

## It's still disappointing

Charles Esche

Guy Debord and Otto Berchem share a date. In 1967, Debord published *Society Spectacle* and Berchem came into the world. The coincidence is important because it establishes the fact that Debord is part of the younger man's primary experience. For Berchem, the idea of the spectacle has always existed and the media is not a rough intrusion into a pre-existing reality but a constant, unnegotiable presence throughout his life. The media is, in fact and in certain important metaphorical ways, akin to nature-like the weather, as well as a determining cultural phenomenon-like family and nation. It is impossible to consider the work here without the media. Not only does it determine the nature of contemporary art, it also validates so much of our reality. It is omnipresent and omnivorous and any appearance in print or on the screen heightens our own sense of being and importance, making what we do more worthy, more significant, more real. In Berchem's birth year, Debord wrote: "Life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" and defined the spectacle as presenting itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears".<sup>1</sup> If you were so inclined, you could read this as if you want to be good, appear, be seen and make sure the moment is recorded and you could then determine to lead you life to that end.

"If autobiographies are to question rather than endorse dominant ideologies, then personal histories cannot just be unanalytically confessional but have to be integrated into a critical frame that excites an engaged questioning in the reader. The aim here in *Unmasking Masculinity* is to try to move toward a new genre that would fuse theoretical and confessional writing—a form that would keep open a dynamic negotiation between specific incidents, atmospheres and events of a personal history and a critical analysis that would investigate conventional assumptions about masculinity."<sup>2</sup>

David Jackson's 1989 "critical autobiography" was one of the first English-language attempts to adapt the codes of post feminism to a male subject. Strangely written in a voice that schizophrenically separates the "confessional" from the "analytical", the book generally fails to resonate with the reader's own experiences. Instead, the text becomes a worthy but didactically ponderous lecture lightened with occasional anecdotes from the author's personal history. Interestingly, at one point Jackson mentions the ease with which visual investigations are able to combine subjective and objective accounts of a life history, but unfortunately it doesn't dawn on him that this might be a way out of his own difficulties. Instead, he soldiers on with his plodding prose. Though only a partial failure, *Unmasking Masculinity* demonstrates a certain weakness in academic writing when confronted by the subjective, just as it reinforces the value of contemporary visual art as it achieves precisely those ends. An artist like Otto Berchem does not particularly have to concern himself with the intellectual precedence of which his reputation might be established nor with whether certain forms, materials or devices are accept to his peers. The permissive culture of art encourages transgression rather than academic rigidity. This means that Berchem can select forms and materials according to the needs of his ideas and will be applauded for the degree of formal and conceptual innovation he can bring. The work can stand both analytical and confessional viewings, one could easily say readings, at the same moment, just as it can combine autobiography with third person testimony, or funny with serious, sad with happy, weak with strong. Ambivalence is contemporary art's great strength because it "excites that engaged questioning" that Jackson wants, without trying too hard. Despite these differences, however, Jackson and Berchem do walk some of the same territory and the comparison is valuable in exploring Berchem's projects. Both use their own life history as a point of departure, both are concerned with how they learned to be men, both are keen confessors and both come close to failure—though with very different intentions and results.

The consequence of a world filled by mediated images looms large in both these men's stories. Jackson's childhood is full of the classic (too classic?) insecurities of not living up to the image of "He-Man" Charles Atlas or rugged English hero Jack Hawkins in classic Second World War films such as *The Cruel Sea*. Berchem, born a generation later, has a more complex relationship to advertising and the

media. From the sixties onward, US and British television began to present "real people" in shows like *7 Up* or *An American Family* featuring an average middle-class Californian family. In addition to Atlas and Hawkins (or their equivalents), Berchem had to contend with nonfictional role models and even the distant possibility that he could be on-screen himself. As time went on, that possibility became more and more likely and, at the same time, the role model of He-Man strength was challenged as the young male ideal by stereotypes of photogenic androgyny or wasted youth. Feminism too was raising a different set of expectations about masculinity—ones that asked for a reappraisal of male strength and applauded more honest expressions of weakness while ridiculing traditional male roles and exposing some of the pernicious assumptions behind them.

