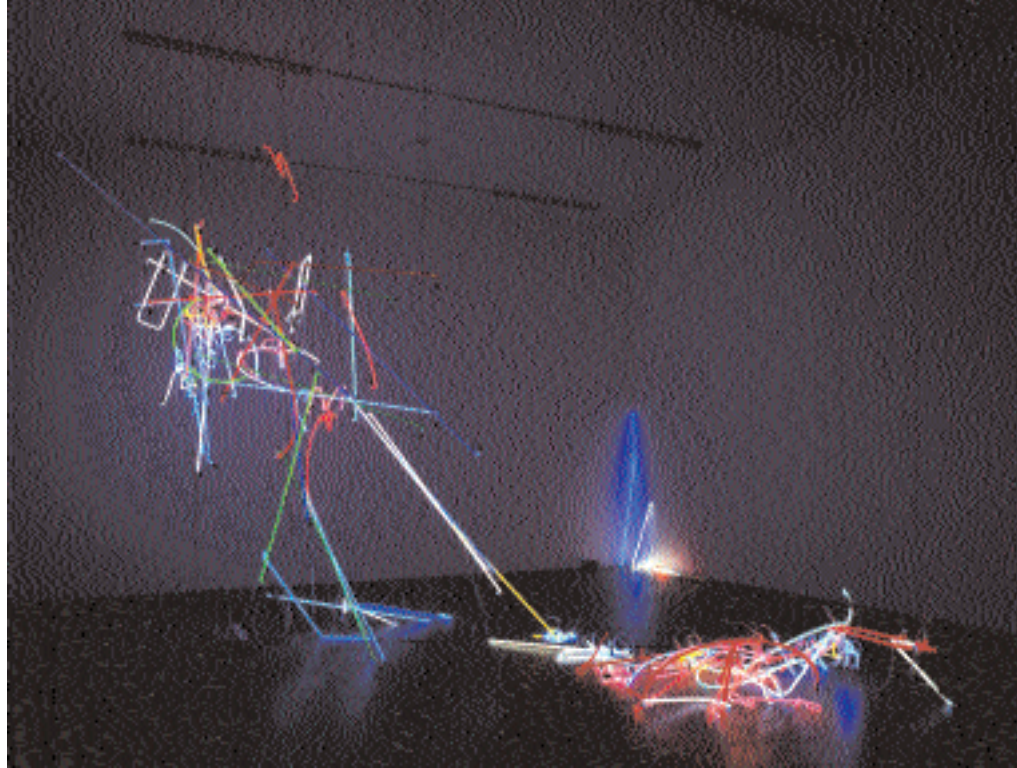


BRAVE NEW ART

The Sculpture of Anselm Reyle



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Anselm Reyle has enjoyed one of the swiftest art scene careers in recent years. His works are in famous private collections, appear in the best galleries, achieve record prices at auctions, and feature in important exhibitions like the critically acclaimed “Unmonumental” at the New Museum in New York. He has been represented by Gagolian since late 2007, after leaving Giti Nourbakhsh, his agent of many years, and falling out with the Contemporary Fine Arts gallery. The contentious issue was his reported demand to adapt the prices of the primary market to those of the booming secondary market. But a non-disclosure agreement sealed the details of the separation. In Reyle’s case, a lot of money has been in play, especially since François Pinault began collecting him on a grand scale; his work was on display at Palazzo Grassi in Venice last summer. Charles Saatchi bought a series of works in 2005, and from then on, the only way was up. Early in 2006, Reyle was honored with a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich. The title of this show and the catalogue, which he helped devise, was “Ars Nova” — the play of words brings supernova to mind, the final explosion of a star that creates huge amounts of energy while destroying the star itself. Reyle confidently presents his claim to a glamorous new art that outshines the old. Following the Zurich exhibition, he expanded his network of international dealers. In close succession, solo exhibitions were shown that year at Andersen’s in Copenhagen, Almine Rech in Paris, and Heinrich Erhardt in Madrid, and his work appeared in a group show at kurimanzutto in Mexico City.

Opposite: *Untitled*, 2007. Found object and neon, 43.3 in. diameter. Above: *Untitled*, 2006. Neon, chains, cable, and transformers, installation view.



self. Reyle was enrolled at Karlsruhe from 1991 to 1997, at the end in the class of Helmut Dorner, Gerhard Richter's student. Reyle then moved to Berlin, where he lives and works today. His atelier is located in the Kreuzberg district, spread out over a whole floor of an industrial loft.

