

RECKLESS ABANDON

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Not far from the Kunsthalle Vienna is the Schloss Belvedere, the Belvedere Palace, built as a summer residence for the Imperial family by Prince Eugene of Savoy. Between two buildings, the Lower Belvedere (1714-1716) and the Upper Belvedere (1721-1722), is a lavish Baroque garden, one of the most elaborate imagined in the 18th century. The buildings house a vast collection which includes masterpieces by Messerschmidt, Alt, Monet, Renoir, van Gogh, Ensor, Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka, as well as Medieval and Baroque treasures. The formal gardens are symmetrical, based on French and Italian plans, with a huge circular pond, fountains, flowerbeds, hedges, garden sculptures — a neo-classical Grecian sphinx most prominently — a carpet of manicured lawns, and a zoo nearby. Bushes in the shape of slender pyramids are as sculpted as the statuary. A tropical greenhouse dating from 1883, from the time of Emperor Franz Joseph, is filled with exotic plants; even on the coldest days butterflies swirl about inside. Nearly 200 gardeners work to maintain the grounds, to keep man-made order from slipping towards the chaos that one encounters in the truly natural world. Here in the Imperial gardens, nothing is left to chance, and nothing is out of place, except perhaps for the stray tourist. Everything is controlled, from animals in their cages to topiary, and perfectly behaves. Images of the garden in front of you should in no way contradict the ones to be found on postcards offered for sale in the gift shop. If ever a weed has reared an unruly head in the shadow of the Belvedere Palace over the past centuries, it was surely not for long; one of the army of gardeners was there to put it out of its misery. And ours. The lowly, miserable weed, is looked upon as no more than botanical vermin. How pathetic it must feel in the face of all this horticultural splendor.

Back at the Kunsthalle, another form of gardening, if it can even be referred to as such, has been enacted upon one of the exhibition rooms. Not so much a garden, but something closer to reckless abandon. Here, the clean lines of the gallery space, an immaculate modernist glass box, has been transformed into a weed-strewn lot, a forgotten place, a terrarium gone to seed. With windows from floor to ceiling, one looks out from this room to the city beyond, to public space, classical buildings, trees, and the street. In an urban environment, nature is suppressed. Buildings go up, streets, sidewalks, and plazas are paved.

Intermittently, there are small specks of green, parks and playgrounds, places where people may seek shade from the summer heat, or pass a few quiet moments before heading back to the sales counter or the office or the ticket booth at the parking tower. The urban oasis is a place of labor as well, and here you will see workers who strive to keep it neat and tidy: garbage is picked up and bagged, weeds are pulled out of flowerbeds and from small cracks between the pavement. In fact, a park may be even more well-groomed than its caretakers or those who make use of its amenities. A homeless person, for example, someone unable to bathe regularly, may be found sleeping on a bench. Objectified, the figure of a homeless person is seen as a kind of human weed; something which ruins the view. From the outside, the Kunsthalle announces itself with large block letters on the side of the building, and just as tall. Here, it announces, is place for Art. With its large glass windows at street level, the Kunsthalle appears to be a showroom of sorts, perhaps one in which new cars would be on display. But what exactly is being shown here?

Weeds, as Tony Matelli reminds us, are hardy, determined to make their way in an unwelcoming, threatening world. Toxic chemicals are mixed — Weed-B-Gone — and killing machines have been devised — the Weed Wacker most famously — and yet these plants manage to survive, thriving in the most unlikely of places. An orchid won't grow in the narrow crack of pavement, but a dandelion will. (And dandelions can be used for salads and to make wine.) The orchid is a source of pure sensation; a dandelion is an object of derision. But as Matelli himself reminds us, "The weed is a triumph and a failure at the same time. Weeds persevere; you can't kill them. They are a celebration of unwantedness."

When an office worker is considered to be under-productive, or a player on a team is seen as having contributed to their losses, the term "weeding out" is applied. Winning, whether in business or sports, always comes down to weeding out the losers, the dead weight. Within nature, eradication is, of course, an endless pursuit. It's not unusual in the suburbs to find homeowners out on a Saturday afternoon, down on their knees, plucking weeds by hand, one-by-one from their otherwise immaculate front lawn. They will most certainly return. The lowly weed. We understand how in our loathing it can inspire such methodical, obsessive behavior. But how has it become a subject for art?