To be born in the sixties, like Berchem, is to have come to manhood under the shroud of Debord's media spectacle and feminism's gaze. This (our) generation has had to respond to these challenges. We have learned quickly to become both instinctive voyeurs and naturalized actors. We play roles, compose and discard identities as the situation demands. To a great extent, we have abandoned the securities of our parents' generation for the heady thrill of free choice and self-expression. Perhaps more consciously than we care to admit, we are also always preparing ourselves for Warhol's fifteen-minute moment when celebrity comes to call. Representation and gender are the pillars on which Western post-war identity and self-awareness have been built, regardless of class or education. Berchem takes them as a point of departure for his own work, a way of working out his own positions by sharing their ambiguities and confusions with both his collaborators and the general audience. It makes him vulnerable, and exposes the people he works with, in ways that are humorous and poignant. Its fragile qualities stop even the grandest gesture from being totally convincing, keeping it in a contested realm with space for the viewers' own creative act.

*Men's Room Etiquette* is a 1994 installation produced in connection with *Aerial*, a city wide, artist-run project in Edinburgh. In a public male toilet he installed a short text work above the urinals: "Men begin at an early age on the lifelong habit of surreptitious penis-watching. In public lavatories they will always compulsively 'check out the opposition'" Outside, by the entrance, an enamel plaque read:

#### Men's Room Etiquette

1. No Loitering
2. No Leering
3. No Laughing
4. No Touching
5. No Comparing
6. No Excessive Shaking
7. Please Ignore Flatulence
8. When Finished, Wash Hands

With their humor and publicizing of unspeakable male codes, the texts bear direct comparison with eighties feminist art. Mira Schor was Berchem's tutor at Parsons School of Design in New York. A writer and an artist, she was one of the loudest critics of the sexist subject matter in the paintings of David Salle, Eric Fischl and others.<sup>3</sup> We could see *Men's Room Etiquette* as a kind of constructive response to her critique. It avoids claims to universality by being overtly unique to male experience, it is layered and multiple, it must be, to some degree, autobiographical—all characteristics of feminist art. Most significantly, it exposes the male, makes him weaker and less secure in his sexuality, particularly when public toilets have long been regular venues for anonymous gay sex. It does this in order to destabilize assumptions of masculine strength and was, in fact, seen as so transgressive that the Scottish police removed the whole work on its first day. *Men's Room Etiquette* introduces an ambivalence and discomfort with deterministic sexual identity that runs consistently through the work.

Two early video works also make perfect sense in this context. *hand catching spanish sausage* and *ear catching dutch sausage* are unlikely mistranslations of a classic video piece by Richard Serra, *Hand catching Lead*. Where Serra's is all masculine strength struggling to master the material and slowly, reluctantly giving way to exhaustion, Berchem's works are comic, lightweight and much more inexplicable. Where the solid lead falls heavier and heavier, the sausages burst; where the hand grabs metal, the ear is just a passive, inadequate receptacle. The two pieces also stand on their own as short

comic vignettes, the humor of the uncooked sausages pink and absurdly sexual being dropped into hand or ear is beautifully timed, the uselessness of the activity part of its charm.

Many of Berchem's projects speak directly about his own life, documenting his progress from the United States to Europe, uncovering his fears and weaknesses and, in doing so, transforming his experience of the world as he tries to play his part in ours. The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has called for a theory of "weak thought" as a way of defining our relationship to the world as puppets rather than puppeteers.<sup>4</sup> He has proposed this as a way of discussing artistic practices and it helps when thinking about Otto Berchem: "weak thought" used not as an accusation but as a means to critique dominant narratives; "weak thought" as failure seen not in the negative but as a necessary condition of humanity. *The Otto Berchem Show* is a perfect example. A copy of a US talk show format, down to the advertising breaks, the cheesy M.C., flashy intro graphics and a primary color, kindergarten stage set.

