

Bruce Hainley Funny You Should Ask

“Funny You Should Ask”

is a poem (?) by Anne Carson about insomnia
and reading a book on Hölderlin, a recurring
figure in her work,

this time specifically concerning his argument
with Fichte’s understanding of the sentence
“I am I.”

Hölder’s “madness” is mentioned but not his
translation technique of casting one language’s
word-lava

into glacier molds of another, the ingots
transmitting both heat and ice.

AC doesn’t address the tautological accordion
of the sentence *I am I* directly.

When one isn’t feeling like an I does that
estrangle the *I*s in *I am I* or keep them as they
are whatever that is?

Perhaps Hölder didn’t feel like an I but more like
January wind, arriving from two directions
simultaneously, *I* and *I*.

Often the first person is a wound that should be
cauterized and left to scar, to scare. Blow on it.

At one point AC writes “Admittedly I don’t quite
know who / Fichte / is and have to look up
Selbstbewusstsein,

but still, there is a / staving / off of terribleness.

To think. This saving thing. This useless thing.”

There is so much to admire. The staving off of *off*
from dissolving for just a second into *of*,
terribleness itself staved for just as long;

the self-confidence to admit what's not known,
a name, a mood in another language; that
something saving might still be useless.

Has art as a way of thinking been abandoned, art
as this saving and (coincidentally) useless thing?

This isn't a poem and it isn't philosophy, not even
something wavering between them,
however helpful that might be, might have been,
it's beyond me. Beyond

me to try to come to terms for what you made
die Blumenhalle into, a place of assignation
and arrangement, various objects, many of them
readymades, juxtaposed or isolated,
their other uses or "lives" (former lives, former
uses) not abandoned but held in tension
as *I* is in *I am I*.

Lately, I don't know how I feel or what to think,
much less how to describe how I feel.

I don't know what I'm doing or what is due.

That's true,
but is it real? Is that a way to start to think?

The only thinking, ice translating
heat, occurs in the line breaks, useless but
(let's hope) somehow saving.

The coin-operated-timer-box and its available
Euros amplified
the lighting effects already in progress—

daylight, candlelight, and sotto voce
corollaries for cloud or moon gently vamping
across the sun,
solace of shadow as fact rather than metaphor,
time-signature shifts
of ancient and immediate, this too often cruel
instant no metaphor either.
It shouldn't be difficult to describe, all of it
actualized with the confidence
of the neutral, with the self eclipsing, eclipsed
momentarily,
to a monad among other monads, matter and
matters, to the plein air
of whatever it is life is understood to be when it
doesn't feel like it's elsewhere, lifelike.

Instead of description and trying to stand in for
your circumstances that elude easy narration,
that bestow silence and a place for contemplation
the way, say, a pilgrimage might, past a herd
of goats,
to see a Caravaggio in some obscure Sicilian
chapel, where a coin is needed to trip
for a few minutes the lights, if not always
illumination, this bout of language is not to
trip up anyone.

The coin box ushers in a bit of early vaudeville
long before vaudeville,
a bit of jukebox done another way entirely.

To bring to life isn't the same as living;
to bring to life as a puppet is animated isn't quite

the relation of object to subject,
isn't the choreography of the objects and subjects
in *der Blumenhalle*,
and yet without one beholden to the other,
momentarily: no strife, no life, no poetics.
Consider the readymade as the voir dire for
the actual,
voir dire for whatever *I am I* might mean or is.
Some are dismissed,
but it would be remiss to assume the objects
on display seat
a jury of the real instead of a salon des refusés.
Most of them play themselves.

Est-ce un problème to come more and more to
want an art that is not an "expression" of ideas,
an art that does not "speak," that defies any ready
access to a specific artillery
(vocabulary, etc.) weaponizing "smarts."

I am or am not
alone in being so tired of art proposing to know
what I or you
should think. Which isn't to suggest that art
shouldn't shave the intelligence
the way a Leirisian razor cuts into meaning to let
its libido drain.

It's the ink to dip you pen in, your I-ness and
not-I-ness, too.

