

Rémy Markowitsch

ONION OPTIONS, or, Happiness is the Anticipation of Happiness

Money is not merely an existential necessity; it is also a real thrill to have money and to make it grow. Few things set the pulse racing faster than dealing on the stock exchange, particularly in options that can generate enormous profits and losses in all the ways we have seen recently. So many human traits combine and play into this – our hunting instinct, a love of gambling, a passion for collecting, desire, and the devil-may-care-streak that is in all of us. The appetite for ever greater profits fuels this potentially addictive game of chance where there is a direct correlation between the gains made by one and the losses made by the other. Following works made in 2007 in Beijing (*The Onion Option*) and Berlin (*Bullish on Bulbs*), Markowitsch has made a 2008 London version of this theme in which happiness and despair, profits and losses, laughter and tears are dauntingly close to each other. As in all his projects, he combines the most diverse references to create an imaginary chamber of associations that is entered through the sensuality and seductiveness of the objects and pictures it contains.

Markowitsch's works arise from his engagement with the realms of literature and research, travel and discovery, the appropriation of things alien, his deliberations on colonialism, a passion for collecting, and addiction. At the same time they reflect on his chosen media of photography, books, video and language. Light – illuminating, lighting, irradiating, enlightening – plays a central part in his work. For the series *After Nature* (1991–98) and *On Travel* (2004), for instance, Markowitsch made expeditions into pictorial worlds that he found in books. In the metaphorical and the literal sense, he shed light on and through these photographic interpretations of the world, photographing motifs from both sides of the same page and superimposing one on the other. Most of his photographic works are made using this method. For the installation *Bibliotherapy meets Robinson Crusoe* (2002) – shown at the Liverpool Biennial and elsewhere – with the huge, glowing *Bonsai Potato* at its centre, Rémy Markowitsch again engaged with the book as a repository of knowledge, feelings and experiences. While *Bibliotherapy* and *On Travel* variously explore the archetypal human desire to accumulate knowledge, and reflect on reading and looking at pictures as imaginary journeys, passions and addictions, *You are not alone, vol. 1 & 2* (2004) also examines not only states of consciousness and human perceptions under the influence of the legal drug alcohol but also the idea of prohibition.

In *Onion Options* three variations on a theme coalesce: *The Onion Option* (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing), *Bullish on Bulbs* (Galerie EIGEN + ART, Berlin) and *Made In* (Kunstmuseum Luzern) focus on the trade in options – a game of hoping to win, and the anticipation of happiness which is often the only real happiness. For all its simplicity, the onion not only features in almost all everyday meals, in places such as India the cost of onions can affect even the most elevated political circles; no government can afford social unrest due to rising food prices. But onions are not just a potential source of nutrition, in the

plant world – as tulip bulbs – they also have the option of producing flowers – a wonderful metaphor. Moreover, the first stock exchange crash in history, in 1637, was brought on by the collapse of the tulip trade in Holland. At the time, widespread enthusiasm for these beautiful blooms encouraged a lively trade. But then prices started to rise, spiralling wildly upwards until they reached the point where unimaginable sums were being asked and paid for a single bulb. However, when a devastating cascade of sales led to a stock market crash, many people – including some of only moderate means – who had borrowed to buy bulbs, lost all their money. The tulip bulbs that came to Europe from China via the Ottoman Empire and the onions that we eat – reified potential and currency – are used by Markowitsch as symbols of the way that human beings treat things and values. They also serve as symbols for all the other goods that generate profits and losses and that travel around the world to this end. The discrepancy between their simplicity and ‘optional’ importance also has considerable potential as a source of comedy and satire.

