

It’s the story of an encounter. Always. An interplay of glances or paths, a game of blatant or covert seduction, the hope for a more radiant future. But there are also bad encounters, ones we would have wished to avoid, risky directions chosen, unexpected collisions with darkness. And often, at the crossroads, a Manichean synthesis of light and shadow, white and black, we navigate in greyness – in a tepidness at once gloomy and sad, enveloping and reassuring. As we will see, the oblique visions unfolded here defy categorization and dilute themselves into a unifying greyness.

When Peter Schlemihl,¹ the unfortunate hero of Adelbert von Chamisso’s novella, encounters a “grey man,” he is struck by the fact that no one notices or pays attention to him: “Nobody else seemed surprised, and they appeared to care no more about the grey man than about me,” he muses, including himself as socially invisible in the eyes of others. After enticing Schlemihl into a fiendish bargain, the mysterious stranger confides that “the devil is not so black as he is represented.” Indeed, it is more than likely that he assumes shades of grey. But the issue is not so much the Devil’s change of colour as what it manifests. Without reciting the history of demonic variations (in turn black, green, blue, etc.), suffice it to say that the Devil ultimately took shape in an anthropomorphic archetypal representation, red and horned, with pointed tail and jutting hooves. He could just as easily be grey were his skin tone due

merely to pigment discolouration. These days he is grey on a theoretical level, using this symbolic subterfuge to take on the colour of anonymity.

The exhibition *L’homme gris* (The Grey Man) revisits this paradoxical phenomenon: In seeking to disappear, to melt into the crowd by shedding his conspicuous attire, the Devil acquires a greater and all the more disturbing presence. This strategic change is the legacy of successive alterations: the humanization of his features during the Renaissance; the affirmation of his restored beauty in the 19th century; the internalization of evil in the early 20th century with advances in psychoanalysis and the concrete manifestations of horrendous wars. Today, the Devil’s grey is the grey worn by “average Joes,” ordinary, colourless (in both senses of the word) men. This crowd of strangers, easily infiltrated by wolves and devils, wears the same numbingly uniform garb like a suit of armour against recognition. Yet Lucifer’s fall was caused by pride, Satan wanted to impose his flamboyance against divine monotony, the Prince of this World was lauded by armies of protesters revering his outrageous, rebellious splendour. The artists presented here have achieved a tour de force in connecting two extremes, in restoring grandeur to grey.

The exhibition layout was designed around two movements that constitute the very essence of human life, constraint and freedom, which also represent the two

facets of the Devil – Promethean liberator Lucifer and ferocious Satan unleashing an infernal dictatorship.

The first part of the exhibition follows a path drawn with no choices and no points of return, symbolizing oppression by external diktats, the mechanization of gestures and routes, the absence of deviation in the modern world. Most of the works here are hidden from view, obliging visitors to make a respectful bow and, especially, to pay attention to each piece, each self-contained and acting as a surface on which our own interiority shimmers. Evoking the famous Nietzschean aphorism – “For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you” – the horizontal positioning of the frames initiates the subversion of our certainties. For the Devil builds his kingdom on our hesitations; by undermining the edifice of our habits, it starts the long, immense and reasoned derangement of all the senses – which leads to our downfall, which offers us the liberty of the Seer.

The alternation continues in the next part, where an (almost) empty space is followed by a labyrinthine passage in which are opposed, so to speak, risky wandering and implicit confinement, stroll and shackles. Magic lurks, invisible to secular eyes, but it haunts the structures like an auratic extension of the artists’ work. The alternation takes place a third time between an open space that precedes a mazelike skeleton where phantasmagoria evaporates to make way for horror before leading us on a forced march toward a long specular introspection. A certain number of works are relatively small, not only to counteract

the expected grandiloquence and devilish ostentation but also, and especially, to compel attentive, probing viewing that creates intimacy between viewer and work, between self and self.

The exhibition was conceived with the same dual focus – difference, illusion and disguise on the one hand, repetition, mirror and sameness on the other. The works adopt the grey man’s strategies of dissimulation, dilution and evaporation, those that connect guerilla tactics and secret societies. The Devil makes himself invisible and omnipresent, identified everywhere and never the same. The path here is scattered with clues or “evidential traces,” to borrow a term from the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, of visions and absences that corroborate the well-known words of Charles Baudelaire: “The Devil’s cleverest wile is to make men believe that he does not exist.”

In this way, the exhibition weaves immaterial, subterranean relationships among the works and creates pathways composed of to-and-fros, circles and vertiginous spirals. If the piece by Sindre Foss Skancke opens the show, it is precisely because his personal interpretation of humanity’s place in its esoteric relationship to the mythological, fictional and contemporary world forms a loop with the drawings of Jérôme Zonder that bring the visit to a close; they raise questions in bodily flesh that echo through uncompromising investigation of the image. One could go on and on about the connections, references and symmetries, the discordant