The M.C. is (has to be) Berchem himself, dressed up in a designer suit and thick brushed moustache. The show should work too-three roving cameras, televisions spread around the art school where the program is being made, a live audience, interviewees with stories to tell. But it doesn't, certainly not on a professional broadcast level. The subjects are too arcane, one day "Art, life and doing the dishes" another "Showing your knickers (making your privates public)". The interviewees are too dull. Most of all, Otto is not himself. He's clearly acting, trying to drive the debate forward but without a clue as to where to go. He relies, comically at times, on the established format of advertising breaks or audience participation to pull him through, but the ads are only previews of work by other art school students and the audience is too Dutch, too laid back and unopinionated. So, if it's not a good television show, then what is it? A bad one? No, at least not only that. It is, as it claims, a work of art and it is clear that a lot of work went into the production. It's art because, quite simply, his failure, here on stage or on video, is also our failure. Even more pertinently, it is also the failure of spectacle. For what is a spectacle if no one is impressed? Just a banal image of the everyday, something we can all understand, criticize, deal with and reject.

Seeing Jerry Springer after Otto Berchem is to become aware of the tricks, to observe the audience rather than be a part of it. It works too. Debord told us that "where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior". Weil, yes, but only if you believe that the real world is out there. Once you know it's in your head, (and can we assume anything else in the era of virtual reality and genetic manipulation?), then these simple images are simply another part of our natural environment and we have to educate ourselves about how to design and use them. That's what *The Otto Berchem Show* does. It gives us a means to deal with the images that impinge so strongly on our conscience-to stop being hypnotized and answer back. The program's commercial failure makes it all the more effective-like the moments when the interviewer loses his cool on television and we suddenly get to see the whole fragile mechanism that suspends our disbelief.

The concept of failure, once introduced by the obvious flaws of a project like *The Otto Berchem Show*, has so much to offer. It is not only a means to reject the totalising projects of strong Modernism but also a way to draw us in as spectators because of its perhaps misleading appeal to our sympathy. Importantly, it is unlikely that Debord ever considered the idea of failure when writing in 1967. It is an end-of-the-century phenomenon, born of a frustration with proclaimed successes that never were: the atom bomb, the space race, the new world order.

In the eighties we had irony and cynicism, now we have failure. It conjures exactly the right sense of impossibility that can give art its energy, its social significance, its criticality. Typically, Samuel Beckett described it much more beautifully and many years earlier: "to be an artist is to fail, as no others dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living".<sup>5</sup> Berchem's work may make use of craft, house-keeping and living but it is not his subject. He concentrates his attention uncompromisingly on the failure of relationships, keenly felt though awkwardly expressed. Unusually, these relationships are not always about him and other people; often they are about the artist with himself. As a whole, his project can be seen as an ongoing critical autobiography (Pace Jackson), where he tries to find out who he is, tests his responses and fails to live up to his own expectations.

Two related works take us into this territory. The first is called *Behind You*, a slide installation of some 80 images shown in slow succession. Each is a full-length portrait, usually of a youngish person,

dressed casually but looking less than fully relaxed. The artist stands behind each one, mostly hidden with only his shoes, a hand or hair poking out from behind the first figure. Only with those of shorter stature does more of Berchem become visible. You can now see his head, his expression difficult to read but more one of shyness or respect than laughter. His presence in the whole series acts as a fixed index to the changing bodies in front. His position invites us to imagine that Berchem has arranged it so that this is someone else's moment in the spotlight, not his. But he is always there, forcing you to recall that he made the work, in case the stamp of authorship wasn't enough. And perhaps he believes that his presence makes the portrait more interesting because the people themselves are too dull. These are his friends and colleagues though, so that doesn't say much about him. It could be an egoist's dream, to be constantly in the frame, but, if so, his quiet, undramatic appearance does not quite make sense. Maybe he wants to prove that he really knows all these people, that he isn't simply lying when he tells us they are his friends. His stance exudes modesty and perhaps some discomfort. He might get found out, like a naughty child, especially as the title mimics a pantomime shout from the audience. "don't tell" he seems to be saying, "only you know I'm here". Only, like in a pantomime, we all know that the people know that he's there. Like *The Otto Berchem Show*, we are caught up again in his playacting-like a turn at the theater of the ordinary, though even in that context all the players seem slightly lost. In the end, he turns the attention of the work away from both himself and the people in the foreground. The motivation becomes the main point of investigation. Why has he made this, why has everyone agreed and how would we respond to the invitation?

