

Real Solutions to Imaginary Problems: An Introduction to the Work of Eric Hattan

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As a boy, walking the streets at night of the village near Zürich where he grew up, Eric Hattan stopped and kicked a lamp post. The light flickered and faded before plunging the street into darkness as the gas vapours in the bulb were, his electrician father explained, momentarily disturbed. This biographical anecdote appears retrospectively as a seminal moment in Hattan's artistic development and one can easily imagine him running down the street hitting lamp posts, thrilled by both the magic of physics and momentary disruption of public order. This is one of many approaches articulated in the overview of Hattan's work provided by this publication. Other predominant themes include: the relation between the human body and its environment; fleeting and apparently inconsequential moments in the everyday; a Situationist-inspired propensity to drift; sculptural and physical properties such as gravity, inversion, re-scaling and appropriation; and informal and spontaneous uses of architecture and design. Often creating trompe l'oeil tableaux, Hattan's artistic strategies at times relate to institutional critique as he destabilises basic perceptual assumptions.

Born in Wettingen, northern Switzerland, in 1955, Hattan has produced sculpture, installation, video and performance throughout his career, from the late 1970s to the present day. Having never formally trained as an artist, Hattan effectively taught himself through friendships and connections with artists in Basel, where he moved in his early twenties, as well as visiting galleries and museums across Switzerland, due to a job which involved travelling across the country. The playful and spontaneous assemblages of Bernhard Luginbühl and Jean Tinguely and the illusionistic work of younger artist Markus Raetz, for example, were quite prominent before he moved to Basel, while, from the late 1970s, director Jean-Christophe Ammann's programme at the Kunsthalle Basel included Italian Arte Povera artists Alighiero Boetti and Giovanni Anselmo. The anti-consumerist use of raw, everyday materials and improvised installations by these artists made a significant impact on Hattan who particularly recalls Anselmo's *Senza titolo* (1968), in which two blocks of granite are tied together with a head of lettuce wedged in the middle. As the lettuce wilts, the structure falls apart, harnessing the laws of nature (such as decomposition and gravity, etc.) in the artistic process in a way that impressed the young artist as he was acquainting himself with work by many international conceptual and minimalist artists.

In 1981, Hattan founded an artist-run space called Filiale with his future wife, artist Silvia Bächli, and friends Heide Hölscher and Beat Wismer, which presented over 100 exhibitions sporadically and in various locations until 2005. Initially set up without any budget, Filiale primarily presented solo exhibitions of young artists from Switzerland. Hattan invariably assisted them to hang their shows, while also working as an art technician helping, for example, Carl Andre to install 300 square metres of steel plates in a park. Filiale presented an incredibly broad range of different practices and some of the more prominent names include John Armleder, Anya Gallaccio, Jacques Herzog, Thomas Hirschhorn, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, Beat Streuli, Marijke van Warmerdam, Hannah Villiger and Anna Winteler. The technical and conceptual variety of their practices is far too broad to contemplate any singular tendency or movement but connections, perhaps, could be drawn between Hattan's work and the extreme contrasting aesthetics of Hirschhorn's DIY and Villiger's reductivism. There is no doubt, too, that other artists such as Roman Signer or Fischli/Weiss, with their childlike spirit of experimentation and transformation of the commonplace, resonated with his thinking. Despite, or perhaps because of, this heady mix of encounters, his practice, as this book demonstrates, very much took its own course.

In 1982, Hattan held his own first solo show at Filiale, suspending a child's chair and small wooden house in mid-air, while a low-hanging lamp reflected water onto the walls, in an installation appropriately titled *Der Traum vom Fliegen ist nicht in der Luft geblieben*, meaning, roughly, a dream to fly does not just hang in the air. In his second exhibition there, the following year, a vast assemblage of red, wooden planks in the shape of a skull or mask filled a room. Perhaps inspired by a Richard Serra exhibition seen during a visit to the USA the previous year, this work represented to the artist a kind of Trojan Horse – a trick of scale, as the piece, when fully assembled, could never fit through the gallery door. In 1984, Hattan curated a group show in an empty factory called *Das subjektive Museum*, of artists in Basel who had influenced him over the last few years. The exhibition of 16 artists brought together paintings that broadly connected architecture and the body: figures crawling through tunnels, staring down into narrow spaces or doubling up as houses. Hattan's final show at Filiale, in 1988, included two large installations: *Áquator*, a kind of peepshow, reconstructed with large velvet curtains and small windows to peer through; and *Les grands ensembles*, the first in a series of linguistic games and architectural installations using his own initials as a monogram. A large

