The Clever Object

Edited by Matthew C. Hunter and Francesco Lucchini

Chapter 9
Fragments of Great Visions
Ian Kiaer in conversation with Christiane Rekade

'A building that would reach up into the sky': such is the utopian human project depicted by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in one of his best-known paintings. Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* (1563, now Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) is at the same time an architectural icon, a symbol of the cursed hubris and an image of failure.

Although British artist Ian Kiaer dedicated a series of works in his *Brueghel Project* (1999) to the Dutch painter and architect, the *Tower of Babel* features nowhere in it. Kiaer typically concentrates on less spectacular aspects in his works.

In *Brueghel Project: Casa Malaparte* (1999), he borrows the windmill from the landscape in Brueghel's *The Procession of Calvary* (1564) and associates it with the well-known house constructed by the writer Curzio Malaparte near Capri. In *Brueghel Project: Icarus* (2004), Kiaer transfers into his installation the legs of fallen Icarus, which are hardly visible in Brueghel's famous landscape now at the Royal Museums of Fine Art of Belgium, Brussels. However, the Tower of Babel, Malaparte's house and Icarus have one thing in common: their origin in a panoramic – even cosmological – vision.

Kiaer's works have often involved an engagement with utopian ideas and their thinkers. Bruno Taut, Paul Scheerbart, Ludwig Wittgenstein are amongst the thinkers, architects, writers and painters whose ideas Kiaer has engaged in his works. In doing so, Kiaer's interventions are neither loud nor spectacular, but modest arrangements of everyday objects, small models, watercolours and paintings. On a first, casual viewing, his assemblages may appear to be randomly scattered objects. But it quickly becomes evident how Kiaer combines artefacts, references and reminders from the history of art, architecture or philosophy through precise positioning. He creates links to grand visions using small models, embedding life stories into poetic landscapes of plastic foil, small cardboard houses, ping-pong balls and rubber bands.

'Vous qui voulez devenir Architecte,' so wrote French philosopher and architect Claude Nicolas Ledoux, 'commencez par être peintre'.[1] For Ledoux, architecture was primarily concerned with the production of images. Tellingly, Kiaer dedicates his 2003 *Endless Theatre project/ Ledoux: House of Agricultural Guards (white)* to the French visionary architect (*plate 1* and *plate 2*). A nearly-transparent, tonal watercolour, placed just above the floor, denotes the utopian concept of the spherical *House of the Gardener*, which Ledoux designed in 1789. On the floor are four white polystyrene plates arranged into a square along with a ping-pong ball. Like Brueghel and Ledoux, many of the architects referred to by Kiaer are 'painter-architects'. They are acrobats of the mind, using pencils and brushes to trace out connections between drawings and dreams in which the real world is often no more than a backdrop.[2]

Ian Kiaer, *Endnote*, 2010. Various materials, various dimensions. Installation: Kunstverein München, 2010. Reproduced courtesy of the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery and Kunstverein München. Photo: © U. Gebert.

