NR Speaking of the social sciences, your practice has often been read through the lens of critical theory. What do you make of these references? Is the critique of society in any way a point of departure in your work? Or is it rather a landing place? Or just something that happens along the way?

JH Since I'm a social being, on a daily basis I am confronted with—and hence involved in—social circumstances. In my life as in my practice, I try my best to understand and interpret the power systems that I am included in or excluded from. I've learned a lot from post-structuralist thinkers, and I am a close reader of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. But, just as I said before, I don't start from a good reading or theory in order to make an artwork; I just try to do my best to pay extra attention to the interactions between different spheres of society. You can say that I am extremely interested in the perception of one's own perception of the world, and that my goal is to communicate the most thought-provoking aspects around those issues.

NICOLAS PARTY: THREE CATS

(8) THE MODERN INSTITUTE
3 Aird's Lane, Glasgow G1 5HU, United Kingdom
themoderninstitute.com

Nicolas Party interviewed by Nicholas Hatfull

Nicholas Hatfull Most pressingly, I need to ask about the cats in the show you just opened at the Modern Institute in Glasgow. Their faces are highly unusual; they look like they might be based on an ancient carving.

Nicolas Party I started doing cats this year. I have done four so far, and they have all ended up having the same face. The cats are not based on anything in particular, but are a mash-up of the rich iconography of cats represented in imagery throughout history. My cats fit somewhere between Balthus cats and Egyptian cats. A mix of strange sexuality and distant postures.

I'm also fascinated by how animal symbols shift through history. Cats, always a symbol of female sexuality, have been celebrated in certain periods of history and condemned in others. In ancient Egypt, fertility and motherhood were highly celebrated through the symbol of Bast. The advent of Christianity ushered in different ideas, and the symbol of cats shifted to represent dangerous perversity and the decadence of female sexuality. In the Middle Ages, female sexuality was extremely repressed. Cats were associated with witches, and killed en masse.

These days, cats continue to be a wide presence in our symbolic imagination, and a good marker of how we represent women in our society. Cats live at home. They are alternately sexy and wild (Catwoman), or cute and diminutive (Lolcats). I think it is useful to keep an eye on the changing ways a culture uses a symbol; cats seem especially loaded.

NH Your double (and triple) portraits have an eerie presence that reminds me of strange historical examples like *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (1594), or *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (ca. 1600). One quirk of these multiple portraits is the lack of psychological insight into the sitters. Indeed, your

portraits not only have an inscrutable blankness, but feel like they might just be pictures of mannequins. They often look startled, and (I hope I'm not out of line in saying this) like they might not be all that bright—a quality that painting often seasons with an extra pinch of mystery. I'm curious to know the background of these guys.

NP I did a lot of 3D animation when I was in art school. Images rendered on the computer are, of course, completely flat. They lack any connection whatsoever with anything that might be considered *real*, with history and personality. The new images we create are born from equations. In 3D imagery, the character and personality of what is represented is purely conceptual. It only exists in the mind of the viewer. Unlike an actor that we know has a life and is a human like us with the same set of emotions, the digital characters we create don't have any of those features. They are pure objects of our imagination, just as a character in a painting, or Gabrielle d'Estrées, or my own portrait.

The project of representation is always up against life itself. Like Dr. Frankenstein, the artist often doesn't want to create a sculpture; the dream is to invent a life. But the reality is that you can't create life, either with your pencil or with the computer. Even the best artist can only create an *idea* of what life looks like. Image-making history seems to always wonder: What is the status of all those images? Are the objects concepts, magic?

The accentuated lack of personality in my portraits, their mannequin aspect, is a way for me to preserve and portray just the barest shell of what an image is, pared down to portraiture's most basic elements. I retain only what makes a portrait recognizable, removing everything that makes a portrait personal. I look, then, to see if we still understand them as human, to see who they are and whether they have something to tell me.

NH The advent of trompe l'oeil marbling in your work, and the illusion of malachite, calls to mind Roman wall painting. I find there's an uncanniness, too, to this technique; the depiction exists in a limbo between complete illusion and a sort of calligraphy. Even once you've spotted that it's composed of brushstrokes, it's mysterious in a way that real marble might not be. Am I barking up the right tree to suggest that the enigmas and charms of depiction itself is your overriding subject? You're not afraid of time-honored subjects, and this sharpens the focus on the manner of their rendering.