Objects object and subjects often subjugate
subjectively.

Ce n'est pas un problème, and it's not a possibility

that's brand new. There were props and
accoutrements
to achieve such effects on the walls of ancient
tombs in hieroglyphics.

Strange to consider how in an old flower market,
you convened (a better word
than *summoned* or *conjured*, which pick up
Prospero's cloak a little too readily,
draping hauntological effects across proverbial
big shoulders,
despite hauntology often conveying a ravaging,
the sublime devalued
into subprime status quo, private interest profit
motive) a rendezvous
with things, objects, elements that conveyed
a mise-en-scène
without any given plot or agenda. The trough
with its trickling water sound
as material as sandstone, soundstone ricocheted
with delay by the infrequent
rotation of beehive bells, they scored calls
to attention, attention rarely aligning
anymore with petition or *adhan*, belief tractable
to something more than the corporate
fractalizations that monetize by geolocation
every flinch, every tremor.

I said something earlier about the management
of spirits
and another replied that I am looking for events

that are presence-centered
rather than self-centered. Another I had to look
up *anwesenheitszentriert*,
had to look up *selbstbezogen*. Buzzing songs form
the beehive,
honey fills the murmuring activity with what
some call soulfulness
or lustration, which is perhaps why the word
sepulcher presented itself without ado
in front of the water, cleansing the body for
its journey, the coin
placed not in the mouth for the ferryman
but nearby in the slot
to automate a pantomime of shadow and light.
Only the untimely
can ever be timely, its rhythm proleptic and
paradoxically timeless,
able to leap tall buildings in a single bound,
delivering what they never knew they wanted.

Listening to a friend (Matt Fishbeck) of a friend's
cover of Galaxie 500's
"It's Getting Late" on YouTube, reading
the comments
the first one floored me almost as much as
the cover did:
"Will you move to Detroit Michigan and start a
band with me," someone named Adam wrote.
"I know I'm an old man and I have HIV from
a 24yr heroin addiction
but I got a place for you in my world. Most of my

days are spent listening
to music in memory tantrums. My wife has
finally gotten used to me
spending the rest of my Life crying to songs
in my chair. Thank you...”

And you're probably wondering why are you
telling me any of this?
Yet the mood and mode of something
beautiful—or, rather, something exhibiting
thinking at a time when it's rare (thus, beautiful)
—that a friend or a friend
of a friend made as a way of paying homage
and then
someone needing to say why it meant something
to them accords
with the atmosphere of what you arranged,
a potent combination
of abstraction and implacable artifice with
the irrefutably actual, votive,
not in opposition but in paradoxical
simultaneity, the anonymous as form
of intimacy. Anonymous as so many aspects
of the readymade.

All of it, memory tantrum, has rattled around
in my head since I saw it.
I hear the bells and see the candles flicker and
melt, see dishes and cutlery
in the oven, the heart and its concerns,
tree trunk felled

and present, branches made out of branches,
all equivalents
of fresh air, temporalities felt as a kind of weather.
Feel the cold air and what is real can be a funny
bracing thing
to think about, the bread is real whether or not
it's bread
it is, which is perhaps as real, alas, as anything
can be
—*alas* but only as it occurs in *galas*, the galas
of the here and now.

I am I as much as you are and what disgruntled
Hölder
about Fichte's understanding of this
fundamental had something to do
with the positioning of subject and object,
of subjective and objective states.
In the book on Hölder that Anne Carson's
reading sleeplessly
Agamben concludes that "[s]ince the identity
that underlies Fichte's
doctrine does not imply any real unity of object
and subject, 'then', [Hölder's] fragment
peremptorily concludes,
'identity is not = to absolute being'."
Hölder *elsewheres* it thus: "...if the extremes,
either by their skill
in holding out or in some extrinsic way, assume
the figure
of tranquility and of the organizational,

then the subjectively active
must now become the organizing factor, must
become the element;
thus here too the subjective and objective have
to exchange
their configurations and become united in one.”