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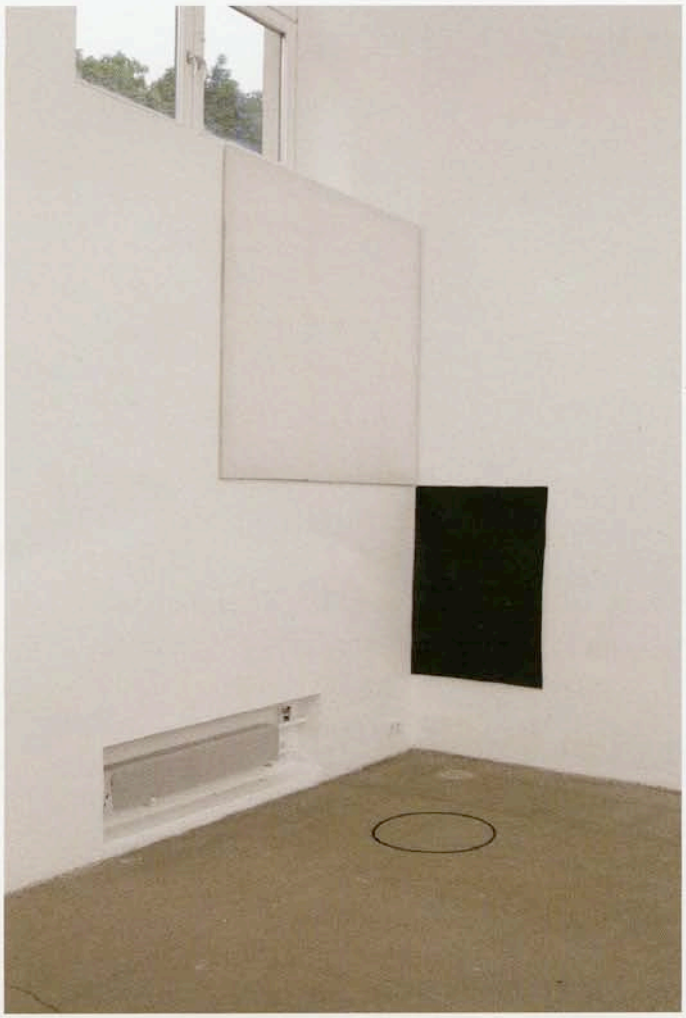
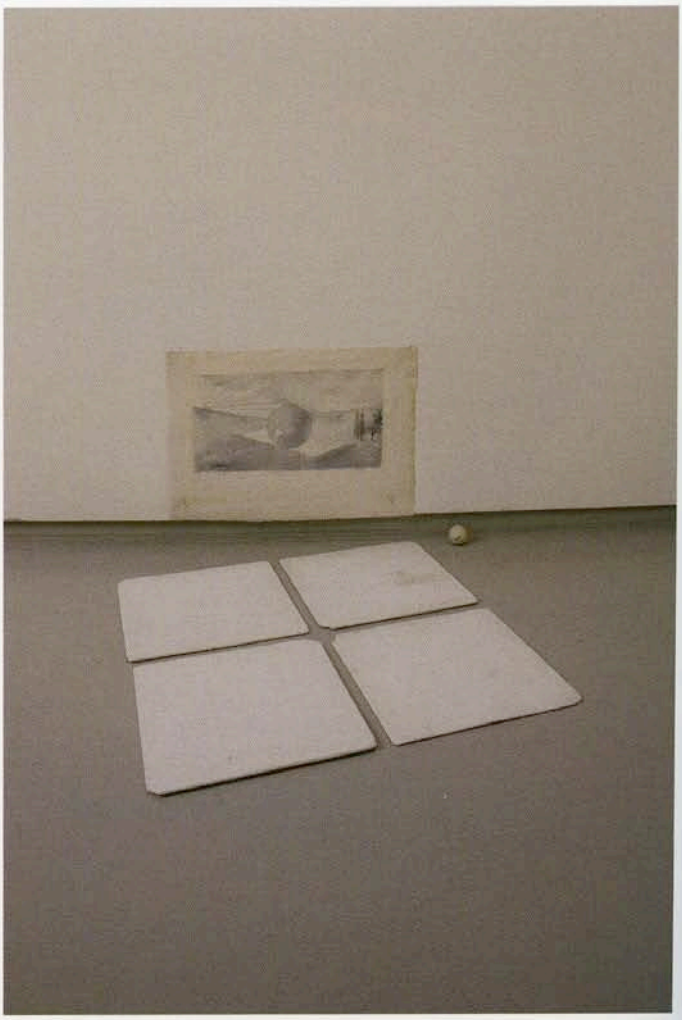




1 Ian Kiaer, *Endless Theatre Project/Ledoux: House of Agricultural Guards (White)*, 2003. Korean ink on linen, polystyrene and ping-pong ball, dimensions variable. New York: Collection of George Robertson. Installation: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, 2009/10. Reproduced by courtesy of George Robertson, the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery and Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Photo: Studio fotografico Gonella, Turin.

2 Ian Kiaer, *Endless Theatre Project/Ledoux: House of Agricultural Guards (White)*, 2003.

3 Ian Kiaer, *Brueghel Project/ Casa Malaparte*, 1999. Acrylic on calico, balsa wood, cardboard, foam, artificial moss and stool, dimensions variable. London: Tate. Reproduced by courtesy of Tate, the artist and Alison Jacques Gallery.

4 Ian Kiaer, *Brueghel Project/ Casa Malaparte*, 1999.

In *Brueghel Project: Casa Malaparte* (1999) a stool, a chipped, blue styrofoam cube and an acrylic canvas are grouped into a kind of landscape (*plate* 3). Placed on the stool, a cardboard model of a house atop a yellow sponge cube evokes the precarious cliff location of Casa Malaparte (*plate* 4). Only a hint, a reminiscence, of Brueghel's windmill is recognizable in the subtle, almost colourless acrylic painting.

