

Simon Dybbroe Møller

*MUSEUM*

Curated by Vanessa Joan Müller

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“If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s probably a duck.” The duck test, a form of abductive reasoning, is based on the fact that a person can identify an unfamiliar object by observing its familiar characteristics. Paradoxically, it is said to date back to the French automaton maker Jacques de Vaucanson, who in 1738 created a mechanical duck that quacked, moved its head, ate grain, appeared to digest it and, after a short time, excreted what looked like duck droppings. It had all the characteristics of a duck, but it was only a perfectly crafted mechanical construct.

Long before we started building a virtual double of the world that we live in, before the internet, before Google image search, before stock images, chat forums, streaming services, online magazines, emails and long before the meta-verse, we represented everything in stone and clay and oil and print. We made toy miniatures and life-size imitations of real objects. The perfect imitation of nature, *imitatio*, was considered the trump card of the art world. Pliny famously recounted the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. While Zeuxis painted grapes so realistically that birds pecked at them, Parrhasius presented a curtain in front of his painting, which was revealed to be a painting itself when Zeuxis tried to move it. Photorealism *avant la lettre*, their creative struggle for mastery of the arts claimed that true virtuosity lay in deceiving others. Zeuxis deceived birds, Parrhasius deceived humans, therefore his work was judged the better. Does this mean that a fake CCTV camera surpasses a decoy bird?

A dummy is an object that imitates characteristics of an original, but never all its characteristics (otherwise it would be a perfect replica). Its purpose is to deceive the observer by pretending to be ontologically different. It is an object “designed to mislead”, an unfriendly fake, miles away from the readymade and its conceptual heroism. Hyper-realist representation has always aimed to make its maker appear smarter than its viewer. The everyday dummy – the fake surveillance camera, the plastic gun, the duck prop for hunting – is a faint echo of what has long characterised the art of the so-called West: the quest for perfect imitation, to deceive the eye.

With photography, these ambitions found their natural end, and reality could be flattened into images that perfectly represented it. But the lack of three-dimensionality and the unlikelihood of photographs being mistaken for the real still offered a way out to win by cheating. In the modest field of the applied, the dummy continued to exist and to materialise, to deceive animals and humans, those who continue to identify objects by their familiar characteristics. Because these objects still need a victim: birds pecking at painted grapes, greylag geese falling for duck imitations and flying directly into the line of fire of the hunting party, potential thieves and burglars being deterred by empty surveillance cameras, bank employees mistaking fake pistols for the real thing. A centuries-old discourse on representation and what used to be called craftsmanship has culminated in hollow sculptures on a scale of 1:1.

The fake objects in Simon Dybbroe Møller’s “museum“ are demonstration objects with an illustrative char-

acter. Lacking the context in which they could successfully fulfil their intended function, they reveal their inherent emptiness – and absorb new discourses. They oscillate between Readymade 3.0 and the final abolition of illusionism. Anachronistic yet weirdly relevant, they seem to question what illusionism is now, what it can be these days: a realistic representation that looks so real that it is taken for real? Representations put in the world to maximise efficiency, utility value, so to speak? What 3D printing has become quite good at – building replicas of the real – is presented here, maybe for the last time, in its materialised, late-capitalist form. As cheap 1:1 duplicates, the objects continue the discourse of the artwork as representation, albeit encapsulated and plasticised. They are all realistic, hollow and made to trick us. Some are made to repel, some to attract. They attract to kill, they attract to sell, they repel to protect and to keep the riches for ourselves.

In a catalogue text for the Kunstverein München, Simon recalls what P told him about his late grandmother's television rituals. When P visited her in the home where she spent her last years, the caretakers had told him that she had begun a strange ritual after breakfast. They couldn't explain why she collected the leftover breadcrumbs left on the plates of her fellow resident. When P returned to her room after taking a break to get some fresh air, he found his grandmother tucked into her arm chair. She had a plastic bag in her lap. In front of her, small pieces of bread were scattered on the carpet. Donald Duck on the tv.

Vanessa Joan Müller

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