A Weed Grows in Brooklyn

In 1995, Tony Matelli made a sculpture of miniscule proportions (measuring only seven by eight by three inches) and humble materials (vellum, paint, and wire) but with a larger-than-life, grandiose title: *Europe is a Vast and Desolate*

Wasteland. The sculpture represents a single, scruffy dandelion. That same year, an even more modest work, titled *Squalor*, was comprised of a sculpted apple core, a chewing gum wrapper and foil, a cigarette butt and ashes, and various bits of detritus more easily identified by a street-sweeper. Made with resin and paint, the work takes up a gargantuan three inches by one by one. Clearly, Matelli is not an artist for whom sculpture is a means to monumentalize an object, or to heroicize someone. (Claes Oldenburg's work still suffers from gigantism, and Mount Rushmore remains a popular tourist attraction.) At the same time that Matelli maintains the original scale of the objects he sculpts, he also elevates that which would otherwise be trampled underfoot by allowing it to collide with the set of circumstances we call art.

In 1997, Matelli conceived a six-part sculpture which offers a grouping of house plants (domesticated nature), with a title more likely to antagonize than seduce collectors: *Fuck the Rich*. An expanded, ten-part version of the work, *Fuck the Rich Deluxe*, followed soon after. Like house plants, art collectors are perceived to be cultivated, although it is primarily the acquisition of art works on which this perception depends. Seven years after exhibiting these works, and despite the growing reputation of the artist, none of them have ever been sold. The lesson learned: You may in taking possession of a work appropriate its meaning — and this is as true for private collectors as it is for museums — but the title of the work remains. And titles, as we well know, are more than just the names of things. Title, in legal terms, is the right or proof of ownership. *Fuck the Rich ...* This is a title which says: You don't own me. Matelli obviously holds the sentiment dear, and all these years later seems not the least bit disappointed that these works have never found a home. The ultimate irony, of course — and a potential source of guilt on the part of the artist — is that if these works do end up in a private collection, they will have to be dusted every few days by a housekeeper or maid.

Lost & Sick

The idea of homelessness, not as a social reality, but in terms of its psychological sense (someone with a place to live haunted by feelings of being adrift nonetheless) is a recurring theme in the work of Tony Matelli. *Lost & Sick* (1996), presents a tableau in which three young boys, Boy Scouts, have gone missing and are physically distressed. Their vomiting is an outward sign of an otherwise unseen, inner disturbance. What has happened here? How have they been separated from the rest of the troop (from their symbolic family, their hope for rescue and survival)? Five years later, Matelli conceived a companion work, *Lost & Sick (Winter Version)* (2001), which represents their dilemma as even more extreme, with the very real possibility of freezing to death as a result of their

wayward adventure. In between these pieces, Matelli made two sculptures that serve to force the issue: to compel us in the act of looking, and the artist as instigator, to acknowledge our searching the world for a place to which we truly belong.

The figure in *Sleepwalker* (1998) bears a passing resemblance to the artist, but it would be a mistake to think of this as a self-portrait. (The common and perennial mistake in art criticism is to view a representational work as a form of self-portraiture.) The figure in *Sleepwalker*, although male, is a surrogate for the viewer, for whoever regards this work of art. How many times have you seen museum visitors move from room to room as if in a trance? As if the prolonged act of looking had reduced them to a near-catatonic state. Looking at art can be exhausting, for body and mind. Watching people look at art can't help but make you wonder if the experience is to some extent, or at a certain point, a kind of mindless wandering. Some people in museums appear to be "killing time." Matelli presents this figure of the sleepwalker nearly naked but for a pair of white briefs, his arms extended, eyes closed, head tilted back. He doesn't see where he is going, or where he has been. Sleepwalkers are not conscious of their movement, just as sleepers are not aware of their relative immobility. Both are in a dream state. To wake sleepwalkers, return them suddenly to consciousness, can be dangerous, both for them and for yourself. It's best to gently lead the sleepwalker back to bed; in effect, your eyes become theirs. As Borges once wrote of the gauchos, "They lived out their lives as in a dream, without knowing who they were, or what they were. Maybe the case is the same for us all."