Like Brueghel before him, Kiaer creates a kind of landscape with his fragile installations into which he integrates stories. He combines things into aesthetic arrangements and weaves gossamer strands between objects, memories and ideas. In this way, Kiaer's compositions stay fragmented and open, compressing both the great vision and its immanent collapse into the fragile, unassuming materials he uses. My conversation with Ian Kiaer began with this question of how inconspicuous objects can bespeak grand visions.

Painting as a Model

CR: Bart Van der Heide writes in the exhibition brochure for your show 'Endnote, pink' at Munich Kunstverein in the summer of 2010 that painterly perceptions are at the core of your installations (*plate* 5).[3] They present an exceedingly clear, structured collection of colours, materials and compositions. Your way of working comes from your perception and your thinking about painting and the history of painting. Do you see yourself as a kind of painter?

IK: I'm not sure it is so helpful to think about identity in this way, or necessary to define myself in terms of a medium or approach. Yet if I think about how my work has developed, and how I understand my relationship to other working practices, it has been through painting. In that sense, I'm more interested in painting as a body of knowledge, with its different concerns and histories, than as a medium, though obviously it is the medium that holds these differences together.

CR: One of your earlier works, still made at college, was the installation *Russian Project/ Irina* (*plate* 6). It was dedicated to the Russian poet Irina Ratushinskaya. It consists of two watercolours – one of which is a portrait of the poet, a small piece of furniture combined with two monochrome canvases and finally a cardboard model of a studio, similar to the one you had during your studies. You mentioned this work at the beginning of your talk at the Courtauld Institute – and it was also the first thing you saw when entering your 2009–10 solo -exhibition *What Where* at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin.[4] Does this work hold a key position in your deliberations on painting and models?

IK: Key perhaps because it is an early work that began to address some of the concerns and problems I had in thinking about making work. I was interested in the limit of an artwork to any longer convey a sustained narrative or set of ideas. I had been reading Ratushinskaya's poetry and thinking about her as an historical figure and feeling unable to convey anything of what I felt or thought about her in my work. In that sense this work was about the work's limit, or rather saying as much as my limit would allow before the work seemed to fall apart or seem unconvincing. I was left with a few motifs, a portrait of Irina, some monochromes, a modular structure and a model of my studio, it was a record of things I had made while thinking of Irina, that could fit together and be a work, while being also a testament to the work's failure to present a coherent narrative.

5 Ian Kiaer, *Endnote*, 2010. Various materials, dimensions variable. Installation: Kunstverein München, 2010. Reproduced by courtesy of the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery, and Kunstverein München. Photo: © U. Gebert.

CR: Your installations often have the character of models. A model is not the original; it is fragmentary and – especially in architecture – often created to represent something larger. What is your interest in models?

IK: There are different kinds of models. Some are representational descriptions of things that already exist in the world; but there are also experimental and projective or futural models. In that sense a model can be an original, if it is the first material manifestation of an idea. I suppose I'm interested in their capacity to work between more clearly defined disciplines like architecture, painting, sculpture, and many types of design. They avoid the weight and demands of a particular tradition, not committing to a definitive result, remaining restless and incomplete. A model always makes the suggestion that there is an alternative, another one to come. They also tend to be quite specific, attending to some part of a larger whole, and so claim the status of a fragment, being both autonomous but also open to a wider body of work.

CR: You've made several groups of works about the ideas and lives of great visionaries. In addition to the *Brueghel Project* there are also the *Erdrindenbau Project* (*plate 7*) or the *Grey Cloth Project* (2005), where you reflect upon the ideas of the German poet

Paul Scheerbart. Scheerbart shared the vision of a future glass architecture with his friend, the architect Bruno Taut, and describes it for example in his book *Glasarchitektur* and his science fiction novel *Das graue Tuch und zehn Prozent Weiss*.[5] The open, light and fragmentary character of your work seems, at first sight, to contradict the virtuosity of large visions and utopias. Can you say something about how found objects and everyday materials offer an instructive way to think about such ambitious visions? What is it that interests you about past utopians and their failed visionaries?