Reyle's oeuvre is multi-faceted. He was initially committed to painting, but objects, sculptures, and installations followed. A rigorous but carefree formalism connects the works in fractured quotations from the abstract art of the last century. Reyle bases

his sculpture on found objects, both real and formal. In a candid interview with the art journalist Tim Ackermann in the German daily *Die Welt* (December 16, 2007), Reyle admits: "I do not think that I am the creator of the art, instead I take things and reformulate or reconfigure them." He observes, collects, and arranges things in a different order, using Modernism as a vocabulary but enunciating it as a kind of slang with a working-class undertone. His preference for pungent 1980s colors and effects is especially noticeable. Without

Left: *Untitled*, 2006. Bronze, chrome, enamel varnish, and plinth, 90 x 90 x 40 cm. Below: *Untitled*, 2006. Bronze, chrome, enamel varnish, and laquered plinth, 42.5 x 8.8 x 10.6 in.

When I curated an exhibition of contemporary sculpture in spring 2007 at the Georg-Kolbe-Museum in Berlin ("Die Macht des Dinglichen: Skulptur heute!"), the claim of a show to represent current trends could hardly be fulfilled without Reyle's participation. His position is important, supported by the market but also by interaction among collectors, dealers, auction houses, and glossy magazines, financed by the ad revenue brought in by commercial galleries. *MONOPOL*, the German magazine, put Reyle on the front page of its June 2008 issue and asked, "How is a masterpiece created?" It doesn't get much better than this. In just three years, Reyle has progressed from a respected talent to a superstar. How can the hype surrounding him be explained? What is the body of work behind all the market crying and the by now legendary story of his career?

Reyle was born in 1970 in Tübingen, a tranquil university town south of Stuttgart. After quitting school and leaving a landscaping apprenticeship unfinished, he went to study at the Kunstakademie Karlsruhe, encouraged by his mother, an artist her-



BOTTOM: MATTHIAS KOLB / BOTH: © ANSELM REYLE, ARS



image of this art back into the context of current discourse. The process of this appropriation is significant. First, 3-D scans of the figurines are commissioned. In digital form, as computer data, they are freely scalable. For *untitled* (2005), Reyle chose a moderate and a monumental size, with a height of more than two meters. Based on the scan data, resin models are milled, which Reyle then casts in bronze. This is quite remarkable, since another specialist supplier then seals off the material with a chrome-effect varnish. What interests Reyle is the idea of bronze and the tradition invoked by the choice of the material. The Makassa-veneered base is part of the artwork,

refining the spectacular sculpture even more. In the course of this process, Reyle does not once apply his own handiwork: all of the production steps are carried out by professionals. The unimposing folkloristic item has been turned into a funky object overlaid with a multiply folded discourse on recent art history and the migration of forms, its sparkling shine initially obstructing the mother-child motif.

Reyle explicitly sees himself as a conceptual artist. For him, the central issue is the work's idea, and he leaves the execution to a steadily increasing staff. Up to 40 assistants work under his guidance in Berlin-Kreuzberg. This kind of large atelier

Left: *Lamp*, 2006. Ceramic, lampshade, colored lightbulb, mirror, acrylic, and MDF plinth, 32.4 x 15.7 in.
Below: *Kelter*, 2002. Found object, wood, and metal lacquer, 135 x 70 x 70 cm.

any inhibition, Reyle helps himself to the aesthetics of that decade. It gets interesting for Reyle where it hurts, where the generation of his professors turned up their noses, where effects from a window decorator's feverish dreams seem to come into play: brown-tinted Perspex boxes, turquoise foil, pink chrome varnish, mirrors, neon, exotic veneers, rhinestones, fluorescent DayGlo colors. But it all has an agenda. On closer exploration, the work presents itself as an intelligent mix of calculated breach of convention, ironic distance, and over-the-top affirmation.

