

Rémy Markowitsch — "The Onion Option" – A Game of Chance

There are people who forever want to keep all their options open—which doesn't mean they couldn't have a job somewhere or even be married or own property, that's to say, be tied up with all sorts of contractual obligations. And they certainly don't lead more autonomous existences than others by keeping that little gate open. But in their hearts they are never really committed. Even as they go about their duties and pleasures, they are casting an eye at some different job, a bigger house, thinking about emigrating, about more money, about a different woman or a new man; they are constantly toying with the notion of other ways of life and occupations, to the extent that some only ever feel really alive when they are operating in the subjunctive. Tempting opportunities, perpetual expectations and cherished hopes introduce an incomparably sweet and agonising tension into their lives and have to be sustained, almost at any price; for deciding in favour of one opportunity would mean relinquishing all those other opportunities. And deciding for one thing or the other is always just a little banal, disappointing and not infrequently brings with it what people call the 'sadness of ending'—the point being that the anticipation of happiness is actually happiness itself.

Rémy Markowitsch explores these feelings and attitudes and the endless machinations they involve in his most recent work *The Onion Option*, first shown in the Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing. As in all his projects, *The Onion Option* combines a huge diversity of references to create an imaginary chamber of associations; and the door to this chamber is opened by the sensuality and seductiveness of his objects and pictures. Light—transluminating, illuminating, elucidating, enlightening—always plays a central part in his work. For the series *Nach der Natur / After Nature* (1991–98), for instance, it is almost as though he had donned a headlamp and stepped into pictorial worlds that he found in books—although in art, making something 'after nature' simply means creating a likeness or a mirror image. Through the act of transformation into a different medium something is always added, subtracted, paraphrased, interpreted, staged.

Mental Journeys

Books—with only a negligible value in terms of their paper content, and at times regarded as a downright nuisance because of their weight—achieve their real value in the hearts and minds of their readers and perusers as repositories of knowledge, ideas, fantasies and feelings. And it is our senses that are the basis of all knowledge and art. In the Neolithic Age, for instance, when human beings started to construct fixed barriers to protect themselves from nature, they were responding to their own natural needs and conditions. They took this action on the basis of what they had learned from seeing, smelling, hearing, freezing, getting wet, sweating, in short, from sensory perception. And for all their efforts to be objective and their reliance on measuring equipment, scientists today—increasingly—interpret their findings on the basis of their sensory perceptions since measurements have become so complex that they can only be understood in the form of computer-generated images. For his part, Markowitsch takes the images he finds in picture books—photographic interpretations of the world—and sheds light on and through them. He then photographs these transluminated images on the front and back of the same page, superimposed on each other and now as one. All his photographic works use the same method as the images in the projects *The Onion Option* and *On Travel* (2004).

The pictures in *On Travel* are presented in conjunction with a collection of literary and scientific texts, that's to say, travel and research reports on the unfamiliar worlds their authors have found in Africa and Asia. *On Travel* is an expedition into the various ways that alien cultures are received: it seems that the gaze of the 'white' explorer faced with the 'colourful' tropical or exotic world is more or less hampered by culture shock, disease and drugs. A positively explosive mix of clear thinking and intoxication produces reports, photographs and drawings that, while they may be of a certain scientific interest, can only really be described as highly subjective, in fact literary representations of reality. The collection of texts and pictures of pictures in *On Travel* demonstrate this in an extremely sensual manner: the world is beautiful, the world is many-coloured, the world is gruesome and dangerous, a place of horror, deception, even of bewildering delirium, and sometimes all these things at once. And any accounts of it are relative because all of these—naturally—are based on physically and culturally determined perceptions.