3D letter 'H' is sandwiched between two 'E's to create the palindrome 'EHE', meaning 'marriage' in German. A small work from this period, *Brutkasten* (Breeder, 1988) succinctly combines these personal identifiers with the ideas of marriage, nesting and accommodation (in this case for birds). Another example was a work called *NeuSehland* (1988), a site-specific piece produced for a Swiss telecommunications company which consisted of a pipe leading deep into the ground, a 'hole to the end of the world', which, if filled with groundwater, would reflect back from down under. *Neuseeland* is German for New Zealand, but here the title is respelled as a riff on the words 'neu' (new) and 'sehen' (to see). That the word 'sehen' included the artist's monogram 'EHE' and the letters 'S' for south and 'N' for north was the source of numerous experiments and appeared in room-sized installations such as *Daheim* (1990). Another offshoot of this playful process was the literal insertion of the artist's own person, this time his body, within architectural space, as in *Inside* (1993). The artist's enjoyment of word play, displacement and perceptual games was particularly evident during this period, for example when he built a section through a metro train track and platform in plywood for a video installation; made a replica balcony fixed to a blank wall like a sculpture or relief; or kept a walkway of parquet panelling suspended above the original floor.

Many of these early works toyed with the laws of physics, using light, reflection and balance to create often precarious installations. Hattan began more regularly to exploit basic, accumulated materials, from the building trade or his own personal belongings as well as everyday items and clutter long abandoned to storage. Like the return of the repressed, neglected junk is often rescued and thrust into the limelight in a delicate choreography that turns back of house into storefront window. This process is exemplified in *+ - das halbe Leben* from 1990, where all of his material possessions were carefully arranged into a neat geometry, and has continued until recent times in, for example, *Lèche-Vitry-nes* (2010), a pun referring to both window shopping and the location of the work. This sleight of hand, bringing a sense of magic to the ordinary, has always been an important part of his engagement with the perceptual world and also drives his fittingly low-fi film and video work. As if in search of authenticity and to assert the value of the ordinary, these works are observational and diaristic, often lifting the commonplace into amusing vignettes. His very first film from 1979, a 30 second loop shot on a Super 8 camera held close to his chest, captured his shadow as he rolled head over heels in a field. Other short clips, often taken while drifting around on foot or in a car through streets, buildings and the countryside, capture the joy, absurdity and incidental poetry of the everyday: a plastic bag pirouetting in the wind; water cascading out of a drain; or curtains billowing in the draught... These sketches and cameos are usually displayed on improvised assemblies of mismatched monitors, accommodated in empty crates and salvaged cardboard boxes, in the joyous spirit of bricolage that dictates all of Hattan's installations.