NP Sarah Margnetti does the marble with me. She studied at an old-fashioned Brussels school called Vanderkelen, where students learn the traditional method of faux marbling. A teacher told her that rather than copy real marble, her painting should improve upon nature itself. Which I think is a fascinating idea. I think it says a lot about our relation to representation and images in general. It indicates that we create images in order to fill the gap between reality and our perception of it. We paint marble in order to show how we see marble, or maybe how we want to see it.

NH You propose that the wall paintings might be stage sets for (pastel) performers: I imagine you would make a really extraordinary opera set. Do

you have any plans or hopes in this department, or do you prefer to hint at it from the exhibition space?

NP I would love to do an opera set! I listened to a lot of opera as a teenager, and I always wanted to be part of such a grandiose experience. So many great artists have done it that to make a worthy one would be an exciting challenge. I designed and produced a lot of stage sets for musical acts while working with two other artists in a group called Blakam. We must have done ten different sets. We loved the idea of creating a visual environment that is only activated for the duration of the performance. It's quite different than doing a show of one's artwork. A painting is meant to be, somehow, outside of time.
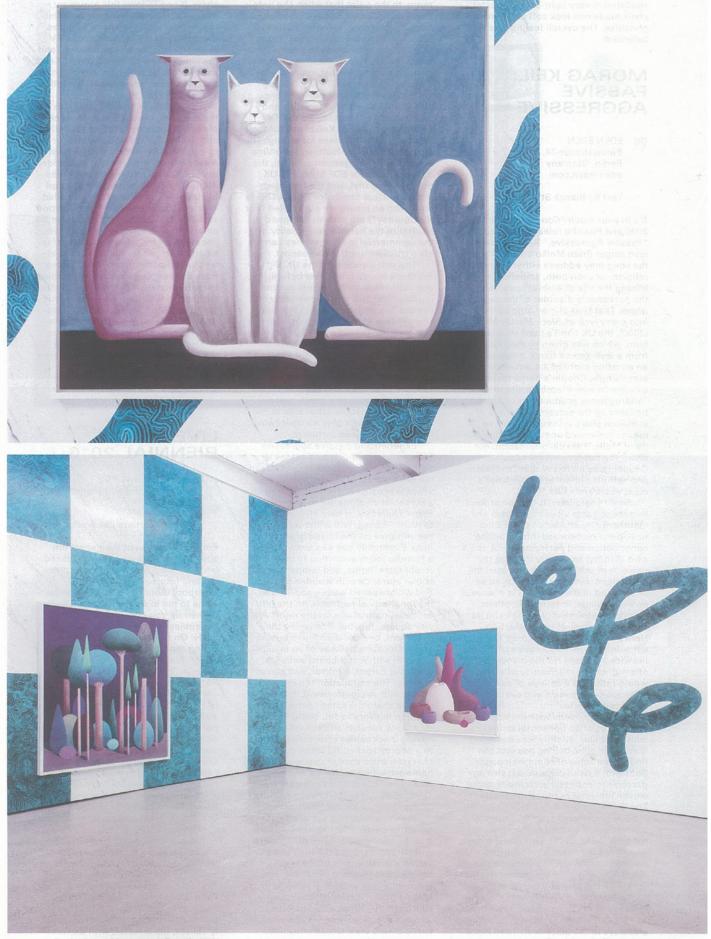
NH The feline ghost of Balthus makes its presence known in this show, and you're pretty omnivorous when it comes to the history of painting; your trees have a distilled quality that somehow links Uccello to Carlo Carrà and David Hockney. Are you scanning for certain tendencies of depiction, daisy-chained across the centuries? A certain timelessness?

NP I spend a lot of time looking at and engaging with painted images—much more time than I spend looking directly at nature. I am fascinated by how many people over time have painted trees, each one slightly different. Imagine if we could gather every one of those billions of trees into a single forest. I would love to walk through it. Which trees you would stop by, thinking one is beautiful and the next is ugly? Why this one instead of the one beside it?

NH If there's a yin to a yang in your work, it might be something like the starchy, upright, and restrained versus unfettered profusion, richness, and delight. This must be in play even within individual works, but when diffracted across various idioms in your recent exhibitions, it's becoming a more fiendishly complex system of weights and measures. For instance, the bluntness of the more digital marks accenting the wall painting and the thud of the elephantine finger might be tonally counterpointed to the elegance of the trompe l'oeil and the soft perfection of the pastels. How do you approach the orchestration of a show? Do you consciously insert elements that will take some shimmying to absorb into your repertoire, or is it more a case of following your nose?