The second work repeats the formal qualities of the first. *Face Off* is a 40 piece slide installation in which two figures, Berchem and a selection of his friends, stand facing each other. The image captures a moment in a little drama of confrontation, as Berchem slowly leans in toward his opposite number. The camera stills this movement, freezing the two at a point when they are still negotiating this invasion of personal space. As in *Behind You*, Berchem acts as an index against which the others can be judged, but this time the emphasis shifts more onto the reactions of the two. Some smile and lean back toward the artist, perhaps an indication that they know him well; some hold their ground a little awkwardly, telling us about their sense of self-importance; others back away trying to hold the already compromised distance between them, whether out of shyness or dislike is not clear. Berchem also changes, looking more or less relaxed; occasionally a little aggressive, mostly jovial. The work could be interesting material in the hands of an anthropologist of Western social etiquette. In an art gallery, it can play a little trick on the visitors, provoking us to test out personal space with each other. Seen in this way, we could speculate on how much Berchem would like to be there in the gallery, watching us watching him. Voyeurism is a key aspect of his work and it seems often that the pieces in which he appears are really attempts to catch a glimpse of himself, to be a voyeur of his own behavior as well as an obsessive watcher of others'.

Putting himself in the front line repeatedly also has the effect of making his presence exemplary. He becomes the measure against which other behaviors and attitudes might be judged, a kind of subjective anthropology. Take *Fine Young Boys*, a two projection video installation in which recordings of the artist and his brother are presented facing each other across an empty room. Each repeats the same sentence, facing forward, the words spoken into the space: "I've been going to a therapist to discuss the problems of my youth and now I am a fine young boy". The recordings were made in different situations, possibly their childhood bedrooms. Berchem dresses casually with a confident open stance, sitting down with hands on knees. His brother is more uptight, dressed in suit and tie, his hands clasped, his hair neatly combed. Who are they trying to convince? Who are they even talking to? It must concern their parents in some way as that's the most obvious thing the boys have in common. If they are trying to reassure, it certainly isn't working. This is more like domestic Bruce Nauman, taking social dysfunction into the home. Besides, this piece is as much about the two boys, and particularly about Berchem as the orchestrator, assuring themselves of their normality. As such, it is quintessentially adolescent, the specter of teenage doubts returning to haunt to these two adults on their return to the bosom of the family home.

Berchem reveals himself as an increasingly complex individual psyche abroad in a fairly hostile world and one in which he must try to find a persona, a place and a community. The desire for inclusion is being played out in *Fine Young Boys*, *The Otto Berchem Show*, where the talk show host is a little too ingratiating to his audience to ever succeed in arousing their passions and in *Countdown to Line Up*, a

video work in which we see a group of school children being picked for two teams. Each one selected walks off screen until the last are left in a haunting image of sporting failure and isolation that appears to mark out a significant psychological source for Berchem's work. As viewers, we are allowed glimpses of this psyche, perhaps in *Fine Young Boys* or *Countdown to Line Up*, some kind of partial explanation although it cannot seriously effect Berchem's behavior—he clearly does not and will not turn out a "fine young boy" after his therapy with the audience. Indeed, he remains in the problematic social position of the artist, self-aware but unchanged. The strangest parallels strike home when looking at Berchem's work, especially when we know that popular media culture invades the inspirational core of every piece. In this context, Berchem's "fine young boy" and his sympathy for the last to be picked is simply the flip side of the Jets' famous diatribe in Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's fifties musical *West Side Story*.<sup>6</sup> When the gang send up their local police officer while walking round the wire-caged playground, they know exactly what they are doing. "My father is a bastard, my mom's an S.O.B. My grandpa's always plastered, my grandma pushes tea. My sister wears a moustache, my brother wears a dress. Goodness gracious, that's why I'm a mess. Officer Krupke, you're really a slob. This boy don't need a doctor just a good honest job. Society played him a terrible trick. Sociologically he's sick (we are sick). We are sick, we are sick, we are sick, sick, sick. Like we're sociologically sick". Of course, their perception doesn't alter anything in their behavior and by the end of the song they are revelling in their "badness" again. The transformation that is supposed to follow self-knowledge simply doesn't arrive, just as in Berchem's work, where he continues to be the same person even as he tells us he's not living up to his own expectations. This is a familiar cynical gesture turned on its head. As he fails in the knowledge of his "failure", Berchem opens up a critical position toward "success", self-help and all the wish fulfilment rhetoric of late twentieth-century pop psychology. Instead, he anchors the meaning in his art onto human frailty in the here and now.

*The Green Room* was a project initially set up in Berchem's studio at the Rijksakademie. He turned his space into a reasonably comfortable waiting room for interviewees applying to enter the academy in 1997. Sofas, coffee, magazines and lime green walls were provided in a conscious mimicry of the theatrical green room where actors wait before making their stage entrance. Thoughtfully, he provided photographs of all the interview panel members to prepare the applicants for the moment they were called into the meeting room. In relation to his recurring obsession with talkshows, the model seems to have been *The Larry Sanders Show*, the greatest US sitcom of recent years, where all the important action takes place behind the set, in the waiting room, the offices and Larry's very public private life. In Berchem's green room, frailty and endeavor share center stage. There is clearly a sharp internal dialogue going on in each of the protagonists. "How do I behave at this interview? Do I really want a place? What will the interviewers ask me? Am I going to meet the right people? What if they hate my work? Am I truly an artist? Should I be myself (whatever that is) or act a part?" On the video documentation, all they come out with is polite, undemanding chitchat. Some sit and read silently, most try to act cool. Partly, the work adapts those classic fly-on-the-wall documentary styles as pioneered in the sixties. Partly, it is a record of a generous act of hospitality and friendliness.

Which brings us to two of the artist's most recent projects; *Make Over* and *The Glass Ceiling*. In different ways, both extend Berchem's continuing interest in personal identity and space, voyeurism and the nature of or criteria for success and failure. In these works, the focus of the questions is shifted from the internal worries of the artist to the desires and fears of other people. *Make Over* was organized in Utrecht in 1998. Nine volunteers were recruited through a local and national advertising campaign to which 40 people responded positively. Berchem selected the recruits following a series of personal interviews, his criterion being those who had the most compelling reasons for wanting to change their lifestyle. The chosen nine varied in age, race and social background sufficiently to make the final transformation dramatically different in each case, including a young black single mother, an advertising executive and a 15-year-old boy with his mother. The exhibited work consisted of a series of before and after photographs with a short video showing the hairstylists, make-up artists, fashion consultants and photographers in action and a sound piece replaying the initial interviews and conversations between Berchem and his subjects. What the viewer sees and hears is not the sublime moment of transformation that the title and methodology might lead us to suspect. We should be used to this by now, but transferred from Berchem's own position to another person, the "failure" of the make over is highlighted all the more. Especially as hearing the voice of the protagonists brings a closeness that few photographs can match. Not that any of the make overs were disasters, indeed most project more forcefully and confidently in the "after" series.

Rather, it is the gaps between our preconceptions, the expectations on the tape and the final result that made themselves apparent. As with *The Otto Berchem Show*, the video uncovers the process, undermining the authority of the chat show formula just as much as his clumsy presenter persona. Observing Lavinia in the video, we can't help but feel sympathy for the way she is manipulated into absurdly high heeled shoes in which she can hardly change her pose, let alone walk. The interviews sometimes mention a desire to "look more like myself rather than try to look beautiful", but the mechanics of the process-tugging at hair, forcing on clothes or clipping them at the back, seem to deny that possibility. Throughout the work, the position of Berchem himself is never properly clarified. He is, on one level, a generous provider of opportunities and free clothing that otherwise would be denied most of these people. On another, he is a Machiavellian trickster, using the dreams of others for his own purposes. The "weak thought" at the heart of the project, where he is almost as much at the mercy of the "style professionals" as the subjects, serves to caution us against either of these extremes. In fact, the ambivalence of his position is itself a strength of the project, reinforcing the gaps between possibility and actuality at every turn.