IK: I wouldn't necessarily group them together under the banner of visionaries. They are so distinct and their differences are more significant than perhaps what they share. There is the relationship that you mentioned between Scheerbart and Taut, and one project naturally developed from the other. Though Scheerbart's voice is very different in tone to Taut, there is a tight irony in the novel *The Grey Cloth*, a self-awareness and a form of mockery that seems to be entirely absent in Taut's project, which seems more influenced by an esoteric mysticism. My interest in Brueghel has its roots in a particular kind of painting that is so expansive and no longer attainable. It seems to be a moment when knowledge of the new world was opening up – with the coming of the printing press, navigation, maps, the religious and intellectual freedom of humanism. Painting seemed to be a technē that was appropriate for holding and representing this new awareness. Brueghel's almost cinematic ability to hold together immense detail and the panoramic movement of the eye, it was a pre-Romantic moment, before fragmentation. Thomas Bernhard, in *Old Masters*, talks about our abhorrence of any notion of the wholeness or totality. For political reasons this is very much preferable. But Brueghel represents a moment when it was still possible.

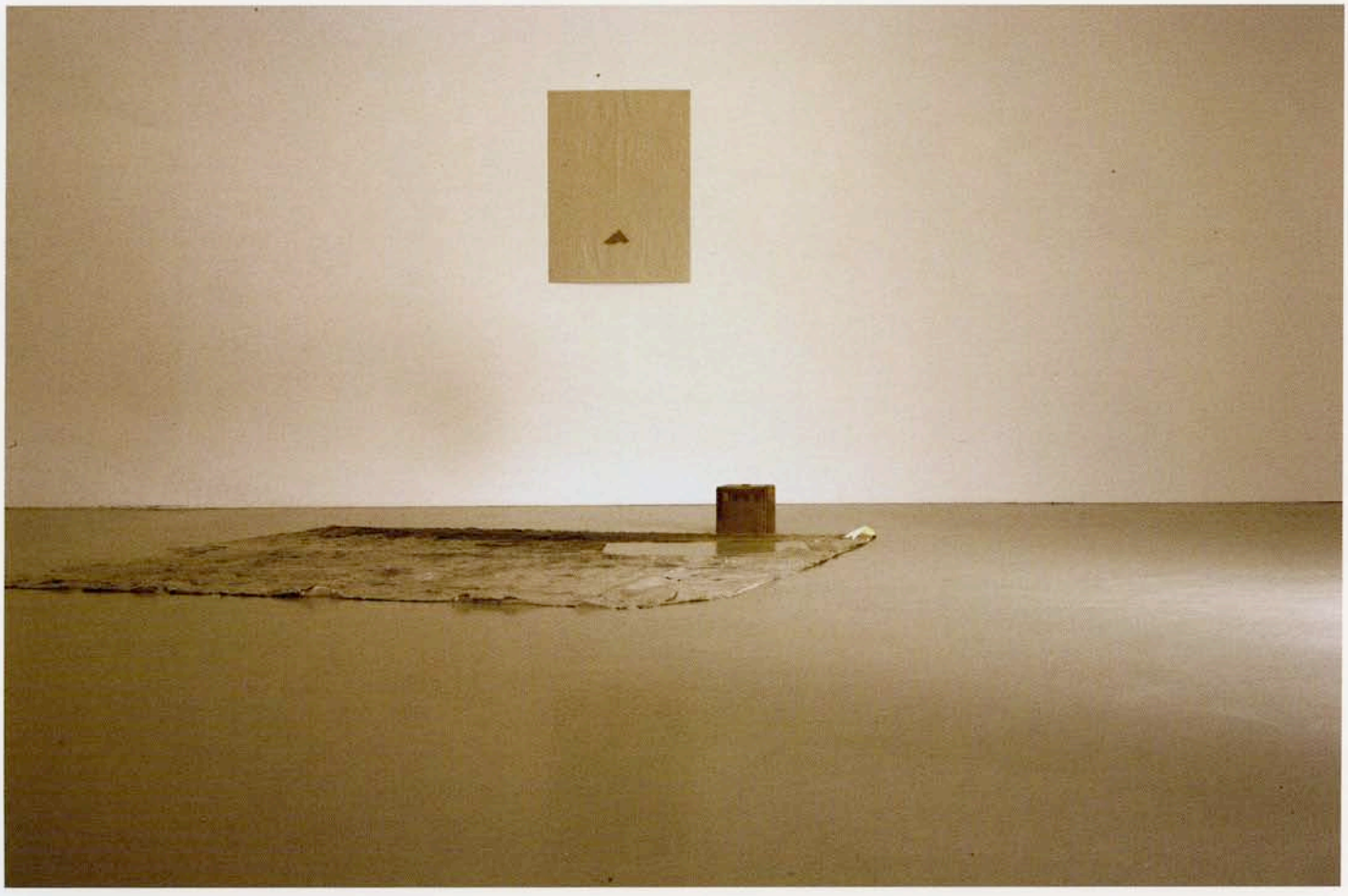
6 Ian Kiaer, *Russian Project/ Irina*, 2000. Acrylic on calico, linen, polystyrene, steel cabinet, wire, balsa wood and plastic, dimensions variable. London: Private Collection. Installation: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, 2009/10. Reproduced by courtesy of the collector, the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery and Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Photo: Studio fotografico Gonella, Turin.