NP I think I'm trying to find the place where, as you articulated so well, contrary aspects meet. It doesn't work all the time. An example might be the chess pattern wall made of alternating panels of painted white marble and malachite. Once it was up, I realized with a sinking feeling that it looked like the wall of a Versace shop. I hoped the landscape I hung on top would act the way frescoes do in Renaissance Florentine chapels, adding refinement and intricacy, but I have to admit the wall still looks overdone. The balance is not right.

A happier example from the same show is hanging the white elephant pastel on the white faux-marble wall. Before the addition of the elephant, the painted wall didn't work at all. It looked heavy, more like the entrance to a bank. But when the elephant was hung, suddenly the wall's heavy aspect

Nicolas Party, *Three Cats*, installation view at The Modern Institute, Aird's Lane, Glasgow, 2016

became much lighter. The idea of the elephant overtook the marble's weight. And the fact that the elephant was rendered in very light-colored pastel chalk made him look soft and almost ghostlike. The overall feeling was well balanced.

MORAG KEIL: PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE

(9) EDEN EDEN
Bülowstrasse 74, 10783
Berlin, Germany
eden-eden.com

Text by Bianca Stoppani

It's in your reach / Concentrate. It's 2000 and Placebo releases the ballad "Passive Aggressive." As the band's lead singer Brian Molko once affirmed, the song may address either love or religion, or even both, somehow retracing the site of ambivalence akin to the personality disorder of the same name. That kind of gray area sprawls into every lyric of *Black Market Music* (2000), the UK band's third studio album, which was given by Paul Cooper from a well-known music magazine an amusing score of 2.4 out of 10. Not surprisingly, Cooper's fierce review is concerned with Placebo's aim to sell "androgynous product to teenagers titillated by the screaming parade of someone else's bisexuality." By no means convinced about the authenticity of Molko's sexual orientation, nor about the band's musical consistency, Cooper goes on to say that "solipsism and self-plagiarism are... the band's most exercised skills."[1]

Some years later, it may be argued that those same vices of egotism and inauthenticity attributed to Placebo have been reabsorbed into a routine construction and performance of one's own identity, especially through the practice of self-branding on social media. Indeed, even if it is displayed as unique and unitary, the self is always an assemblage, in terms of both its manifold coexistent personas and its constant biological (re)production. Here the motorbikes in Morag Keil's latest video *passive aggressive* (2016) are likewise a fantasy for the ownership of a monolithic machismo, when they would rather be a collage of several different components and eventually produced in series.

The video opens with the title flickering across two horizontal stripes in white and lilac, slightly less annoying than those click-baiting ads one can find on the sides of some web pages. Shot with a hand camera, *passive aggressive* relentlessly scrutinizes about eleven motorbikes found in the street. The first is burgundy, and its pneumatic body is analyzed starting from the top box and then descending toward the arch between the seat and the back wheel, following the silver muffler, ending the movement where the clutch cover is, going after the gleaming side fairing all the way down until the subframe, ascending rapidly to the leather tank and to the handlebars, down again to the front wheel, and finally climbing sideways to the black seat. Then there is a cut in the take, and the next motorbike appears, ready to be acted upon.

Yet the gaze is affectless, as disengaged and blind as a handheld metal detector inspection, somehow activated for no other reason than a bodily presence. Indeed, for every time that Keil takes the camera close to a motorbike's component, she never uses the zoom, to the point that when she pats down its orifices the image goes black. Except for a few cases where attention is given to the motorbikes' logos or when the lens seems to sensually touch their surfaces, these movements compose a scheme that, more or less, could be applied to all the following machines. The latter's portraits are punctuated by stock video clips and brief excerpts of cartoon-based TV commercials, which Keil chose for their deployment of cuteness for selling. The animated bears for Nutmeg (an online investment management service), the dancing flame for EDF Energy (a UK energy company), and the heteronormative nuclear family for Lloyds TSB (a bank with an insurance plan called "For the Journey") are proxies designed to neutralize the harmful potentiality of the commercial messages they carry via a childlike, inoffensive aspect.