*The Glass Ceiling* is Berchem's most ambitious project to date. The work was made as a contribution to a 1999 exhibition called *Panorama 2000* in Utrecht. The premise of the show was that all the works would be ideally viewed from the tower of the city's cathedral, necessitating a certain scale and ambition as well as a high degree of clarity or simplicity in the proposal. Berchem's idea contained precisely that combination, as he searched for a penthouse-dwelling household willing to have their roof replaced by a glazed ceiling through which their domestic activities could be observed from the tower. This invitation to look without touching, indeed without knowing anything about the people involved, recalls the tenor of *Society of the Spectacle*. Somatic experience is replaced by observation or, more sinisterly, surveillance images that deny privacy to all but the controllers of the technology. The remarkable thing is that a couple agreed to be the subjects of the work. Their apartment was opened to the sky, and to the prying eyes of the exhibition audience, for little compensation and with the one proviso that they could draw blinds across the glazing after the end of the exhibition each night. The fact that not only they but two other families were prepared to entertain the proposal proves something about the urge for celebrity and the need to be seen in order to be validated. Beyond the motivation of the couple, the compromised position of the viewers. We are momentarily put into the role of exercising Foucault's "disciplinary power", to quote an overused but still potent description of the history of penal law. Berchem's intervention has transformed a private home into a panopticon: "an architecture built to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control-to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them".<sup>7</sup> We are the observers, placed in something of a minor ethical dilemma. To look or not to look, that is our question and one, that is answered, in all likelihood, in the affirmative. So, we look and feel in an infinitesimal way, something of the adrenaline of having "eyes that must see without being seen". This power though, like much of Berchem's work, again rests on a form of failure. What discomfort we feel could easily be laid at the feet of the artist as instigator of the project. Besides, the apartment owners agreed to the ceiling and they could simply pull across the blinds if they felt too much intrusion. So our little rush of power is only available to us by permission-a thought that, in some ways, makes us even more complicit. Berchem's own role is naturally ambivalent, but here, more than in any previous work, he seems to be playing out a manipulative role, seeking to make us aware of the nature of surveillance techniques just as much as he wants us to enjoy the show.

I have a vision of Otto Berchem as Charlie Chaplin as *The Great Dictator*. He stands behind his great desk, spinning the world on his finger, fantasizing about power. All the time, he is also just as aware as the audience that he is the same little man, down on his luck, that we have seen in so many other films. Behind that stage persona lies yet another, "real" Charlie Chaplin, the great authoritarian and sexual athlete revealed in recent memoirs. Behind that, in my vision, is Berchem himself, the artist and the man, waiting, no doubt, for other identities to be formed around him. As a film, *The Great Dictator* (1940) worked because we knew the first of these personae were all present simultaneously. Imagining Berchem playing Chaplin brings it into the postmodern everyday. In Berchem's work, it is not the individual's personae that emerge from behind the work but the vivid, constantly changing identities of artist, collaborators and viewers combined. It's significance lies in the negation of a singular personal identity, just as the work can be seen as the negation of success or of the society

of the spectacle. Like the classic talk-show host he so nearly was, Berchem brings the people to the cameras and lets things go from there.

Charles Esche

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red. Detroit, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> David Jackson. *Unmasking Masculinity -A Critical Autobiography*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> See "Appropriated Sexuality" in: Mira Schor, *Wet -on pointing, feminism and art culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Gianni Vattima, *Il pensiero debole*, Feltrinelli, Milana, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett -a collection of critical essays*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1965, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story*, first performed 1957.

<sup>7</sup> See "Panoptism" in. Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin, London, 1986.

From:

Catalogue Otto Berchem: " It's not my fault", Artimo Amsterdam, 2000  
Charles Esche, p. 68 - 75