This can be demonstrated with the shrill, chrome-varnished bronze sculptures, which bring the biomorphic abstraction of post-war Modernism to mind. In fact, they are enlarged versions of African soapstone sculptures, the likes of which you can find the world over at flea markets and art bazaars. These pieces, in turn, are formal hybrids of indigenous African traditions and Western influences that reached the African continent in the 1950s and 1960s. Reyle is turning the wheels of reception history further and feeds the cliché-rendered





or workshop is operated by a number of artists, including Jeff Koons, Wim Delvoye, Franz Ackermann, Olafur Eliasson, Thomas Demand, and Sylvie Fleury. These studios, with their division of labor, are comparable to the workshops of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. But in regard to content, they are successors to Andy Warhol, whose Factory turned production conditions with various assistants and co-authors into an aesthetic principle. The authority of the author's signature bestows art status on something that the artist did not create himself. For Reyle, the link to conceptual art followed pragmatic reasoning: "It was clear to me: I didn't want to struggle with each picture for four or five months." From this inclination toward cool slackery—the Renaissance called it *sprezzatura*—arose the idea of the clay lumps refined in the same way as the soapstone sculptures. Using their hands and feet, Reyle and his assistants quickly mangle the packaged clay lump (the indiscernability of the traces

is important); afterwards, it is molded and then cast in bronze, varnished, and finally placed on a Makassa-veneered base. It all looks like Art Brut, but it avoids Modernist pathos and earnestness with a programmatic clumsiness. Even more minimal are the alterations of the readymades, finds from antique and junk dealers dipped into bright colors to transpose them into an art context. The series includes lamps from the 1970s and 1980s, on whose shades Reyle drips fluorescent colors. The theme is always the supposed beauty of marginalized styles or aesthetics—like Reyle's neon-framed wagon wheel, which evokes the taste aberrations found in private bars. Turned into a glowing icon, it calls to mind the rosettes over the western portals of Gothic cathedrals.

Reyle was once told that his works look like modern art ordered to decorate a film set. He works with clichés, forms that have been used so often that we no longer see them, in order to re-animate them

Installation view of "Painting in Tongues," MOCA, Los Angeles, 2006.

by transferring them into the current art context. He says of the enlarged African sculptures: "This is what art in Donald Duck comics usually looks like. Like the essence of the modern sculpture: half figure, half abstract, a couple of holes. You can look right through it." The French artist Bertrand Lavier took a similar approach in the late 1990s, realizing sculptures taken from Disney comics, initially as computer models and then cast in colored polyester. But Reyle's works cannot be dealt with from a critical standpoint alone. Like a good Pixar-produced animated film, they can be read on multiple levels. The naive observer sees pure aesthetic qualities in them, an overpowering of senses and judgment by the shiny, fine surfaces, expensive or expensive-looking materials, blessed by the label of "Art." On a higher level of reflection, the ironic appropriation of his-



Wagenrad, 2008. Found object, metal, wood, and cracked lacquer, 43 in. diameter.

toric finds and their re-animation in the form of a re-enactment become key. In this process, the artist remains bodiless for the most part, beyond the explicit commitment to his procedures and aims. In many ways, Reyle can be compared with Koons. Reyle states: "I value Koons highly. But Koons is Pop. He deals with the world of consumerism. In my case, a reflection on Modernist art always is part of it as well." That may be, but in their effect on the rich of this world, Reyle's and Koons's works are related. They not only look expensive, they are, and they serve as distinctive attributes in a complex social system in which the price of status symbols plays a dominant role. The more the value of the

art (and the increase in value) is talked about, the more important an artist's works become within this system (though the economic downturn may affect this phenomenon). From this perspective, it is not coincidental that Reyle's works were sucked into a crazy pricing spiral in a very short period of time. Both Koons and Reyle bedazzle with an exquisite and highly refined sheen, avoiding all of the genre's critical potential. Reyle's reflection on the commonplace idioms of Modernism and Postmodernism is a contemporary translation, refinement, and softening of these vocabularies. The success of the Polish painter Tamara de Lempicka in the 1920s and 1930s can be explained in similar fashion: she made the methods of Cubism acceptable to the international jet set with her Art-Deco portraits.

In person, Reyle is hugely likable and very laid-back about his current success. He is clearly aware of the fact that it could all be over as quickly as it started. And as long as it lasts, he will take the attention in stride. He can also imagine doing something else later in life: art is a fairly normal profession for him, more of a craft than a life-engulfing calling. There is a lot of his Swabian heritage in this no-nonsense outlook, as well as a very German urge for perfection and efficiency. To create the greatest impact with as little effort as possible — no one else currently pulls that off with the same kind of aplomb.

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