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Dani Gal

Dani Gal: Sampled Histories

*In the exhibition "Freisteller" at the Deutsche Guggenheim, visitors unexpectedly become DJs when they approach Dani Gal's record players. The Israeli multimedia artist is one of this year's Villa Romana fellows. The furious performance he gave in February at the artists' house in Florence and now at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin appears emblematic for the Villa Romana's new programmatic orientation, says **Tim Ackermann**.*

The Deutsche Guggenheim, May 2008: the black Pioneer record player sits on a pedestal in the middle of the exhibition space, where it seems as alien as a relic from the Hi-Fi-obsessed eighties — and as sublime as a Ready-Made by Marcel Duchamp. The vinyl disc on the turntable revolves; the arm wanders along the record's grooves and reaches the end. Then it swings back and hovers for a moment before the record player kicks back into motion, as though guided by an invisible hand. Through the loud-speakers, unintelligible fragments of conversation can be heard. The visitor has to draw nearer to the artwork to identify the voice of a man speaking in English: "archi-itecture is like language... when you are really good at it you can be a poet." One step closer and a name can be deciphered on the record: Mies van der Rohe. At the same moment, however, the playing speed of the record player shifts and the architect's voice drops a few octaves, wobbling horribly. Once again, only sentence fragments can be heard: "...honesty of the material...", "...nothing lasts forever..."

The modified record player was created by the Israeli artist Dani Gal for the exhibition Freisteller. Through the end of June, the show at the Deutsche Guggenheim presents new pictures, installations, and videos by current fellows of the Villa Romana in Florence. Ever since 1905, the Villa Romana Prize has been awarded annually to exceptional young artists. Along with Gal, this year's prizewinners are Julia Schmidt, Asli Sunqu, and Clemens von Wedemeyer.

Dani Gal, who was born in Israel in 1975 and today lives in Berlin, tellingly called his record player/sound installation *Architecture regarding the future of conversations*, an allusion to a record containing interviews with famous modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, and Walter Gropius titled Conversations regarding the future of architecture. And it's precisely this LP that the artist has rotating on two record players in the exhibition. Mies van der Rohe, Saarinen, and Gropius & Co. explain their utopian visions of a pioneering architecture. The fact that these discourses in architectural modernism continually elude the listener's reach and withdraw into unintelligibility lies entirely in the artist's intention. His title already indicates that he is primarily interested in the "future of conversation."

Thus, his work for the Deutsche Guggenheim is interactive: sensors in the pedestals register every movement in the vicinity, converting it into electronic impulses which then regulate the record player's speed and volume. "Visitors in the exhibition become aware of their movements in space and their relation to one other when they manipulate the record that documents the main thinkers of modern architecture," explains Gal. And so it's literally in visitors' own hands how much they understand of the recorded architects' talks; together, they assume the responsibility of authorship. One suddenly gets a sense of what the Israeli artist means by the "performative act

of speaking."

Dani Gal is a manic collector of sound recordings of historical significance — a sound bite junkie, as it were. At last count, his "Historical Record Archive" consists of over 300 recordings of a wide array of events that left a mark on world history, from the invention of the phonograph to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collection includes original sound footage from the victory celebrations aboard the battleship U.S.S. Missouri following the end of the Second World War, as well as the resignation speech of the American president Richard Nixon in 1974 and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Gal also owns records of speeches by Martin Luther King in Washington in 1963 and Helmut Kohl in Dresden in 1989. The majority of these recordings were created for the purpose of propaganda.

In the case of recordings reaching further back into the past, the crackling and rustling of the vinyl blends with the speaker's voice. This provides a corresponding feeling of authenticity and, in the case of highly emotional passages, for goose bumps. "You can feel the room," says Gal, "the situation in which the recording took place, the time and the quality of the recording devices. For me, this makes it more interesting to listen to vinyl records than, for example, to read historical speeches. I find it interesting to listen to the situation that was documented." The audio material is always a record of something that has happened, and for this reason it accommodates the above-mentioned "performative act of speaking." One could also understand the artist's perhaps most important thought in yet another vein: as speech that itself becomes performance when Gal short-circuits his historical sound material using the contemporary principle of sampling.