agreements and complicit silences. But it is best left to each viewer to discover and create these games, like a Bergmanian chess match, a staged scene, an illusion of freedom held up by satanic strings. For beyond the formal arrangements and the Devil’s various identities, an underlying theoretical multiplication operates within each work. Consequently, any attempt to reduce them to a role would be futile; like the grey man, they escape, slip away and mutate. For example, David Tibet depicts the coming and coronation of the Antichrist based on a visionary work faithful to the writings of John of Patmos; in parallel, he brings to life a Mirror Emperor reigning over a Mirror Empire, a reference to the proliferation of false prophets in our present-day world. In addition to incorporating the dual poetic and political (in the first sense of the word) aspect of the biblical Apocalypse, he very perspicaciously reminds us of its stunning topicality. Similarly, when Ragnar Kjartansson wears himself out singing, to general indifference, that Satan is real, he sounds like a prescient prophet lost in the noise of the world. The irony is excruciating and the laughter disturbing. At this point we think we have found the key and can take reassuring shortcuts: Élodie Lesourd, too, speaks of music; but for the most part she evokes the history of art and the philosophical fall of man, and ultimately reveals herself as closer to the conceptual, religious and mathematical Apocalypse of John Urho Kemp’s learned calculations. Hence the need to beware of appearances: behind the Symbolist beauties of Iris Van Dongen loom animal-like mutations of Satan, accursed bridges, threatening shadows.

Suddenly, everything starts to move, and the foundations on which we rely are shaking. This movement, which runs through Gast Bouschet’s video and unfolds in alchemical transmutations with political overtones, is specific to the Devil according to the French director and theorist Jean Epstein. It is an intangible force that disrupts and sweeps away everything in its path (even below ground), like a torrent of frozen lava. Everything shifts, everything is diffracted, and Julien Langendorff’s collages revive the magic of the fragment, recompose the secret, reveal and conceal the indescribable. Danger, force and attraction take cover in invisibility and mystery. Tony Oursler plays with masks inspired by dramatis or marketing personae, masks of the artificiality of life; Marnie Weber, like the German filmmaker Werner Herzog, “likes to direct landscapes” into which fantasies slip, where nothing remains in place, where reality sees the fantastical arise.

When Gisèle Vienne opens up time, she fashions a knot from mythology and the future and introduces the two-way mirror – untinted and traversable – of possession. She provides access to a reversal of perspectives by resituating the diabolical in humans, by exposing the crack through which evil penetrates. Darja Bajagić exposes its excesses and their materialization; she questions the impossibility of distinguishing victims from criminals, man from Devil, face from disguise. Jan Fabre embodies this structural mask by placing the Devil deep in the body, where the Sacrum and the Sacred meet. Christoph Büchel upholds the separation of body and soul and revisits the origin of the encounter with the Prince of this World in a contemporary Faustian pact.

¹ Adelbert von Chamisso, *Peter Schlemihls wunderbare Geschichte*, 1813.

The grey man is *L'homme double*, handsome like Lucifer, abominable like Satan. Christine Borland depicts “the Angel of Death,” the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, with elusive, perpetually changing features. Shifting and shadowy, he is no longer identifiable but becomes unstoppable: he certainly calls for the weight of history and the judgement imposed on him by Sarah Charlesworth’s work – a veritable mark of infamy that recognizes his kind. A stark mask, the archetype hovers like a gleaming infernal shadow. Accepting the need for distance, Alex Bag chooses irony to denounce the demonic grip of capitalism on today’s societies; Bianca Bondi wields the ways of magic to shed light on the ecological decrepitude of the world – a residual trace of the influence of a grey man who is everyone and no one, often unaware that he carries the Devil’s presence within himself and manifests it daily in his every act.

All that remains is to wonder whether the blurry, troubling contours of Andres Serrano’s body of Satan are a sign of his disappearance or whether, on the contrary, they express his coming emergence in the heart of our cities – disguised, of course, in a suit of grey, simply grey.

Benjamin Bianciotto, curator

Benjamin Bianciotto holds a Ph.D. in Art History from Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, where his dissertation focused on figures of Satan in contemporary art from 1969 to the present. The links between present-day art and religion and the occult remain central to his concerns and research. He is also an art critic and independent exhibition curator.

Artists

Alex Bag, Darja Bajagić, Bianca Bondi, Christine Borland, Gast Bouschet, Christoph Büchel, Sarah Charlesworth, Jan Fabre, John Urho Kemp, Ragnar Kjartansson, Julien Langendorff, Élodie Lesourd, Tony Oursler, Andres Serrano, Sindre Foss Skancke, David Tibet, Iris Van Dongen, Gisèle Vienne, Marnie Weber, Jérôme Zonder

Colophon

L'homme gris
Casino Luxembourg –
Forum d’art contemporain
14.11.2020 – 31.01.2021

Text
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Translation
Marcia Couëlle (FR/EN)

Layout
Bunker Palace, Dudelange

Acknowledgements
Sabrina and David Alaimo;
Angelos/Jan Fabre visual
arts studio, Antwerp; Galerie
Christian Berst, Paris;
Bugada & Cargnel, Paris;
Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Mor
Charpentier, Paris; Electronic
Arts Intermix (EAI), New York
(NY); i8 Gallery, Reykjavik;
Simon Lee Gallery, London;
Luhring Augustine, New York
(NY); Migros Museum für
Gegenwartskunst, Zurich;
Aram Muksian, Vallejo (CA);
Galerie Nathalie Obadia,

Paris/Brussels; SPVIE
Assurances, Suresnes; Von
Ammon Co, Washington D.C.;
Baronian Xippas, Brussels;
private collections and the
artists

ISBN 978-2-919790-15-9
© 2020 Casino Luxembourg

Casino Luxembourg is
financially supported by



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