CR: What does the difference in size and importance mean for your work?

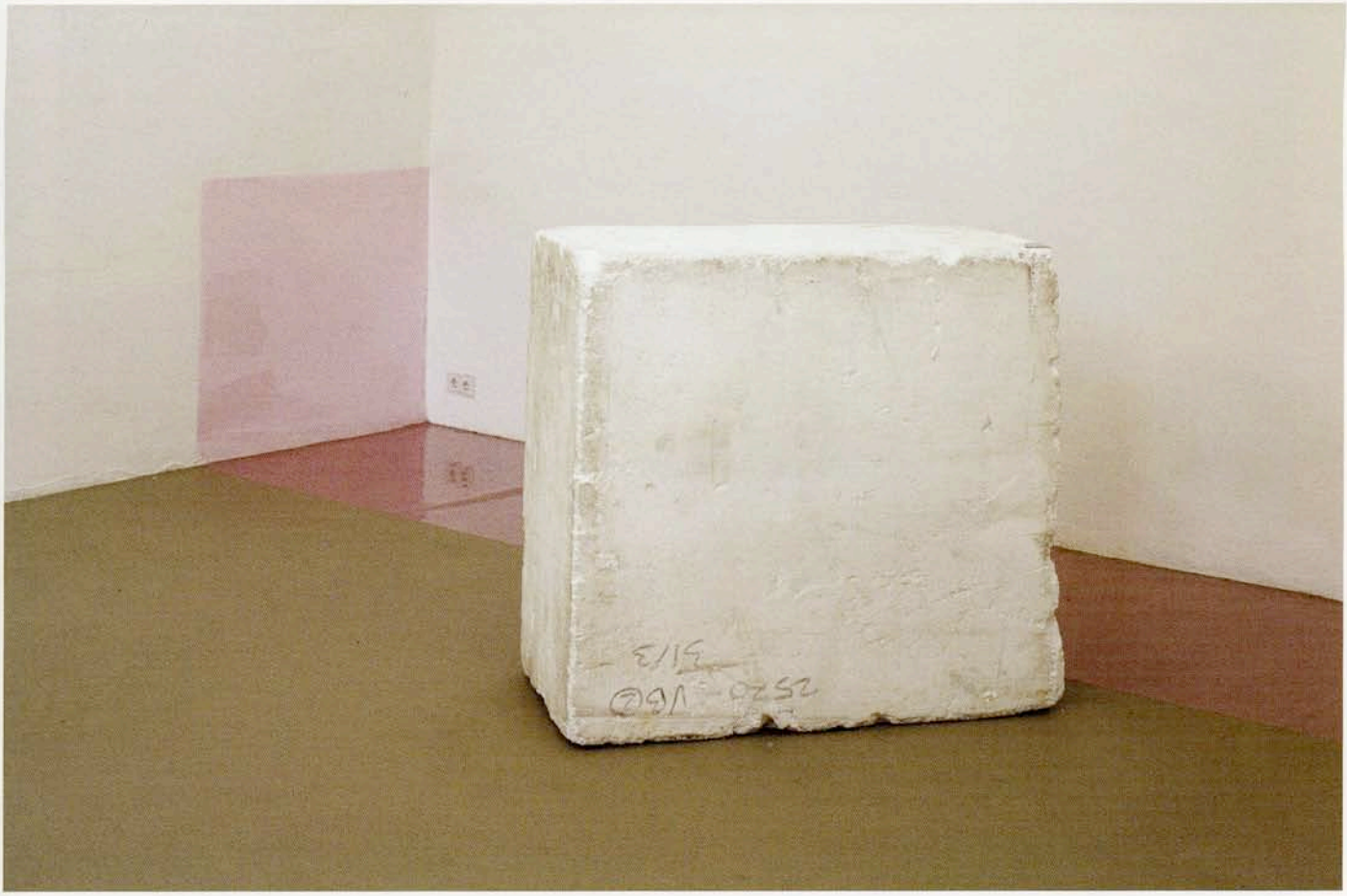
IK: Scale, even when 1:1, is always active in a model. It asks the viewer to move beyond what is literal, but this process is usually so rooted in convention that the effect is hardly noticeable. The model can introduce monumentality while remaining fragile. It speaks to power from a position of weakness and, in that way, has the potential for critique. It has a way of undermining the supposedly important; it works in the realm of the minor, so even when proposing notions of utopia, or historical significance, it does so with qualification, and more questions.