In his comprehensive project *Bibliotherapy* (2001–03) Rémy Markowitsch engages with the book as a universe of knowledge and feelings, as a store of processed experiences. *Bibliotherapy* was not just a ramified reflection on literature and language, on mental journeys, on the book as a medium, on reading as pleasure and addiction; *Bibliotherapy* was also a collaborative project with the artist Michael Lin and numerous readers: in France Markowitsch videoed them reading from Gustave Flaubert's unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (about an obsessive drive to accumulate knowledge). In Germany and Switzerland there were readings from *Der grüne Heinrich*, Gottfried Keller's *Bildungsroman*, and in Great Britain willing volunteers read from Daniel Defoe's travel and adventure story *Robinson Crusoe* that addresses both psychological issues and questions of civilisation and colonisation. In the end Markowitsch had accumulated hundreds of hours of reading. This many-voiced chorus of readers creates a realm filled with stories, images and insights. Reading as imagined journeys, as a process, a passion and an addiction is as all-pervasive as the apparently primeval human drive to acquire and to store knowledge.

Crisscrossing the Universe of Knowledge

Be it in the book and exhibition project *On Travel*, be it in the exhibition *Spirit* (2005/06), where Markowitsch explored the spirit of the vast, private art collection of Werner Coninx in Zurich (sweeping a searchlight over some 14,000 objects that the public has only ever had partial access to), be it in *You are not alone, vol. 1 & 2* (2004), which focuses on alcohol as an entirely legal drug—all these works are the outcome of Markowitsch's simultaneous engagement with multiple themes and his reflections on the media he is using. Photography, videos, audio—speech, sounds—on one hand, literature and research, the appropriation of things alien, colonialism, addiction and a passion for collecting on the other constantly recur in his work. *You are not alone*, for instance, consists of two video pieces exploring the use and misuse of alcohol: one wall-filling projection shows drunken women and men out and about in the streets of Liverpool. Inserted into this projection is a flat screen with an image of a strange figure, a god of alcohol perhaps, accompanied by the sound of the voice of Monsieur Homais, the apothecary in Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. Although he readily satisfies Emma Bovary's addiction to medication and reading with pills and literature, he imposes the strictest of limits on the consumption of alcohol, not least because, as an apothecary, he could profit financially from prohibition.

Desire and Money

But let us now turn our attention to Rémy Markowitsch's most recent work, *The Onion Option*. On the face of it the title refers to the trade in derivatives, which includes 'options'. The principle of trading in options was established in the mid-nineteenth century in agriculture, which is a very risky 'futures business' based on perishable goods since the farmer is at the mercy of the weather. But: as early as 1630, in the wake of an unprecedented craze for tulips, the Dutch started trading in the first tulip bulb derivatives. These options to buy or sell tulips at a fixed price by or before a specific date first led to a stock market boom and then, in 1637, to a collapse in the tulip bulb trade and the first stock exchange crash in history. While the option to sell agricultural produce at a fixed price can be a practical way of securing a farmer's income, from the start this highly speculative financial instrument also developed in other directions—with options on slaves, for instance, who would only come on to the market once the ships had berthed. Nevertheless, the trade in options and its abuse are merely variations on innate aspects of human behaviour.

Euphoria or devastation to the bitter end and beyond: nothing works without money. Even if you only had ten minutes to live, you would still need ready cash to keep things ticking over, not to mention what happens when you die, which brings with it a whole string of expenses. Money is not only an existential necessity, it is also a real thrill to have money and make it grow. There are few things that set the pulse racing faster than trading on the stock exchange, particularly in options that can generate enormous profits or losses. So many human traits combine and play into this—an instinct for hunting, a love of gambling, a passion for collecting, desire and the devil-may-care streak that resides within even the most cultured souls. The very act of trading in options with their expiration dates can be enormously exciting—for it is an activity that, even more than shares, holds out the promise of a quick profit, in other words happiness (based on other people's losses and obviously, the prevention of one's own). Bubbles form and burst, but the nerve-tingling trade goes on . . .