In other words—
this is how I translate it, hoping to keep both
ice and heat—
“there are no edges around it,” your organization,
each numen, the various players activating it,
everything
exhibiting thinking: “There are no edges
around it.” *Sockel* and *Podest*, least abstract as
simultaneously most abstract, most tranquil,
unite, these impromptu
prompts for platform, for petition exchanged,
parallel
yet congruent to the point of eclipse: “*Es reiche
aber,
Des dunkeln Lichtes voll, / Mir einer den duftenden
Becher.*”
It’s getting late now. Never getting to sleep now,
but staving off terribleness.

Bruce Hainley, “Funny You Should Ask” was written in response to Michael Kleine, *in der Blumenhalle* at Bonner Kunstverein. This piece is part of a series of reflections on how a show can be documented and held beyond the temporality of its presentation.









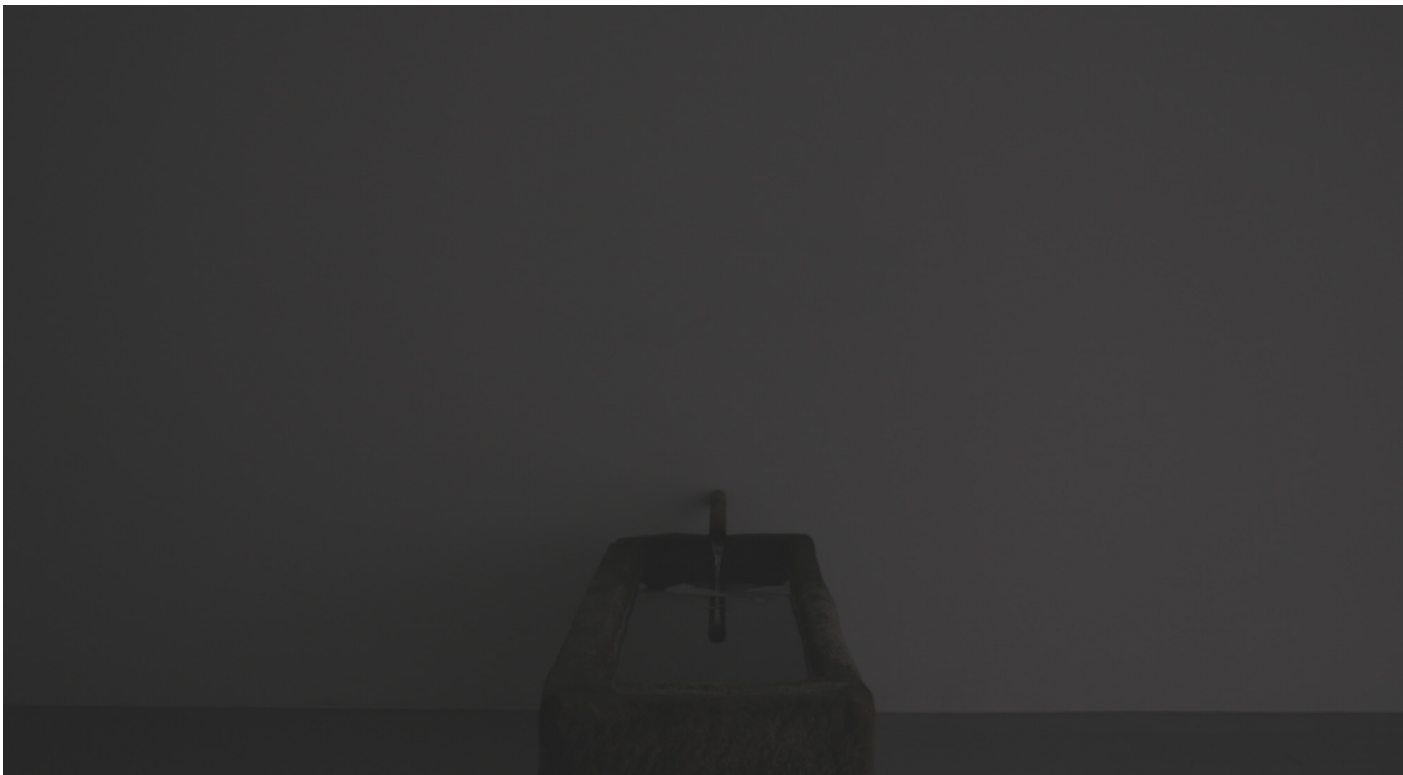




















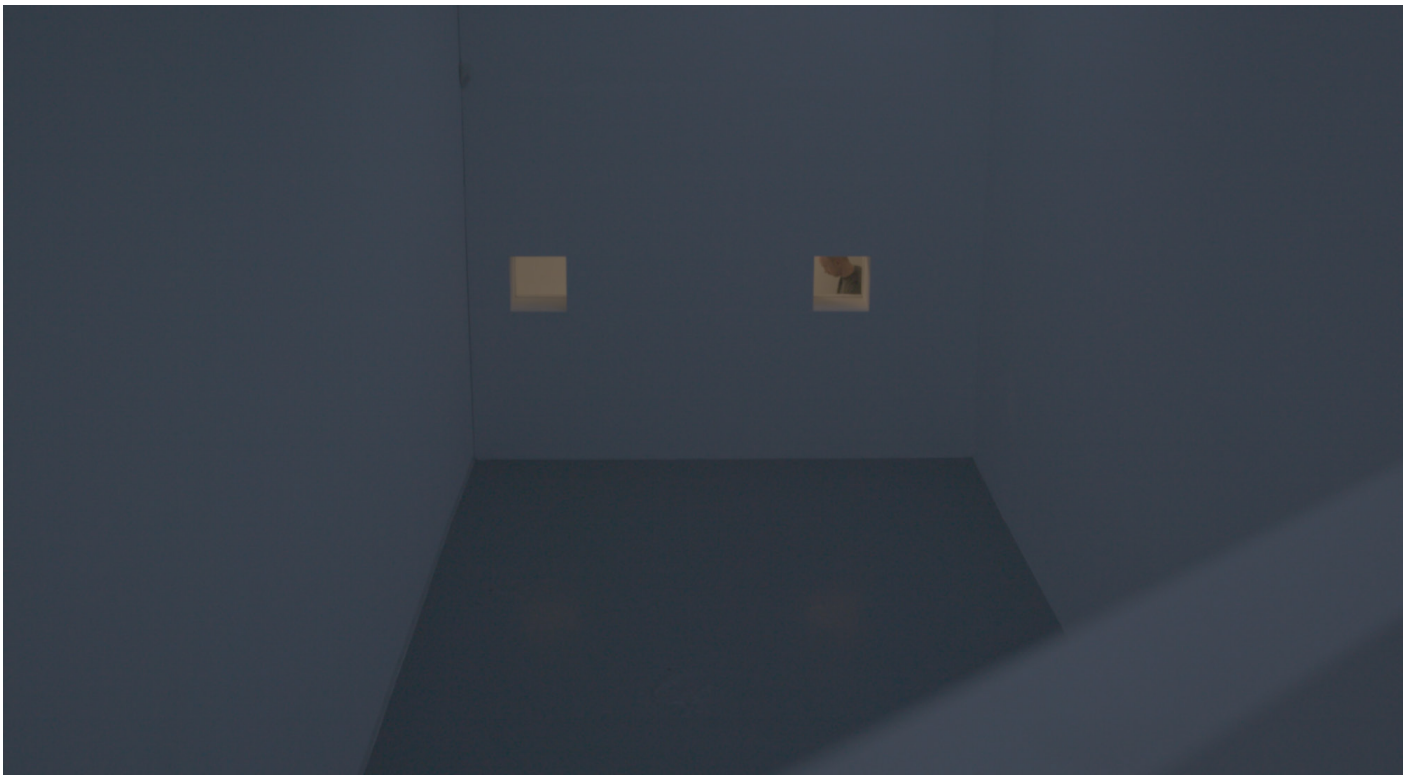












all images

Michael Kleine, *in der Blumenhalle* (exhibition views, Bonner Kunstverein, 17.09.2023 – 25.02.2024), video stills, 2024. Camera: Alexander Gheorghiu.