What this sounds like is something he demonstrated at the beginning of the year in the historical surroundings of the Villa Romana on the hills overlooking Florence. As the highlight of the opening of his solo exhibition, the Villa Romana prizewinner presented his performance *voiceoverhead*. In the chilly spring air, visitors stood around the courtyard while Gal and his partner Achim Lengerer performed as DJs behind black objects resembling a cross between a lectern and a loudspeaker. Yet it wasn't music that the loudspeakers emitted, but rather items from Gal's recording archive: the voices of Angela Davis and Erika Mann mingled with submarine radar signals, sound fragments from the Nuremberg Trials, or the low rumble of crowds. "What we do in *voiceoverhead* is work with historical recordings as sound material," says Gal. "During the process we oscillate between abstraction of the recorded event/speech and its coherent content. When we change and manipulate a chosen recorded event, we try to emphasize the atmosphere it carries. Sound has the ability to bring an event 'back to life.'"

During his performance at the Villa Romana, the historical material could only be clearly identified in certain parts. The artist largely allowed it to blur into a diffuse, almost musical scrim of sound. He used this disturbing contradiction to demonstrate just how subjective and random constructions of historical "truth" and national and cultural identity actually are. The associations a sound evokes seem to be as manifold as the listener's experiences: "When I was a kid I was scared to listen to Arab music caught when changing the radio stations," remembers Gal. "Not only because I was educated that this is the music of the enemy, but also because of the quality transferred by shortwave, which made it sound ominous."

Its acoustic disturbances and thematic overlays, its samples and breaks make Gal's performance seem almost programmatic for the future of the Villa Romana. In the tradition-steeped house where Max Beckmann and Georg Baselitz as well as young stars like Amelie von Wulffen and Marc Brandenburg have worked, it's a matter of constantly breaking with clichés and questioning one's own status quo. Angelika Stepken, the Villa's new director, resolutely counters the notion that the house on the hills is a home for German artist grantees seeking inspiration in romantic seclusion in the Italian way of life, the architecture, and the art here in the "Cradle of the Renaissance."

And so the image of an old-style retreat among idyllic Tuscan cypresses is over with, at the very latest since the house was completely modernized with millions in federal funding in 2007 and — at long last — since it obtained an Internet connection and web-site. Now, at the click of a

mouse, the Villa is connected to the global art circuit. The oldest German artists' stipend, which has been sponsored by Deutsche Bank since the 1920s, has always been a hothouse for the artistic strategies of its time. Now, Stepken is redefining the Villa Romana to increasingly serve as a platform of exchange with the Italian scene while building upon its international importance.

One factor in this is the presentation of the fellows at the Deutsche Guggenheim, which also poses a challenge to the participants. This was also the case with Gal's performance *voiceoverhead* at the Deutsche Guggenheim in early May. "It was very interesting to perform here, since it is such a corporate place," says Gal. "The location of the show was in the main hall where they usually hold the speeches. In the performance we emphasized the situation by the way we laid out the room and the objects we used." While the Villa Romana version had more of a club atmosphere, the Berlin arrangement of *voiceoverhead* was actually far more reminiscent of a lecture at a general assembly. "The sound in this hall is amazing," recalls the artist. The visitors in Berlin, however, were as ruffled as those in Italy — a feeling typical for the reception of Gal's art. His artworks undermine expectations, pose questions, yet ultimately they offer no way out, no way to focus the art experience into an affirmative statement. And so it remains open whether or not Gal's sampling of sounds and modified record players seek to convey a deeper insight into the world. The artist is silent on this subject. At least one thing remains clear for him: communication cannot be trusted.