CR: You use usually 'poor', light and fragile materials like cardboard, paper, plastic. Where do you find them? How and why do you choose and combine them?

IK: Implied in the status of the model is a certain provisional quality that suggests the need for revision. It is necessarily impermanent. For that reason certain materials seem more appropriate than others when using the gesture of the model. To what extent the model functions as a gesture, rather than merely as a pragmatic solution, may vary depending on the work. For instance, when I make an inflatable the material is working both pragmatically but also as a gesture. In terms of finding and choosing materials, the question of what is to hand is again important. It is not always clear how to begin a project or how to resolve it. There may be initial ideas, thematic interests but no obvious material solution. There is an element of opportunity, where a piece of packaging in the street or a particular coloured plastic suggests a form, or at least a quality that can contribute to a work. Materials carry with them certain qualities of association, fashions and histories; bringing different materials together



7 Ian Kiaer, *Erdrindenbau Project: Building For Scheerbart*, 2006. Plastic, cardboard and paper, dimensions variable. Italy: Private Collection. Installation: Alte Fabrik, Rapperswil, 2008. Reproduced by courtesy of the collector, the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery, and Alte Fabrik. Photo: Bruno Tremblay.



8 Ian Kiaer, *Endnote*, 2010.

is a way of working with different registers of tone. It may be necessary to counter the stains or smudges of a found object with something mint.

CR: Architects, scientists and engineers now, of course, possess the technical ability to create dazzling computer-generated 3D models, which seem very close to reality. But you prefer the hand-made, glued and cut-out models. Why? What is their appeal?

IK: It has something to do with the issue of production and thinking through making. In principle I like the idea of computer-generated, very technical, synthetic models. Yet with technology comes the issue of distance. In painting, the question of the hand, to what extent it is present or removed in a work, often determines its tone. This can become over-coded – late Titian, where traces of finger marks supposedly signify an artist at one with his material, where Vermeer, with his use of an optical device, suggests a greater detachment. Yet such codes, even if the readings are exaggerated, can be interesting to work with. I heard an account of Rem Koolhaas, who continues to employ make-shift, to-hand models. He turned a previously abandoned design for a domestic house into an opera house. Whether ultimately true, the suggestion is that the idea came from turning this piece of styrofoam around in his hands, the relationship of hand to play to thought was very immediate and opened up a different way of thinking about the project. The implication of computer generation is a reduction of ambiguity and accident and increase of precision and control which inevitably will affect how one thinks. Agamben speaks of the Greek distinction between poiesis and praxis.[6] Poiesis is the space of thought before production; praxis is the implementation of the will. Technology in that sense is closely linked to praxis, possibly negating poiesis.