The trade in derivatives now dominates the international markets in raw materials and foodstuffs, currency, shares and obligation bonds, at times to such an extent that they can decide the fate of whole families, companies or governments—as happened in India when the price of onions rose, and as is currently happening in China where the cost of pork is rocketing. However humble onions or pork may be, featuring in a multitude of everyday dishes as they do, the prices they command can affect even the most elevated political circles; no government can afford social unrest due to rising food prices.

Potential is Sexy

And then there is the fact that bulbs are themselves prototypically 'optional' objects: they are potentially edible as onion bulbs and, as tulip or, say, lily bulbs, they are optional flowers; that's to say, more or less unsightly lumps can produce the most beautiful blooms—a wonderful metaphor. So the bulb is not only connected with the first stock exchange crash in history and—in the form of the 'onion option'—with the history of the stock exchange; as reified potential, as a source of nutrition and an object for speculation it also symbolises the way that human beings treat things and values. Moreover, in Rémy Markowitsch's project it provides enough comedy to keep pathos at bay – who would even think of taking something as ridiculous as an onion seriously?

The centrepiece of Markowitsch's installation, *The Onion Option*, is a polyester sculpture some four metres in height, which is illuminated from within. It is an onion, which—gigantically enlarged—has been transformed into a sensual, strangely appealing object. It is not by chance that Rémy Markowitsch takes an onion that is half raw and half cooked as his starting point for the sculpture. Thus the associations suggested by the work arise both from the notion of rawness (*sheng* in Chinese) as a symbol for things uncivilised, barbaric and alien (*sheng ren* = "raw" people, strangers) and from the notion of food cooking (*shu* in Chinese) as a symbol for all things civilised and familiar (*shu ren* = "cooked" people, acquaintances, friends). So this onion is in transition, proceeding from an uncivilised to a civilised state; something that might also be said to apply, in varying degrees, to all the economies and different types of nation states in the world, even of capitalism as we see it in China today.

However, this onion lamp is also a grotesque equivalent to the biblical golden calf of Western society. There would be nothing to stop one dancing round this onion—in reality a symbol for money—shamelessly peering up under its semi-decaying skin-skirts as one did so. As seductive as it is repulsive, this is both an object of desire and a symbol of the fascination (uniting peoples and cultures), not to say the turn-on of money, which at times seems to be more important in the art market than the actual art.

In this lamp sculpture, as in the images of tulips in *Bullish on Bulbs* that also forms part of this installation, Rémy Markowitsch very deliberately exploits ambivalent beauty and sexiness and a glow that draws human moths in their droves, in other words market-worthiness. In stock-market circles the term 'bullish' refers to an anticipated rise in prices, an increase in profits: in short, good luck. Rémy Markowitsch gives the title of a particular kind of option to each picture, as in an *American, Asian or European* option. These photographs by definition call to mind the first stock market crash in history and the craze for tulips that caused it. Imported from the Ottoman Empire, but originally found in the remote Tien Shan mountain range in the border regions of China, Tibet, Russia and Afghanistan, the tulip initiated a craze that had less to do with its refined appreciation and much more to do with the hope of profiting from the tulip trade. This unalloyed desire to make money grow is also at the root of every flourishing capitalist economy.

Created by photographing transluminated book pages, the images of tulips are a reproduction of a reproduction of a reproduction and, as such, reflect on the media of photography, printing and books. At first sight sensually beautiful, appealing, accessible—on closer examination they develop a certain intransigence, something disturbing that resists the viewer's advances. In fact, the duplicated and superimposed tulip motifs also confront the viewer with the ill-omened combination of nature and technology, and its unfathomable dangers lurking in the carefree, by now full-throttle mix of plants, animals and humans, or rather of their components invisible to the naked eye.

In this, Rémy Markowitsch's most recent work, light again features as a factor not only in the photographic process and in developing prints, but also in projecting a video film and in the lamp sculpture itself. Like the similarly huge *Bonsai Potato* – casting light at the heart of Markowitsch's *Bibliotherapy* installation – the half monstrous, half poetic giant onion serves as a seductive lamp casting light in the exhibition and on deeper meanings.