In his sculpture, everyday items are arranged and re-arranged, turned on their heads and inside out, their physical boundaries pushed until they almost burst at the seams. *Katz & Mauz* (1991), is an early example of works that test the inherent structural qualities of materials (paper bags in this instance), a process which is pushed further in later works including the *Unplugged* series since 1995, the *Instant Sculptures* since 2002 and elements in *Verdunklungsmaßnahmen* (2012). The products and materials used by Hattan, the general quality of manufacturing in clothing, bedding, boxes and bags, even Christmas trees and packing crates, are tested to their limits to check, often literally, if they 'stack up'. Clothing also becomes a productive medium in Hattan's hands. It is used as a comical substitute for himself and others, as it is folded and piled up (*Homme à l'âge de GN*, 1989), inverted and pinned to the wall (*Umgedrehte Kleider*, 1995–96), hung out to dry (*l'évaporation*, 1998) or used as an unusual record of activities charting, for example, his daily purchases from street markets in *7 jours à Buenos Aires* (2003). His use of clothes even takes on cartoonlike qualities as in *Shoe Shine* (2010) where shoes walk up a wall or at the exhibition *Habiter l'inhabituel* in Marseille 2014, where a jacket is trapped, implausibly, under a column. Hattan has also always worked with chairs, often scooped up off the street and collected like odd socks or abandoned orphans. Used in his work, in all their guises, shapes and sizes, in all positions and orientations, they are equally anthropomorphic. In *Beirut 2011* and *Marseille 2014* a crowd of these chairs appeared hamstrung by concrete lumps, like prisoners with a ball and chain. More recently, an ensemble of 62 disparate chairs has been used as an elaborate and extensive drum kit for a virtuoso performance by Julian Sartorius at the *Centre Culturel Suisse* in Paris in 2014 before being stacked like unstable totems, employed for anything, almost, other than actually sitting.

As such, Hattan's convoluted tinkering with ordinary, discarded materials represents an act of stalling, if not downright refusal. As with crisp packets, clothes and chairs, Hattan also intervenes and disrupts the public realm: in *Hors service* (1993), public and domestic objects have been covered in tight-fitting cloths that maintain their form but impede their function; while, more brashly, in *Zeitreise*

(Sparmaßnahme) (2000), a public phone booth has been totally bricked up on the inside. One work in particular, perhaps, captures a heightened sense of Hattan's humorous rebellion: *Jet d'OH* (2000) is a public bin which sporadically vomits out its contents, like a hilarious and irrepressible expletive, an inadvertent retch amidst growling and rumblings. These irreverent gestures, initially sparked by his childlike delight in interrupting the flow of electricity, have persisted in the subsequent bending, twisting and uprooting of lamp posts and turning them on their heads, culminating in a major public commission in Geneva, 2014, where Hattan even attempts to defy gravity (*Les jeux sont faits – Rien ne va plus – Faites vos jeux*). Since *Air Strikes* (1994) he has employed thin wooden rods to pin household furniture to the ceiling, while in works like *Pendant* (2005 and 2009), empty crates from the museum store have been hung from gallery ceilings. In both instances, items remain suspended, not just physically in mid-air but also from their intended purpose. By undermining the original purpose and habitual flow of things, Hattan rejects the authority of often unspoken as well as spoken rules and regulations, from building control to health and safety, and engages in an idiosyncratic kind of institutional critique.

From the moment he first created a dummy CCTV camera out of an olive oil can in 1984, Hattan has signalled a particular stance against accepting appearances, conventions and passive consumption. Interior scenes viewed through Hattan's many spyholes continually make a mockery of their context so that disappeared lamp posts and columns or large cinemas in tiny broom cupboards induce doubt and double takes. Surveillance and *trompe l'oeil*, control and confusion provide a tricky mix heightening scrutiny of our surroundings and scepticism as to their veracity. Extending these games into oversized, site-specific, architectural settings in works like *Zwillingszimmer* (1996) and the first of several caravans, *Wohnwagen* (1996), made these tricks all the more improbable and beguiling. Despite its physicality, a sense of weightlessness often permeates Hattan's work, a lightness of touch or spirit, a sense of absurdity or lightheadedness that conceives a world of tea parties happily taking place on a ceiling (*À l'env'air*, 2003), tents lying comfortably on a steep roadside (*Mistral*, 2003) and leather shoes tipped up on their toes (*None Too High*, 2015). Departing from concrete situations, his experiments continue to be driven by this same sense of fun and doubt, by a curiosity that takes nothing for granted and even less as given. After twisting, stacking and suspending, peeling, disordering and rearranging, his multiple methods of manipulation have evolved into elaborate systems of improvisation and play. Envisaged like the children's game of joining the dots, a puzzle completed by following a sequence, this survey of almost 40 years' worth of work presents an inventory by Eric Hattan of real solutions to imaginary problems.