

Roughly 3,167 pairs of shoes (and mine)

by Jason Stoneking

This past Saturday night was Nuit Blanche, the all-night art festival that happens in Paris (and a growing list of other cities) once every autumn. Over 100 artists showcased their work around the city, but this year I spent my evening in one place, admiring and discussing Markus Hansen's installation at the Palais de la Decouverte. I'll confess that I was personally invested in people's reactions to the piece because for the previous few days I'd had the honor of helping Markus install it. Together, we'd moved several tons of used shoes across town, through an underground parking garage, and up into a staging area in the west wing of the Grand Palais complex. Markus and his assistant on the project, artist Leslie McAllister, had already spent months meticulously grouping the shoes by color and separating them into specifically marked bags. So once we got those bags into the building, and lined them up according to category, Markus knew quickly where to find the ones he needed.

He began by placing a tight ring of jet-black shoes, carefully joined in matching pairs, toes pointing out from the middle of the floor in the Palais's grand elliptical entrance hall. Then, with the help of his team, he worked his way out from there. He formed the next ring from the darkest of the brown shoes, the next one slightly lighter and so on, through the range of browns and beiges, creams and off-whites until he arrived at a ring of only the whitest whites. From that point, he gradually reversed his color steps, selecting darker shoes for each successive ring until he worked his way all the way back to black again. By the time he constructed his outermost ring, the grouping consisted of almost 3,000 pairs of shoes and took up an impressive percentage of the expansive floor space.

Once Markus had finished the final selection and placement of the shoes, we quickly put away everything we hadn't used, turned on the spotlights, and climbed the stairs to have a look at what we'd done. Markus must have had some idea of what we'd see up there, but even after having worked within the piece all evening, and being impressed by its effect at the ground level, I was not prepared for the scope it would take on when I finally saw it from above. In the view from the third-floor balcony, the arrangement of shoes morphed into a pulsating, radiant disc, free-floating below us in the darkness of space. And in its form, one could find almost anything that they happened to be looking for: an eye, a flower, a mandala, the abyss that stares back into you, a twirling galaxy, a drop in the pool of the universe spreading in infinite concentric waves toward the limits (if there be any) of human possibility. And from time to time the pattern rippled with an unexpected glint. Here and there a pair with pink laces, one with metal parts, a tall one, a short one, some furry and some flat, each in its own way adjusting the path of the tide from within.

When we went back downstairs and approached the piece again, I was staggered by the reminder that each pixel of this

contemplative visual oasis was, in fact, a very physical part of some human being's life story. A few minutes later, the doors opened to the public, and the waves of actual human beings started to arrive. I engaged them as much as I could, listening intently for their thoughts. And one of the things that kept jumping out at me was how many different kinds of people found ways to plug into the piece and extrapolate various meanings. Those in attendance, and their interpretations of the work, seemed

as varied as the shoes themselves. There were, however, some themes that recurred more than once. I don't usually like to discuss a piece in terms of its context in art history, or in any history for that matter, and I think Markus's work stands beautifully on its own without those discussions, but I would like to address a few of the connections I heard being made during the evening.

Early on there were whispers of Christian Boltanski, the artist who had once, just feet from where we stood, filled the Grand Palais with immense piles of disused clothes being knocked about haphazardly by a crane. That installation, entitled "Personnes," eerily evoked the horror of the WWII death camps where piles of clothes and shoes still stand, terrifyingly and accusingly inhabiting the space once occupied by their owners' lives. Boltanski himself has described his work as "about the fact of dying."*

Later, a woman I spoke with mentioned to me the recent installations at the Buchenwald Memorial Museum, and London's Imperial War Museum, of Jenny Stolzenberg's work "Forgive and Do Not Forget," in which ceramic models of the mismatched shoes of holocaust victims march toward us, in a solemn single file out of the past. The piece is, in Stolzenberg's own words, "a contemplation of human atrocity."*

One guy even walked up next to me alongside Markus's piece on Saturday night and gravely intoned that "Shoes are different when you're a German artist."

For my part, I found it somewhat disappointing to hear the subject dragged multiple times to that darkest of all places in human history. It made me think of Theodor Adorno's oftquoted line about how continuing "to write poetry after

Auschwitz is barbaric."* Being a poet myself, born in 1974, I always found that judgment a little bit problematic. In everincreasing hyperbole, Adorno would later go on to "raise the less cultural question of whether after Auschwitz you can go on living."* But for better or worse, we simply do go on living, with or without a working knowledge of Adorno. And we also go on making poetry, whether it is deemed barbaric to do so or not.

Fortunately, Markus's piece is poetic in the least barbaric way. It is a cosmic reassurance, a gesture of hope. Markus's shoes do not march solemnly in one linear direction, nor do they laze about in disheveled heaps, passively awaiting the grand nothing. They spread actively into the unknown darkness of tomorrow, carrying with them the marriage of beauty and organization that lies at the very heart of narrative. In the Boltanski and Stolzenberg pieces the accent is on the discontinued use of the objects, representing the absence of

their previous utility, the deaths of their previous owners. But Hansen's shoes have been brought back into use. Resurrected. They are as alive and functional as paint or clay or pianos ever have been. They are not discarded; they are not relegated to the category of memories or trash. They don't wallow in grief, guilt or mourning. They are continuing instruments in the conversation about form, color, light, and time. They still have new stories to tell.

Of course, Markus's shoes may in some cases have been the shoes of the dead, but they could equally have been the shoes of those who outgrew them or got bored of them, the shoes of those who bought new shoes, shoes that have merely gone out of fashion. To get straight to the point, Markus's work isn't about dying at all. It's about living. And more, it's about existing. It's about inhabiting a reality in which the lives and deaths of people and objects are only cyclical refrains that swell and continue forever.

As we all return to the ground to fertilize the future, so do our possessions. So do our ideas. There is nothing here so vulgar or morbid as fatalism. On the contrary, it's the greatest and oldest kind of across-the-board, non-denominational comfort. It is the notion that we are eternal.

The Palais de la Decouverte serves, in its day-job, as a science museum. And there in that foyer, with the history of astronomy on its one side and the history of evolution on its other, Markus Hansen's piece reminded us that we humans still live and move through constantly returning cycles. Just as the galaxies and universes are infinitely collapsing and expanding, we too are a forever blinking and resetting iris. We pass from dark ages into enlightenments and back again. Our colors evolve and blend with each other as we do, generating newer and infinitely subtler hues as the generations march on. I am very happy to report that I snagged a pair of shoes out of the supplies for this installation while it was first taking shape in Markus's studio. And now, thanks to him, a piece of that endless human story, a piece of the eternal poetry, walks with me everywhere I go. Onward. Into the future.

*-"Interview with Christian Boltanski", Tamar Garb, London Phaidon Press 1997

*-The artist's website, www.jennystolzenbergceramics.com

*-"Cultural Criticism and Society" Theodor Adorno, 1949 English translation: Samuel and Shierry Weber

*-"Negative Dialectics" Theodor Adorno, 1966 English Translation by E.B. Ashton