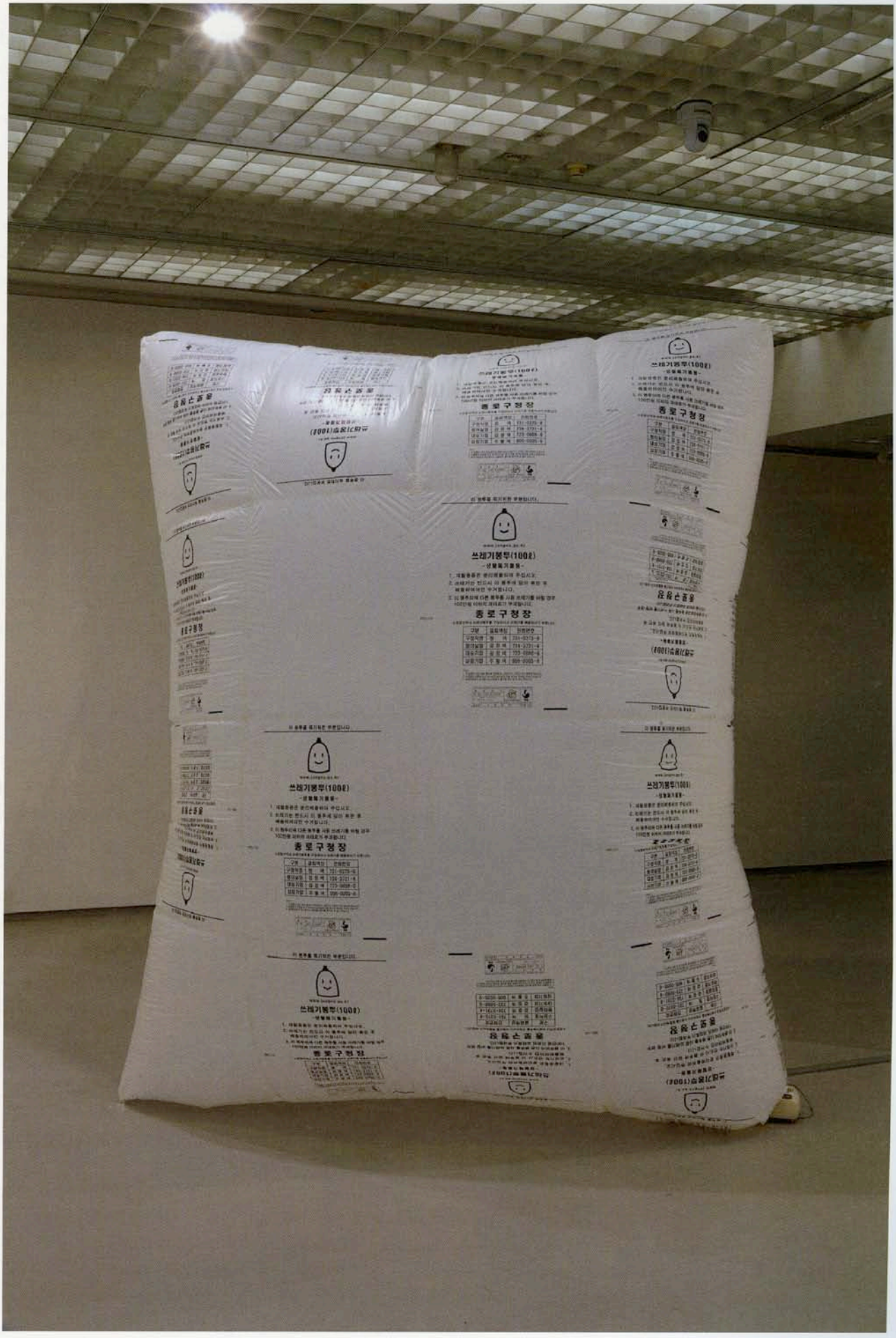
9 Ian Kiaer, *Endnote*, 2010.

10 Ian Kiaer, *Ulchiro Project: Cushicle (Inflatable)*, 2007. Plastic and fan, 340 × 260 × 250 cm; dimensions variable. Milan: Collection of Mariano Pichler. Installation: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, 2009/10. Reproduced by courtesy of Mariano Pichler, the artist, Alison Jacques Gallery and Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Photo: Studio fotografico Gonella, Turin.

Space and Perspective

CR: When looking at your works, I notice that the perspective or position from which one views your installations is important. British artist Paul McDevitt has observed of your work: 'Ordinarily I associate looking at your work with being crouched down.'[7] And, Christian Rattemeyer described your compositions as characterized by 'dramatic shifts in perspective, scale, and narrative'.[8] One can often experience both the 'close-up' and the view from afar in your work, just as in the landscape or the model. They encompass an all-inclusive overview as much as the complete fragmentation of the experience. How do you place your installations in the exhibition space? How does the space influence the arrangements and the installation?

