

Left To My Own Devices
Michael Van den Abeele
at The Wig (16 March – 27 April 2024)

War in the Family

Michael Van den Abeele may not be explicitly referring to himself in the title of this exhibition, but whoever it is that has been 'left,' the phrase communicates simultaneously both self-reliance and abandonment, thus hinting at a complex paradox inherent to autonomy. Here, the self embarks on a journey of discovery, mirroring the way a child goes from being on all fours and exploring through touch to being a person who can stand, understand and reassess. What unfolds next? This narrative-spiritual prompt invites us to grapple with the idea of a life deciphered through experience—it promises to reveal the constructs behind storytelling but it might somehow also leave the meaning of life itself hanging, deserting it at the intersection of plot, pathos, and parody or even absurdity. Through his exploration, rooted in (post?)-postminimalism, Van den Abeele highlights the physical qualities of commonplace objects, transforming them into forms that sharpen our perceptions of autonomy and identity.

The use of miniature bed frames embodies the show's thematic concerns. In their scaled-down form they remind us of the routine, almost automated aspects of our existence. We wake, we sleep, and in between we often move through our days on autopilot, following patterns laid out by society or by our own habits. Are we, like automatons, merely going through the motions? And if so, are we truly living, or just mimicking the appearance of life?

This narrative mirrors the concept of the German '*Bildung*'—a pursuit of nuanced, permanent self-improvement—cognate of the English 'building'. Van den Abeele's exhibition offers one interpretation of this introspective, perhaps even somewhat vain path towards self-enhancement and growth. Initially, the fact that the title is written in the first person serves as a reminder that this odyssey is both personal and universal—the 'I' implied by the 'my' could be anyone. This is the starting point of literature, which will lead us to the Bildungsroman. At some point the 'I' stands in contrast to the collective 'we,' and underscores the self's finite and bounded nature. These pivotal yet commonplace realisations often unfold in solitude, in the quietude of our homes, catalysed by intense and sometimes manic introspection. When we're at our lowest ebb and an unvoiced yearning for connection lies within us, something as trivial as looking at oneself in the mirror can trigger a movement towards self-actualization. As one goes through this exhibition, each work is a reflection on the threads that bind us to communal experience: the more often we cross intimate thresholds, the deeper we go. But we also risk building our own sanctuaries of seclusion.

Three miniature bed sculptures stand as waypoints in the first room; a fourth is absent, for now. This arrangement is not a system: no matter the number, size or style, beds or a bed always offer the idea of rest and the potential for dreams that will take us away from reality—even if, upon rising, we must return to it. Amidst these sculptures hangs a curtain-like installation, a tapestry made of repurposed crisp packets. This shimmering membrane, sewn and printed on, divides and reveals, encapsulating diurnal decadence and aesthetic rebellion. It stands as a modern-day portal, exalted and mundane.

The video—found alongside the fourth bed—was made using a heat-sensitive lens and captures a teapot and iron in an existential pantomime. The iron is propelled into a new phase of self-awareness as it confronts—seemingly for the first time—its own reflection in the mirror. A pivot from landscape to portrait frame adds a layer of anthropomorphic angst. This transition to vertical orientation mirrors the human condition of standing upright, symbolically elevating us above our animalistic origins and anchoring our existence in the realm of representation and thought. An upright posture alienates us from our fundamental connection to the earth—we are caught between the sky and the mud, suspended between the lofty projections of our minds and the base realities of our physical existence (a split represented in the work of Georges Bataille, for example, as a tension between the animal mouth–anus axis and the human mouth–eye axis¹). This new verticality, then, serves as a silent yet potent assertion of presence while also

resonating with the old patriarchs of cinema and their dream of a vertical screen—a dystopian and totalitarian desire for a cinema that could better assert a form of masculine dominance².

Here, verticalization takes on a critical twist. The erect posture of objects, from the bed frames displayed like canvases to the crisp packet installation shimmering with a curtain-like allure and the anthropomorphized iron standing on its 'feet,' exudes a latent masculine energy. Yet this assertion of masculinity is rendered in full indulgence and combined with some impression of passivity or frustrated action: once a bed is up-ended, it cannot fulfil its essential functions. The use of a horizontal plane alone would have elevated the comedic chases between the teapot and iron—a dance of predation and seduction—into a form of universal entertainment akin to a *Tom and Jerry* skit, complete with an underlying tinge of sadistic pleasure. In light of this possibility, the vertical orientation common to all the objects in the show becomes a vanishing point for irony, highlighting the futility, the vanity and most importantly also the violence of asserting top-down dominance in a world embroiled in endless fights for survival. It is precisely there that Bildung unfolds: in the negotiation of one's own personal saga amidst the oppressive grid, the rigid frames and the distorted reflections of societal expectation and competition.

Whether isolation—imposed or self-imposed—works for or against the formative journey of Bildung is not evident. Growth necessitates engagement, entering into a dialectic with the world in its messy, ugly entirety; however, when society becomes a theatre of wars in their generic form, this engagement is stifled, and stagnation follows. Recognizing these struggles as the crucible from which a new form of Bildung (or just a nicer life for everyone) may emerge, we find ourselves not only left to our own devices but in a strategic position to demand more. That's when we can start arranging—not through the peaceful cultivation of the self in a stable society, but by directly navigating the very eye of the storm that represents our current condition—the necessary tools for our individual and collective reorientation in, through, towards or against the world.

Gianmaria Andreetta

¹ "In the essay 'Mouth,' where the issue of rotation is more explicit, Bataille contrasts the mouth/eye axis of the human face with the mouth/anus axis of the four legged animal. The first, linked to man's verticality and his possession of speech, defines the mouth in terms of man's expressive powers. The second, a function of the animal's horizontality, understands the mouth as the leading element in the system of catching, killing, and ingesting prey, for which the anus is the terminal point. But, beyond this simple polarity, to insist that at its greatest moments of pleasure or pain the human mouth's expression is not spiritual, but animal, is to reorganize the orientation of the human structure and conceptually to rotate the axis of material existence." Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti" (1985)..

² "Eisenstein dreamed of a vertical screen, which he explicitly saw as an active, phallic thrust against the 'passivity' of the horizontal film-frame. (Kenneth Anger claims that he once tried to realise this dream by turning a 16mm projector on its side—only to cause a minor electrical fire when the machine's oil ran into its motor.) Like many of Eisenstein's more utopian day-dreams, this desire—poignant in its lack of feasibility, given the prevailing technology—had a particular, wistful appeal to his homosexual followers. Like almost all of Eisenstein's theory, it is predicated on the desire to make 'cinema' an assertively masculine act. Montage = rape?" Tony Rayns, "Submitting to Sodomy: Propositions and Rhetorical Questions about an English film-maker," in "Derek Jarman... of Angels & Apocalypse," ed. Simon Field, Guy L'Eclair, Michael O'Pray, *Afterimage* 12 (Autumn 1985).

Checklist

1. Bed, 2024
Steel, rivets
105 x 80 x 18cm
2. Bed, 2024
Steel, rivets, oil paint
100 x 43 x 10cm
3. Bed, 2022
Aluminium, steel, wood, ribbon
100 x 89 x 15cm
4. Against Nutrition, 2024
Crisp bags, uv print, silicone
130 x 223cm
5. Bed, 2024
Wood, string, acrylic
104 x 89 x 17cm
6. Left To My Own Devices, 2024
HD video, mirror, shelf, sound
6.30min
124 x 130 x 32cm