At the heart of Rémy Markowitsch’s installation *Onion Options* is a glowing sculpture of an onion. It is made up of three items that have all been derived from the same photographs of a half-raw, half-cooked onion in an oven. Located in the entrance hall of the former Museum of Mankind and flanked by two tulip pictures from the series *Bullish on Bulbs*, the light of this grotesque lamp now falls on a wall text – printed black on black – describing the effects of the price of onions on politics and politicians in India, which was itself once a British colony. Playing on cultural symmetries and differences, it is as though *The Onion Option II (Made in China)*, *The Onion Option II (Made in Germany)*, and *The Onion Option I (Made in England)* are both brought together and unleashed on each other. It is a somewhat absurd *rencontre* that presents the international commodities market (with its colonial origins) not only for what it is but also as a market place for radiant beauty and vanity. We, the visitors, flutter like moths to the beguiling light: the 1.5 meter polyester light object realised in Beijing the light sculpture realised in Berlin, and now the onion lamp created in London – sensual, semi-attractive, semi-repulsive yet remarkably incendiary objects – form a mildly obscene chandelier in the entrance hall of this Victorian temple-museum where an imperialist history of humankind was once on display. It is not by chance that Rémy Markowitsch takes an onion that is half raw and half cooked as his starting point for the sculpture. Thus the associations suggested by the work arise both from the notion of rawness (*sheng* in Chinese) as a symbol for things uncivilised, barbaric and alien (*sheng ren* = ‘raw’ people, strangers) and the notion of food cooking (*shu* in Chinese) as a symbol for all things civilized and familiar (*shu ren* = ‘cooked’ people, acquaintances, friends). And in the installation itself there are numerous reference to the both raw and civilised world of trade, where the familiar and the alien come together and where something very small – like an onion – can have a huge impact.

With his tulip pictures from the series *Bullish on Bulbs*, Rémy Markowitsch makes the connection with the trade in bulbs that still continues today but that ran so completely out of control in the seventeenth century. He also makes a connection with trading on present-day stock exchanges by following each title with an additional option; in the Royal Academy of Art these are *Asian Option* and *European Option*. And, of course, in this context the term ‘bullish’ is used when the index is expected to

rise, when traders expect profits, in short, happiness. That a failed trade on an onion option can bring tears to your eyes just as effectively as chopping onions, has been seen all too often recently. And in this installation tears are also audible. A soundtrack drizzles sampled American, Asian and European movie clips of weeping into the visitors' ears. Of course it is immediately clear that there are tears and there are tears. These are model tears. Since they are wept by actors on camera they are not only about the desperation that grips the individual when an (emotional, economic) crash sweeps all before it. These are also a profane product of the film industry deliberately designed to touch filmgoers' feelings and to move them into weeping their own tears of compassion. Nor are these the real tears of desperation either; they are about melodrama. They have a cathartic effect, and offer a satirical aside.

But be they dramatic or melodramatic, just as a film portrays and analyses instances of the individual consequences of social conditions, so, too, art presents them as sensual cognitive scenarios that are rich in imagery and metaphor. And the players in the market that circulates art around the world are not only hoping for deep insights and intellectual gain, they are also hoping that values will rise, that their economic muscle will increase. In all the various sections that make up his *Onion Options*, Rémy Markowitsch addresses this complex of emotions that is both vulgar and deeply complicated with analytical irony. He focuses on the systems and drives that keep these economic mechanisms running and turns the spotlight on economic, cultural and political-historical factors without becoming explicitly political or offering a critique of the global economy. It makes one both shudder and laugh; the viewer is semi-seduced and attracted, semi-repulsed. That Capitalism is ambivalent and inevitably involves feelings of power, desire and helplessness, that buyer and seller, that good fortune and misfortune need each other is presented in a sophisticated visual dialectic that arises from the configuration of the installation which is rethought for each new venue. Rémy Markowitsch achieves a balance between different cultures, wherein the universal desire for and susceptibility to money along with the global tyranny of money are as present as the antagonism of buyer and seller, of happiness and misery, in other words, the laughter, joy and passion, the tears, grief and mortality of the system. In this West-East constellation, it is as though cross-cultural cravings for hoarding and making money – for power – were shimmering and glittering in competing seductive, visual images. But all that is left in the end is the anticipation of happiness; that's all we can rely on.

Nadine Olonetzky

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott