turning in circles-Sozialismus (Abstract Socialism), 2002: doctrine is reduced to a miner's lamp and beside a rusty bicycle without a front tire, the ble set on a revolving platform. But the of ideological spectrum is no more promisir singers—Ian Curtis, Iggy Pop, Beck—haunt The artist was a DJ in Cologne in the late rock and pop icons seem like tutelary figur sioned generation, promising no more fulf

In her catalogue essay, Derieux writes work represents "a final act of resistance to the spectacle." In other words, so much th us today-the images and ideas that are among us as "knowns"—are taken up b shown as such: things staged. But to leave that ignores the intellectual and emotive artist nevertheless conjures for audienc underscoring culture's artifice. As the artis "In filmic language as in oneiric langu images that withstand both consumption a tion." And yet, at the conclusion of Hen Magasin we found ourselves faced by the bal: an appropriated media image of a m depended on consuming those around him the artist, and of us.

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Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.





Opposite page: Lothar Hempel, Escape from Innen (detail), 2005, mixed media, 51% x 51%". This page, from left: Lothar Hempel, Vorwärts! (Forward!), 2006, wood, paint, bronze, and lightbulb, 86% x 41% x 31%". Installation view, Magasin—Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France, 2007. Lothar Hempel, Abstrakter Sozialismus (Abstract Socialism), 2002, wood, paint, metal, bicycle, lantern, monitor, video, and rotation system, dimensions variable. Lothar Hempel, ABC, 2007, color photographs, wood, paint, and lightbulbs, dimensions variable.

