

# TOBIAS REHBERGER

## designing narratives



The first thing to realize about the work of Tobias Rehberger is that, despite appearances, it is not design. Design appears in Rehberger's work as a subterfuge. One can make a comparison with Andreas Slominsky's design for a wardrobe in which a person in a wheelchair could hide if the spouse of the person he or she were having an affair were to return home unexpectedly. Rehberger is not quite as over the top as Slominsky, at least he pays lipservice to the domain of design. In Rehberger's work we see an antagonism to the functionality that is an absolute condition of modernist design. This rationalism was the foundation of the massive impact modernist design had upon the fabric of twentieth century culture. But by the late twentieth century there was a post-modern turn that was much more concerned with play and lifestyle. Rehberger, however, is not even definable in terms of postmodern design. He takes the deconstruction of modernist design one step further by pulling it into the uncharted territory of the aesthetic with no name. There it is inpenetrated with concerns about identity, nonlinear narrative, and absurdism.

One can see the intersection of absurdism and design in *Office for Twins Both 1.38m Tall*, 1995. The title points to a determination to be ideosyncratic yet the design is distinctly international style (albeit a little clunky). But Rehberger shows that he is not bound to this or any other style. This is especially evident in a large exhibition in Turin that





Rehberger entitled *Deadies* (2002). ‘*Deadies*’ is American youth slang and is a play upon ‘death’ and ‘mommies and daddies’ thereby suggesting thereby a very Oedipal concept of the death of the father. As usual in Rehberger’s work design plays a role but as the title of the exhibition suggests functionality is subordinated to narrative play.

*Deadies* was composed of a variety of sculptural installations. One of these Rehberger’s rather macabre *modus operandi* was to purchase the contents of apartments of the recently deceased. In an interview with Alessandra Pace Rehberger explains:

I bought entire environments, took them out of the apartment, broke them apart and processed them aesthetically by changing the original European into Japanese style. The only thing that remains about the original possessor is his name in the title.

One begins to understand Rehberger’s reluctance to speak of his work in terms of design. Design does not generally work with a narrative dimension yet *Deaddies* is permeated not so much with a story as with an allegorical dimension. Following Craig Owen’s discussion of allegory and postmodern art we can understand it in terms of counter-narrative, which is to say a narrative that does not defined here as a metaphoric narrative that avoids a one-dimensional message. This presents a challenge to the viewer because there is no clear message.

At first one might find this work quite macabre. But in an interview with the curator of the Turin exhibition Alexan-



dra Pace Rehberger noted that ‘death is probably the most speculative thing that exists’. Which is certainly thought provoking. What happens to us when we die? Well as Rehberger notes in his interview most people dwindle into virtual nothingness:

A person disappears and things belonging to that person also disappear. Some people inherit the belongings, some get thrown away, others are sold. The longer the time lapse the more this person disappears. Think about your own family tradition: you might know your grandfather, but nobody knows his great-great-grandfather. Turin p.97

Rehberger reports that his intention was to erase the identity of the owner. The fact that he achieved this aim by the implementation of an off-the-shelf *Japoniste* style would also appear to erase the artist’s identity. Yet the result is a Rehberger: indicating the death-defying power of art. Because if he enters into the portal of art history Rehberger’s name will potentially live ‘forever’. He already has a foot in that door, and in another twenty years we will have a good idea of how much chance he will have of surviving ‘dissolution’. That must always be in the back of any artist’s mind.

The Deadies furniture is also a play on Oedipal concerns especially with respect to the legacy of previous generations of artists. Born 1966 Rehberger is relatively young. He is part of the new generation of artists enjoying the limelight until the art system swings towards the next generation (around 2010). In a sense the artists of the previous generation (born in the 1940s and 50s) are in the first stage of being deadies,



backgrounded by the shining new talents. And the reference to *Japonisme* harks even further back to the first manifestations of abstractionist modern design in Art Nouveau and Jugendstil at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We all die of course but what survives us is culture. Japonisme is still as effective today as it was a hundred years ago. Which is to say it has become woven into the fabric of our culture.

Rehberger is almost like a hybrid of storyteller and designer. Looking back into history one can note that the distinguishing difference between Dada and Surrealism and De Stijl and Constructivism is that the former were also literary movements. Deadies makes it very clear that there is a literary or narratological dimension to Rehberger's work.

Revisiting the situation in the early twentieth century when Constructivism coexisted with Dada one can note that there were interactions between the two parties but these did not result in any substantive synthesis. The beginning of such a synthesis seems to be stirring now, almost a century later. There is some evidence of this in *Deadies* and in Rehberger's installation *Tsutsumu*, created for Expo 2000 in Hannover. The artist created a Japanese garden with bonsai tree a stone block and garden bench for visitors. And as the event opened in Summer Rehberger provided some respite from the sun in the form of manufactured snow. The Japanese word 'tsutsumu' means 'wrapped' which implies a boundary separating the zone of the installation from the rest of the Expo.

What becomes apparent is that in Rehberger's hands design is a simulacral and fictive medium. It is firmly released from the bind of engineering. If he needs such a thing he will em-

ploy the relevant professional. Can such a person contribute to the domain of design or is he destined to be a storyteller who uses off-the-shelf styles for allegorical purposes? Only time will tell if his flirtation with design will produce any concrete results in the real world as opposed to the world of art.