

## A Tribute to Bruno Jakob: Between the Great Wide World and Quiet Retreat

Ladies and gentlemen,

It occurred to me that, apart from its pleasing ring with four vowels and two ‘O’s, Bruno Jakob’s name actually consists of two first names: Bruno and Jakob.

It was Alighiero e Boetti who introduced a lowercase ‘e’ (= ‘and’ in Italian) between first and last name, thus pointing out the two dimensions of his name, or rather of names in general: they are individual and collective, of limited duration and yet enduring beyond a single life. While the first name, Alighiero, designates a very specific Boetti, the so-called family name refers to all the other Boettis, past, present and future. The artist was addressing the duality of his person.

As mentioned, one might simply read two first names, Bruno and Jakob, or two last names, for that matter, like the “Bruno” in Giordano Bruno. Why am I fascinated by personal duplication of this kind — or, on the contrary, collective duplication, depending on the point of view? It is an iridescent equality manifested through opposites. Even so, the name with its twice two syllables is centered; it is entirely at rest.

Bruno is a popular Swiss name while Jakob is found in a wide variety of languages from Albanian, Danish and Estonian to Turkish and Ukrainian; it even seems to be widespread in Ghana and Nigeria. What’s more, Jakob unites the three world religions; it can be a first name in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

It is like the two places where Bruno Jakob lived until a year ago, New York and “Paradiesli,” the mini paradise of his parents’ home in the Canton of Aargau: oscillating between the great wide world and quiet retreat. The artist went to live in New York at an early age. He always seemed to me like a pillar of strength. He is diametrically opposed to what one would associate with an artist who “goes to New York.”

Typically, it was in Düsseldorf that I first heard about this idiosyncratic and indeed eccentric Swiss artist. Katharina Fritsch told me about him, for they had both studied at the Art Academy, a mythical site of postwar art in Europe.

Bruno Jakob paints with water — water that varies in provenance and meaning. The jars of transparent liquid may, for instance, be labeled “green” or “yellow.” Waves of energy, especially those transmitted by the brain, also figure as the “material” of his art.

There is a photograph, dated 1991-98 and titled Happy Nothing, in which Bruno Jakob is seen from the back, wearing bathing trunks and holding up a paintbrush with one arm like an antenna. Caspar David Friedrich’s famous Monk by the Sea (1808–10) comes to mind, an association that is less far-fetched than one might think, even as it manifests an immeasurable contradiction. The painting came as a shock to those who first saw it in the early 19th century. It embodied a new attitude in rendering our vulnerability in the face of implacable infinity. Heinrich von Kleist famously remarked, “it is as if one’s eyelids had been cut off.” However, Bruno Jakob sets an entirely different tone; he is not the monk by the sea.

His attitude is undramatic and unheroic, personal and intimate, yet invoking the general and the universal. The word “happy” in the title of the photograph enters into a fragile, one might even say Buddhist, alliance with its neighbor “nothing.” In this picture, water also stands for the elemental, the universal, and the temporal, embracing both the moment and infinity. In contrast, however, the person in the foreground is utterly absorbed in a very specific activity, painting as a process of receiving and transmitting. Here, Bruno Jakob is first and foremost an artist, but he is also a man of leisure — a monk in swimming trunks.

Happy Nothing is reproduced as a double-page spread in the catalog of the exhibition “Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer,” in which I presented Swiss art “with guests” at Kunsthaus Zürich in 1998. Thirteen years later, in 2011, I invited Bruno Jakob to contribute to the 54th Venice Biennale. I had a particular location in mind for him: the large entrance hall to the Padiglione Centrale, where he would have the opportunity to confront his work with three magnificent paintings by the 16th century Venetian old master Jacopo Tintoretto. It was admittedly a provocative act. For one thing, having an old master conspicuously hung as an overture to such an explicitly contemporary exhibition, and thus geared towards an explicitly contemporary audience, was one thing, but to juxtapose these works with an artist who paints “invisible paintings” was quite another.

Prior to the opening, Bruno Jakob appropriated the room with the old paintings for a private performance. In preparation for mounting his visible/invisible work, he performed an exuberant dance that was both extroverted and introverted at once, a quiet act, undertaken before the crowds of people, lovers of contemporary art, started pouring into the space over the next six months. The work itself consisted of a white card suspended from the ceiling on a thin thread. It was called The White Smile.

The title curiously coincides with my impression of the artist. Every time I think of him, I see the smile that plays across his face when he speaks about transferring energy. For all those who may be wary of esoteric leanings, let it be said that there is nothing esoteric about Bruno Jakob. Everything is open ended. The least art can do is to be ambivalent — and, as I said, there is this smile, a smile that makes one wonder: is he perhaps a Dadaist? The last thing he has to offer is a simplistic message. His art is fully aware of its own potential and the power it has to challenge our pragmatism, our relentless emphasis on use, and our frenzied need to maximize.

This is an artist who cultivates resistance in beauty, who engages in an absolutely non-belligerent resistance. Gracefully, with neither pomp nor circumstance, he manages to be uplifting, or, as they say in weather forecasts, “brightening.” And the smile, this physiognomic trait, can be quite disarming at times.

But Bruno Jakob’s art also involves risk, vulnerability, and fragility. During the 2011 Biennale, he willingly exposed his work to the elements in the open architecture of the Gaggiandre at the Arsenale in Venice. Then, when hurricane Sandy raged in New York, water — his most important artistic medium — destroyed much of his work, and as if that were not enough, an arson attack and the hoses of the firefighters claimed the “Paradiesli” in Aarburg along with all of the works he had stored there.

Over the years, one can observe a form of further development in this oeuvre. Bruno Jakob has been using more pots and a little more equipment in the process of applying, collecting, and vaporizing water, but the words, the note paper, the gestures are all as sparing as they have always been.

Even when, or actually because, he brings the word “nothing” into play, he is obviously adding something to the world. Is the invisible really at the core of Bruno Jacob’s endeavors? The traces of water remain visible for a long time. In a refined, ethereal publication, the catalog of his 1991 exhibition at Kunsthaus Aarau, the invisible is both visible and not visible at once (a curious paradox). The catalog contains a great many smooth, empty pages set off against a gloriously self-confident, orange cover. The publication also has a page that can be folded out to reveal an original painting by the artist. On taking a closer look, we see that the paper is wavy. Only in his titles does the artist hint at the subject matter of his invisible paintings! For instance, Evening Landscape with Two Men, or Inside a Waterdrop or the 36,000 Obscene Scenarios: they are meticulously listed but invisible.

All in all, Bruno Jakob is occupied with an iridescent revaluation of values. It is an alchemistic procedure that embraces such activities as “simmering,” vaporizing, and dancing; but it also refers to something larger, going so far as to address the link between microcosm and macrocosm. “What is below is what is above and what is above is what is below, an eternally enduring miracle of the one,” as we learn from the Emerald Tablet by the ultimate alchemist Hermes Trismegistos.

In his affinity with the frequencies of the universe, Bruno Jakob paints an intense “almost nothing,” much like what Meret Oppenheim spoke about in one of her poems: “such an enormous little bit of a lot.”

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