

35 SYNONYMS FOR 'HAMMERED INTO' AND A FAMILY PACK OF YOKES, ONE PUDDLE, ONE DRINK, AND A FIRM PROMISE OF FUTURE SCHEMES

Stefaan Dheedene is concerned with the functional, unpretentious object. He subjects it to non-functional study, to observation and exercise; he applies experimental, material procedures to it. His artistic production, consisting mainly but not exclusively of sculptural work and installations, is controlled, as it were, by 'findings'; by an unintentionally revealed potential for imitation, association or transformation. In the studio – practice, workshop, thinking place - another 'political' order is imposed on us: a kind of shift of role and meaning.

All of Stefaan Dheedene's exhibitions, including this one, are moments in which this order is briefly revealed and made public. The works are suspended in a temporary relationship with each other; different relations are possible; they have already been established (as is usually the case) or will be established in the future. The artist acts as a kind of facilitator. Characteristically, the audience has a role to play: it is often involved in one way or another - not just as a guest but rather as a factor. Dheedene's exhibitions are very often organized, operational contexts in which the ritual, the performance and the collective are put into a relationship with his own artistic production; a moment or a place in which the work of art fulfills its sole and proper function through the intervention of the audience. Issues such as instruction, norm and convention are thereby tested. This way the exhibition becomes an enclave, an autonomous place rather than a space. This is also the case here. The series of works entitled "35 Synonyms for 'hammered into'", presented as one installation on the ground floor, has migrated from another context: the works were displayed for the first time in an exhibition at Yuri G. Gallery in Antwerp (2020). A total of 29 hammers, all with a different length, head, handle and weight are hung up, divided across 9 racks. During their first display, the hammers were lent out to visitors for a year, leaving the racks partially empty for the remainder of the exhibition period. At the occasion of the current exhibition they are being brought back by the borrowers. The installation thus acquires dimensions of time, promise and commitment. The same applies to "A family pack of yokes", a rack with 9 yokes. These were also lent out for the same period and in the same way, and are now being returned. All this time, the racks have continued to function as a work of art while being incomplete. Something is missing or is taken away; the sculpture becomes a synthesis of action and form.

"Single Shot, Single Tone", an installation in the form of a bar with one shot of whisky waiting for a visitor, and a conch to blow one single tone on, similarly serves as some kind of activating, generous sculpture: it functions within the same context of actions, it functionalises the space, linking up with the other two installations downstairs. The glass of liquor on the counter adds a dimension of time and incompleteness, much like the loan period that is implied in the concept of the installations with the hammers and the yokes. There are links to the upper room as well, where "The puddle" is displayed. A

sculpture reminiscent of a jacuzzi provides the base for a puddle: another evaporating, disappearing element. There is a kind of emancipation going on here, with all its connotations: a puddle of dirty water is ideologically placed above a mass of clear, bubbling water. The series of works entitled "A firm promise for future schemes", a series of real, in the sense of correct, calendars of years from the near and distant future, is again related to the basic concepts of expectation, borrowing, engagement and the idea of promise which underlie this exhibition. Here again, Dheedene strips everyday objects and actions of their pretension; he liberates them from their function and from their categorical limitations. He lets them evolve freely through shifting contexts, like a kind of organizer of a process, all within a radical democracy of objects. There is room for misunderstanding and there is room for what is missing.

To whom observes Dheedene's work on a somewhat longer term, the exhibition also testifies to a shift within the artist's attention: from objects and installations with modernist, conceptual overtones, and with a kind of ideologically charged or social meaning, to a more concrete 'ontology' of objects. And paradoxically, biographical, anecdotal footnotes – on Africa, the sea, rhythm, engagement, and disappearance - sometimes work their way up to become 'text'.

This is the first solo exhibition at Annie Gentils Gallery by Stefaan Dheedene (born 1975 in Kortrijk, lives and works in Ghent).

Dries Verstraete, May '21