IK: My intention isn't to present the work as landscape or a still life, in the sense of looking upon an uninterrupted pictorial field. There isn't a right perspective, or a correct position to look from. Photographing the work is problematic because immediately the issue of the frame puts too much emphasis on pictorial composition, which is not the case when one moves through the space. The placement of different models and motifs, their spatial relation and shifts of scale are all important, but so also are the different kinds of information each element holds. For instance, a piece of text demands an alternative reading from a representational model, which in turn speaks differently to a painting with marks. They have a relation but it is not simply pictorial – the shifts, interruptions, and varied languages resist such a reading. Certainly the exhibition space influences and adjusts the positioning of the work.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CR: For your exhibition 'Endnote, pink' at Munich Kunstverein you exclusively showed new works made for the space (*plate 8* and *plate 9*). With the positioning and installation of your works, objects and images you managed to connect the oblong, consecutively constructed rooms of the Kunstverein and keep them in suspense and equilibrium. You created invisible connections to the outside and between the individual rooms, from one end to the other. Did you develop the works in situ? How did you proceed?

IK: I made a lot of the things in my studio, but I was trying to keep them as open as possible, to not close my options when I got to the space. Ultimately it was a question of roughly thinking about the room. But the larger work for instance, the inflatable and the fragile aluminium rectangle, I couldn't make in my studio, I had to realize them there. The Kunstverein was an opportunity to think how one walks through an exhibition. The galleries are designed in a very particular way where you come up the steps and are projected almost immediately into the main space. I wanted to work against the assumption that the main space should somehow be the most substantial, and spent much of my time concentrating on the smaller rooms at each end. In that way there was a contrast between the intimate experience of looking at works close-up – that was also about a density of information, and the more spatial gesture of the inflatable and aluminium square.

CR: When you develop your works – in your studio, for example – at which point do you decide that a piece is finished? When does a collection of things become a work that you show and sell – i.e. a white canvas, a black rectangle and a circle made from wire? When is a work finished?

IK: There is always a tension between what I want to include in a work and what the work ultimately allows me to hold. In that sense it is the work that tends to decide these things. Usually there tends to be much more a process of subtraction and editing after an initial play of forms and ideas. But this isn't so much a battle of form and content, as being conscious of how different elements hold different kinds of information, and being attentive to what is being said by groupings of things. Also how much a work might contain tends to be decided by the space that things are shown in; things that might work in the studio usually need to be adjusted in the space, either reduced or added to. This becomes more difficult when works are borrowed and represented. Contingency and flexibility are important principles, but that said, there is a moment when a work seems to settle and it makes no sense to keep fiddling.

CR: From your solo-exhibition *What Where* in Turin I remember, for example, the inflatable, sort of an overdimensioned pillow, made from a white plastic bag with these funny Korean prints on it and a small architectural model made out of a McDonald's box. These two works made me discover a very humorous, very 'Pop', side of your work (*plate 10*).

IK: Again, I think the question of tone is pertinent. Whether something is dead-pan or humorous or, say, has a quality of unease, is often determined not only by the image or figuration of an object but also its materiality – as well as what it leaves unsaid. The work you mention relates to a project I was working on in Seoul, where each district had its own design of recycling bags. The idea of the banner as

a form of expression is a contemporary phenomenon that has its roots in Chosun dynasty painting, where text and image held equal weight for the scholar poets. It's a Pop[y] work that can be seen as a remnant to a previous history. It's also something necessarily ridiculous, both aspirational and unstable.

Notes

1 Quoted in Antoine Picon, *Architectes et ingénieurs au siècle des Lumières*, Marseille, 1988, 63.

2 See Elena Volpato, 'Ian Kiaer: Dislocation of vision', in *Ian Kiaer, What Where*, exh. cat. GAM Turin, Milan, 2009, 3–14.

3 Bart Van der Heide, 'Ian Kiaer: Still life', text accompanying the exhibition *Ian Kiaer: Endnote, pink*, Kunstverein Munich, 10 June–29 August 2010. see http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de/en/ian-kiaer

4 *Ian Kiar: What Where*, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea GAM, Turin, 24 October 2009–31 January 2010.

5 Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur*, Berlin 1914; and Paul Scheerbart, *Das graue Tuch und zehn Prozent Weiß. Ein Damenroman*, Munich and Leipzig, 1914.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, Georgia Albert, trans., Stanford, CA, 1999, 68.

7 Press Release for *Twenty Questions: Ian Kiaer and Sara MacKillop. A Project by Matthew Higgs*, International Project Space, Birmingham, 13 March–19 April 2008. See http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?tid=43201&action=termin

8 Christian Rattemeyer, 'Landscape and model', *Parkett*, 80, 2007, 152–5.