Also in 1998, and certainly not by coincidence, Matelli produced *Stray Dog*, a life-size sculpture of a seeing-eye dog, separated from its owner. Borges, the blind Argentinian poet would surely have seized upon the depth of irony implied. Put aside the idea of "the blind leading the blind." Here, with a lost seeing-eye dog placed in various locations around a city, we are confronted with the idea of the blind led nowhere at all. The dog portrayed here has lost its purpose in life, to assist the sightless. Is this then its purpose as sculpture?

The American Trip

It would be easy enough to view Matelli as another member of the Loser's Generation, as someone who celebrates the victory of loss — though always a Pyrrhic victory. Evidence to the contrary, this would be a mistake. Matelli's negation is far more personal, more political, and thus more complex. The idea of the American Dream — for many unattainable, for some unwanted — applies to an entire post-war generation of artists raised in the land of endless consumer

goods and plenty. We think of ourselves as the winners — to the victors go the spoils — and yet post-war America gave way to various forms of existential refusal and rebellion, from the beats to baby boom hippies, from punk to straight edge. Today in America, you have the clandestine eco-terrorist group Earth First!, with their slogan/challenge: “If you build it, we burn it.” Illusion gave way to disillusion, and winning came to be seen as losing. We not only lost our innocence, but our willingness to be marched off to war, to be spit out in the cause of nothing ...

In 1999, as if to celebrate (perhaps in reverse) the end of the century, Matelli made a sculpture in the form of a wispy, modest tree covered in American currency. Titled *Endless Joy, Endless Everything*, the artist seemed to be saying that, yes, money did grow on trees, but only in art: art, that plastic bubble where all is illusion and which can easily burst. Between 1999 and 2000, Matelli realized a large-scale installation of weeds, which he titled *Abandon*. Abandonment suggests giving up, or desertion, but it can also mean a reckless embrace of life, a casting off of imposed responsibility and duty, and the subsequent freedom implied. Matelli has often referred to the refusal to maintain one’s appearance, and in terms that nearly approach civil disobedience. It is as if he sees himself as an unruly, misbehaving lot in a planned community, a place where restrictions on everything from the size of a trash can to the color of curtains are intensely enforced. (In many of these communities the only flag which may be displayed is the American flag.) Matelli, whose lawn has grown shaggy and tall, wants to watch it sway and bend in the breeze. *Abandon*, offering viewers little more than an image of this couldn’t-care-less esthetic, will never begin to meet the expectations of the average art lover. This is a work which challenges the very idea of art as a beautiful object of contemplation, and in age when most people — even so-called professionals — happily accept everything in the museum as art. We would be heretics, at the very least, to claim that something wasn’t art after fighting so long for its cause. Still, let’s not be so quick to abandon our own standards ... even in the face of a few nasty weeds.

The artist has some explaining to do, and he seems willing enough. In conjunction with his exhibition, an informal lecture and discussion has been arranged. Unseen by the audience, Matelli has partaken of some beer, maybe a few shots of vodka, possibly a joint. His nervousness allayed, he enters the hall and is introduced. The people assembled, who have certainly attended similar gatherings, expect the artist to make a presentation of his work, to explain his intentions, and to entertain questions. This will not be the case. If any explanation of his motives can be expected, it will come purely by indirection. Tony Matelli is here to engage in an act of lecture-theater, and to purge himself. But of what? Bad faith? To purge is to free from impurities, to purify; to rid oneself of sin or

guilt. It also means to induce the evacuation of the stomach or bowels. Up at the podium, Matelli at first appears somewhat out of sorts, confused, disjointed. This is to be expected. All public appearances are on some level potentially embarrassing ... humiliating, even.

Martin Kippenberger was one of the great masters, of course, turning public appearance into performance, though at times to his own detriment. While Kippenberger parodied the academic, institutional speech that is customary at the opening of a museum exhibition, he was also presenting the work in a revelatory manner. As he laid himself bare, exhibited his vulnerability and emotion for all to see, he was not only telling those assembled something about his work, but about who he was. Matelli, willing to play the drunken fool, appearing lost in his mind and sick of body, explores a similar line of communication. To perform, in a sense, is to purge oneself, to reveal what's kept hidden inside ... secrets waiting to spill forth in the light of day. With a small dose of ipecac swallowed, the artist will have induced himself to vomit, an act which he sees as poetic, as a metaphor for refusal. Too ill to continue, Tony Matelli staggers from the podium. The audience, with some confusion and disgust, begins to leave. Outside the lecture hall, the weeds remain.