In Floods of Tears

All over the world there are people who like a flutter, risking their hard-earned or—much worse—borrowed cash at the races or at cock fights; like the love of money, a love of gambling also unites different peoples. In China the Communist government's state-controlled capitalism is gradually introducing the population to capitalism; at the same time it is also securing the raw materials and energy needed for its booming economy by strengthening its trade links with Africa. So as the Chinese progressively advance towards the position of a capitalist super-power, they are discovering—like so many others—how to appropriate and exploit foreign cultures and how to use the stock market as a money-making tool.

In the mid-1980s there was already a moment of economic madness in China when a craze for bush lilies—comparable to the European obsession with tulips in the seventeenth century—seriously overheated the market in lily bulbs, which in turn led to a mini-crash on the stock exchange. The fatal rhizomatic combination of a passion for gambling, greed and the legitimate wish for material success has been producing such juicy offshoots that the government feels the social fabric is threatened by growing inequalities and the bursting of speculation bubbles.

As well as touching on the obsession for bush lilies in *The Onion Option*, Rémy Markowitsch also points to the fact that it is not only chopping onions that can end in tears; the same effect can be achieved by the cold shower of a collapsing trade in onion options. Interestingly, Markowitsch has based this part of his installation *The Onion Option* on a significant and fruitful mistranslation, namely, that red spider lilies—and not bush lilies—were at the root of the passion for onion bulbs. However, boom and crash were actually triggered by the Chinese plant *jun zi lan*, in English the *bush lily* and in German the *Klivie*. This delightful misunderstanding has enabled Markowitsch to exploit the erotic and pleasurable connotations of the red spider lily in his video work *Spider Lily meets Jun-Zi-Lan*. The video image, framed in a cloth sculpture of red spider lilies and bush lilies, shows a gushing shower head wrapped in a 'turban' (echoes of the Ottomans delivering tulip bulbs centuries ago), while the soundtrack plays audio clips from American, Asian and European films where people can be heard weeping. It makes one shudder and laugh in the same breath: for it is not only in the business of prostitution—that unholy concatenation of money, sex and power—that we see the capitalist system at its most ambivalent, always operating with the other side of the coin and multiply entangled in feelings of desire and the seduction of power. The same feelings of desire, power and impotence also come to the fore in the options trade, which can only work when two parties have opposing views of the same object; buyer and seller, good luck and bad luck need each other.

It is no different in the art market. Here, too, the players hope not only for profound insights and intellectual delights but also added value, in other words, an increase in their economic prowess and pleasure levels. In *The Onion Option* Markowitsch takes an ironically analytical approach to this both vulgar and endlessly rhizomatic complex. That is to say, he does not present it to the viewer in the form of a clear definition, but instead sheds light on some of its many aspects (not only with the onion lamp!). And as he does so he takes relish in his own game with the multiple meanings and implications of intoxication, the collector's passion and the exploration, appropriation and exploitation of foreign cultures, all the time focusing on the drives that sustain the world's economic mechanisms. *The Onion Option* is a sensory and sensual analysis of the psychic processes that underpin our crazy dealings with anything and everything; as such it is a visual essay on the optional thinking that is also the motor of life.

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June 2007

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Short Biography

Nadine Olonetzky (*1962 in Zurich) is a freelance writer for the cultural magazine *du*, for the papers *NZZ am Sonntag* and *Photonews – Zeitung für Fotografie*, and a frequent contributor to catalogues and books on photography, art and cultural history. She is a member of the Office Collective *kontrast* (www.kontrast.ch) in Zurich. Her most recent books: *Sensations – A Time Travel through Garden History*, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2006, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2006, and *Ein Amerikaner in Luzern – Allan Porter und 'camera'. Eine Biografie*, Pro Libro Verlag, 2007.