The video ends with the UK *Big Brother*'s trance intro. Just before, one could hear some people discussing food and sharing. From the press release, we understand that they are competitors at that reality show and that they are talking about how to manage the weekly amount of money to buy groceries. The argument exploded because instead of buying food together and then sharing it, they resolved to split the money and let each to decide what to buy. In such a game, where voyeurism is just the other side of the coin, the gamblers play on their twin roles as victims and torturers.

Experiencing *passive aggressive* feels natural as much as it seems to participate in a reality show—minus the redundancy of the apparatus: the video is broadcast in a synced loop on a screen in all of the six rooms at Eden Eden. Therefore, it may be sufficient to watch it once, and without leaving the entrance on the raised ground floor. Eventually one can even choose a favorite room according to their different sizes, lights, and temperatures: Is that entrance with wooden floors and whitewashed walls good? Better the longitudinal rectangle on the left or the latitudinal one on the right? An airy square, maybe? If fancying the basement, one can also find a humid and suffocating hallway or an insulated room with matchboard walls and light blue carpet, a mirror, and some shelves. The installation too is pretty simple and straightforward, for the screens share the same centerfold-like position in every room, being framed by a black speaker on each side and having black cables connecting them to a nearby socket. All these common characteristics appear to suggest a homogeneous experience of the space, through which one can navigate freely. Yet do they not begin to sound a little bit repetitive? Like, too much visible?

When considering the whole, it becomes evident that Morag Keil has structured the experience of the show and the work around the idea of a pervasive exposure. Out of the sneaky comfort and freedom of choice, one can realize that what is offered here is not a fluid experience, but rather a choreography of repeated gestures through it. Every screen is connected to the others via a circuit of cables, and they all share the same wall that traverses the two floors of the space. It could then be argued that this arrangement makes that wall a screen itself, an extended surface but also an ambiguous membrane, for it both screens Keil's video—which is mainly shot outdoors—and screens the audience's presence out of the *passive aggressive* show. If one follows this argument, the installation involves the preexisting architecture, the space acquires the quality of the backstage of a TV program—maybe a reality show—and the video is one of the episodes. Keil's hand would be a jib camera operator and the viewer would just been following the camera ring.

Fascinatingly, the artist mimics here the mechanisms used to capture people and characters, gesture identities and desires, share a space, and form a community, even for a short time span. Aware of how the idea of a stable identity is "illusory and provisional"—as Alighiero Boetti defined the attempt to classify rivers—and how so-called Western societies still try to rely upon systems of inclusion and exclusion (as an example, the passive-aggressive behavior is categorized as a non-classifiable personality disorder), she attentively repositions the easy blame: from the people exposing themselves to make money under the capitalistic regimen of visibility to the infrastructure itself. Modulating her own identity-driven passive-aggressive paradigm, Morag Keil stages both terms by stretching them and embracing the newborn, gray, and troublesome in-between.

1. http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/6327-black-market-music/

LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL 2016

(10) VARIOUS VENUES
Liverpool, United Kingdom
biennial.com

Text by Barbara Casavecchia

Possibly because of their short life spans, biennales are often obsessed with the need to redefine past, present and future. This ninth edition of Liverpool Biennial—whose press pack came to me in a green tote bag asking, "When do you come from?"—tackles the subject both seriously and ironically. On the one hand, it embraces a long-term format that exceeds the ephemeral duration of its opening dates by introducing permanent public projects like Betty Woodman's *Liverpool Fountain*, installed next to George's Dock Ventilation Tower, and by adopting a strategy of public/art community building, evident in several ad hoc commissioned works— for instance *Dogsy Ma Bone* by Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, a live performance and new film shot entirely in the town with the help of seventy-eight Liverpudlian kids and teenagers, which brings together Brecht (Bertolt) and Boop (Betty) amid DIY props, great costumes, music, and spoken word.

On the other hand, by articulating the exhibition in six narrative "episodes," spread across two dozen venues and elliptically titled Ancient Greece, Chinatown, Children's Episode, Monuments from the Future, Flashback, and Software, the biennial's self-proclaimed curatorial faculty (Sally Tallant, the director, with Dominic Willsdon, Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas, Joasia Krysa, Rosie Cooper, Polly Brannan, Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Ying Tan, Sandeep Parmar, and Steven Cairns) play freely with site specificity as much as with