

## **A Gate without a Wall**

Tipping Objects and Setting Symbols Adrift

*Dominikus Müller*

Something is not right. The thing is too big; the thing is too small. It is made of a material that makes no sense and its purpose is thwarted. Or maybe, where it can be seen, it has, in fact, lost nothing. Something like that. It is precisely this fundamental moment of irritation that is a characteristic of Gregor Passens' work; it feeds on the gap between object and environment, work and context. Focused on this elementary moment, it carefully and persistently probes how an object can be transformed into a work of art. Passens experiments with proportions; his objects are vastly oversized and he situates them in such a way that, initially, they make no sense. An oversized, eight-meter-wide life ring is suspended to encircle a covered walkway that connects two parts of a building (Freischwimmer, 2010) (Free Swimmer); with his enormous pencil sharpener (Spitzer, 2008) (Pencil Sharpener), exhibited on a wooden pallet, it is impossible to sharpen any pencil. These common, everyday objects - freed of and alienated from their original purposes here – cease to be what they appear to be. Even if this thing looks like a life ring, it no longer is one. And, although the sharpener still appears to be just that, it no longer functions as such a device should.

These works focus on what constitutes a symbol, and how one can shift its meaning; in other words, the focus is on seeing things in an unusual way, and on how one not only sees an object, but how one reads and embeds it within a symbolic order. A table is a table, and a chair is a chair. Yet, a house can also be a tank. If placed on its side, the chimney quickly becomes the barrel of a tank gun (Caterpillar, 2003). Meanings shift in the blink of an eye, as soon as their carriers are placed in oblique positions. Passens' work goes straight to the heart of this game involving the strategies of relationships – by making sense and allowing sense to dissolve – especially in the case of examining the form of the triumphal arch, a form to which the artist repeatedly returns. In architectural terms, the triumphal arch is an exceptional form. It ostensibly serves no purpose; it is neither a dwelling nor a workplace. A triumphal arch is a perfect example of pure representational architecture: a gate without a wall that simply exists, intended to signify or symbolize something. It is a structure of expression – the visualization of a victory, a historic moment, greatness in and itself, an absolute symbol – and usually one of power. Furthermore, the triumphal arch has an extremely simple, recognizable form, like an upside down "U" with a flat top. Passens uses this structural template repeatedly, employing it in a vast

variety of situations; every time he drives a wedge – from a different angle - between this architectural vehicle and its meaning.

In 2006, Passens erected an inflatable triumphal arch on the Salinas Grandes (Great Salt Flats) in Jujuy, Argentina. In his video *Triumph* (2006), one sees how the arch, made of dark fabric, slowly emerges, rising up against the brilliant blue sky and, for a moment, stands in this incredible salt desert, alone, lost and yet somehow, "triumphal". To a certain extent, what Passens stages here is a triumph over reality, a play on the impossible and, above all, stupendous futility. "Useless" architecture becomes more useless here; it is further stripped of its purpose to the point that, instead of recalling a military triumph far from home, its only triumph is its own erection in this absurdly faraway place. The symbol is only the symbol itself. The arch then deflates and collapses back into nothing. The tension between external reality and that, which opposes it and momentarily wishes to irritate and transform it, can only be sustained briefly.

Precisely to what extent this work thrives on said tension Passens would make clear once again two years later, when, for his work *Batterie* (2008) (Battery), he employed the very same form of the triumphal arch, this time turned upside down as a mastic-asphalt sculpture weighing over 260 tons. The arch now has the appearance of a crude and powerful horseshoe magnet stretching into the air. This work constitutes the absolute opposite of *Triumph* – executed using the same symbol: rigid material now takes the place of an air-filled void. What used to be up is now down. That which was light and transitory is now heavy and eternal. From the beginning, the principle of tension is inherent in the battery motif, which also appears in other works by Passens, including *Akku* (2008) (Rechargeable Battery), two rough and brittle mastic-asphalt objects. A battery derives its strength from two poles. It exhausts itself and becomes old and useless. In the work's title, one may feel that Passens has hidden a slight hint of the original action involved in his cast object. At least there, in its title, this colossus also contains traces of exhaustion.

Recently, Passens employed the principle of the inflatable sculpture once again, as he did in the first triumphal arch described. Upon seeing *Run Away* (2011), one is reminded of Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*. While Klaus Kinski, in his signature role as would-be rubber baron Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, attempted to heave a three-story tall ship over a mountain top in the sticky, humid Amazon, in Passens' work *Run Away*, an iceberg drifts through a mangrove forest near Cartagena de Indias in Colombia. Where Herzog used the spherical and ethereal music by the German avant-garde band Popol Vuh to bathe the absurd scenery in a

surrealistic light, Passens accompanies the slow drift of his iceberg with the chirping of tropical birds and three songs from Franz Schubert's Winterreise song cycle (1827). Nature and its synthetic imitation are added to the geographical-climatic discrepancy, as is the contrast between central European Romanticism and a post-colonial South American setting.

Here, the foreign object seems far more out of place, and while in the case of Triumph the 'misfit' quality of the object within its environment resulted in a withdrawal of meaning into the object itself, the associations here - born out of irritation - seem to multiply and almost become independent of it. By way of its displacement and the musical accompaniment, the iceberg is transformed into the condensation point for a problematic history between Europe and South America. However, one thing remains the same on a formal level: the temporary, incidental qualities that Passens brings into play by choosing to employ an inflatable sculpture in this case. At some point - sooner or later -this iceberg will also loose its air. In the same way, meanings are only intermittently fixed; they can only be set for the fleeting present. Like water that freezes into ice, they dissolve back into water again at some point, slipping on their own accord, and can then be shifted. They condense every now and then into objects and form conventions. Recognition, to a great extent, means recognizing. Then the game can begin anew. Somewhere else. In some other way.