

JAN DE COCK
IMPROVISE
AND OVERCOME
DEREK SULLIVAN
YOUNG
AMERICANS 23.04.2011 - 12.06.2011

English

In Jan De Cock (Brussels, 1976) and Derek Sullivan (Toronto, 1976), KIOSK has found two artists from the same generation who both address and examine the history of modern and contemporary art in their work. With a certain respect for its tradition, both artists suggest that the interpretation of the history and visual heritage of contemporary art is not a self-contained narrative, but an act that always contains a new proposition. They dissect the 'modern' construction of images and processes of canonization, as well as the position a young artist may take in this matter. Rather than attempting to present some sort of final result, De Cock and Sullivan translate this question, each in his very own, distinctive visual language, to an exhibition where dialogue and endless improvisation are allowed full play.

With *Improvise and Overcome*, Jan De Cock highlights the central, semicircular space of the gallery with an 'infini'; a structure that refers to the nineteenth-century panorama. The installation enhances the movement evoked by the space: the visitor stumbles upon a walk-round, a spot-lit scene by which he is entirely surrounded. The architectural context functions as a reference point, but the space is also a starting point with regard to content, a gauge for the work's attitude towards the academic, pedagogical context within which KIOSK operates.

The slogan-like title, *Improvise and Overcome*, is De Cock's straightforward proposition to young artists: Nothing is impossible, improvise and 'thou shalt overcome'. It exemplifies a 'just do it' kind of attitude that could well serve as an epitome of De Cock's own uncompromising artistic practice.

The improvised assortment of elements functions as a conceptual framework in which the viewer can shape his own proposition. A walk through the round space is evoked, like a skin that can be peeled back by the viewer, to lay bare a simple essence contained within a multitude of perspectives. Rather than directing the visitor, De Cock offers an opportunity to stray and lose one's way. The subdued wall with its wood veneer guides the gaze like the plane-trees along an endless avenue. Friction is only suggested by the layered images of polluted alpine landscapes and pictures of Kyoto and Cairo. Through these, we can view back on our origins, the cradle and shape of our civilization.

As such, the panorama may at first confront us as a blind wall, but can subsequently be opened up like an infinite landscape or a blank sheet of paper. The rounded corners suggest a boundlessness, an infinitude in which De Cock wishes to offer himself, the visitor and man in general the space and opportunity to doubt.

These formal elements are combined with a politically charged text that is at once complex and commonsensical; it touches upon that universal figure of thought: Why is it so much easier to envisage the end of the world than it is to accept a languishing disease? Little by little, we learn to deal with, say, a nuclear explosion or the potential end of Belgium, we learn to seize 'the moment' to channel our emotions instead of blocking them.

Where De Cock's proposition concerns a possible attitude of the contemporary generation of young artists, Derek Sullivan presents us a random group of young American artists from the twentieth century. The title of the show, *Young Americans*, refers to two

exhibition catalogues published by the New York MoMA in the 1950s, an age that showed a great interest for American abstract painting. A number of artist portraits from these catalogues are reproduced here as posters, and each one seems to carry a certain hope, ambition or temperament.

The posters combine with framed drawings and the fan-shaped architecture of the cabinet spaces to make up separate pages from an imaginary book entitled *Young Americans*. The installation is built in two meticulously designed layers: the numbered book pages with enlarged artist portraits and blank sheets serve as the basic layout of the book. On top of this foundation rests a second layer with framed poster drawings. These eye-catching drawings, collages and gouaches feature graphic patterns and text references drawn from the visual imagery of geometric abstraction, modern design and conceptual strategies. The two layers overlap, but maintain their own separate visual rhythms. Like phrases in a winding narrative, each poster combined with its accompanying pattern or fragment of text suggestively builds upon the one before it. In its sequence, the multilayered book emphasizes the sensation of reading. It consists of a concentration of free associations, formal and textual relations and an endless loop of narratives.

The conception of the exhibition as a book is extended throughout the space. Blank sheets serve as breathing spaces; short breaks during reading. These stylistic elements are a recurrent feature in Sullivan's artist's books where the blank sheets, the literary, cultural and historical references and the additional titles suggest that the book is still under development. Making grateful use of the possibilities of 'print on demand', the artist can ensure that literally no two exact copies of a book are in circulation.

As such, the exhibition may serve as yet another exercise for Sullivan in devising a structure for a book and in linking the temporal aspect of experiencing an exhibition with the logic of reading. Consequently, Sullivan considers *Young Americans* as an artist's book to walk around in, as a dialogue in which the visitor partakes.

Some of Derek Sullivan's artist's books are on display and can be browsed at the reception of KIOSK.