

Filip Berendt: *Pandemic*

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2009, Polish artist Filip Berendt completed a body of work titled *Pandemic*. It must have been received as a metaphor for the economic crisis. Now that coronavirus is sweeping the world and most countries are in lockdown mode, to call this body of work prophetic would be an understatement. Revisiting Berendt's *Pandemic* 11 years after it was made, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, I'm awed with a cryptic body of work, which raises key ontological, epistemological and political questions and most importantly, puts forward a radical proposition about life.

A hybrid of sculpture, painting and photography, Berendt's *Pandemic* captures the decay and disintegration a common parasite can cause. A mould is a type of fungus that can spoil food and make people sick. Berendt observed its behaviour over time and decided to use it in his compositions both as subject and material. Mesmerized by the unruly nature of the mould, the artist decided to grow one and was very surprised with its swift changes in shape and colour.

Berendt starts by drawing a distinct shape but the minute he inserts the mould, the latter takes over and it becomes the organic creator of intractable and capricious images. The mould is in a constant state of "becoming": it unleashes an element of chance in the composition, while it foreruns uncontrollable chaos. It is a liberating agent for the artist who gives up part of his decision-making process. The end result is "contained" in a series of photographs. The artist raises questions about authorship, while at the same time he proposes a more fluid way of making art that favours the cross-pollination of disciplines.

The twelve works that make up *Pandemic* may be viewed as still-lives that have been pulverized by an all-encompassing mould. Considering the pivotal role the mould has played in the creation of the artwork, I would argue that *Pandemic* is a radical intervention in the history and understanding of the genre of the still-life.

But first and foremost, *Pandemic* is a series about abstraction. The artist has used hair, dirt, human and animal debris to break the sense of flatness of the picture. They communicate an overarching sense of materiality that is often found in painting, and bear similarities with the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. There are perhaps points to be made about process, gesture and performativity in Abstract Expressionism that resonate with Berendt's work, but there are some fundamental differences too. Abstract Expressionism emerged after WWII in a climate of disillusionment. The canvas appeared, according to Harold Rosenberg, as an arena in which to act in quest for meaning. There was a desire to make sense of the world and the human condition, an admittedly heroic pursuit that had viewers palpitate with emotion. Berendt's intellectual pursuit is the opposite: it is about jettisoning any sense of self-importance and finding solace in the irrational, the inconsequential, the abject. *Pandemic* is about the collapse of meaning.



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic VIII*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 50 x 50cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

If the human body is infected and disintegrates to a sickening degree, then there's nothing superior to it compared with other species that populate the world. The moment we wake up to this realisation any division between self and "other" comes to naught. If our imaginary borders disintegrate and the abject becomes a tangible threat it is because our identity and conception of the world order have been disrupted. In this sense, a pandemic becomes synonymous with darkness and death. It haunts us with thoughts about our mortality and sanctions a dive into darkness. The darkness is aptly conveyed in the depiction of a black hole in one of the works in the series.

The black hole, a recurrent symbol in the history of art as well as a symbol of the universe, gives the impression of something burnt and therefore unable to pin down or contain. It indicates the remains of an ill-omened battle with an invincible predator. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, this battle with an invisible enemy can bring a sense of consolation, but it also deprives us of the possibility of change. If, however, we surrender to the unknown, we may gain some spiritual insight and experience another kind of life.



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic VI*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 70 x 50cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

We have a sense that we can control life and nature, at least to some extent. A pandemic dispels human arrogance and delusion and reminds us that human existence is haphazard. This realisation is a major disruption to our rational ways of thinking about the world and can pave the way for deep transformation. The main question here is whether we wish to go back to the world as it was before, or explore a new set of possibilities that may not necessarily make sense but could contribute to our transformation as human beings.

Berendt, who has explored the power of myth in other series and is intrigued by the spiritual as much as by the intellect, prompts us to assess our present and past, and re-imagine the future of humanity collectively. His *Pandemic* encourages us to free art of its predilection with meaning and focus on the condition of “becoming”. It is an invitation to delve into the unknown and discover its transformative power.

Vassilios Doupas

Vassilios Doupas, is an independent curator and writer. Until recently he was a Curator of Programmes at the Contemporary Arts Society in London. Before joining the CAS, Vassilios was Head of Fundraising and Strategic Relations at the Athens Biennial. He has worked closely with both emerging and established artists and has organised and advised on a number of exhibitions at galleries and public institutions including the Whitechapel Gallery. His writing has appeared in *Flash Art*, *Art Monthly* and *The Art Newspaper* (Greek edition) as well as in journals and academic publications.