

The corral and fragile happiness : Mario Sala's hybrid spaces

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For my song Elizabeth –
from the ancient avenue
the wind carries it to the sea –
and from that tree,
it is like a dream,
Elizabeth.

For my song
Elizabeth – through the ancient
avenue on to the sea,
filled with happiness I listen
to the magic music.

Shadows of the past
look down from the ancient castle,
they beg and beseech you,
oh, do be clever,
you don't have forever,
you'll be so sorry,
Elizabeth.

For my song Elizabeth –
open heart, soul and ear
along with that choir,
tenderly singing
and bringing you greetings,
Elizabeth.

The song "Elizabeth," in its entirety and cut into bits, plays a central role in Mario Sala's installation, *Ballroom* (ill. p. 2). The source of the sound is not a treetop but a chandelier modified with paint and tin. Heard from a horn loud-speaker on the chandelier are "Elizabeth," then a sampled, dragging and slightly menacing waltz, and finally a more relaxed but also not entirely intact song by a certain Harry Nilsson. The three elements alternate, sometimes with extremely abrupt transitions. The sense of menace is followed by something that seems to be more relaxing, and then again by this fragile happiness.

"Elizabeth" is sung by the Günter Kallmann Choir. It is an old song of Celtic origins. The recording of the Günter Kallmann Choir dates from the early sixties. The rapport between smiling choir, committed conductor and the smooth, seasoned orchestra, a small big band, is the ultimate in perfection. When the musicians paraphrase the song with their instruments, they add just the right emphasis. The choir represents the emotions; the big band professionalism. And high above the bright (boys') voices, this tinkling glockenspiel seems to play itself, managing, as it were, without a musician: *der Zauber Musik* (the magic music).

Nature – the wind – carries "Elizabeth" from the ancient avenue over to the sea, "and from that tree/it is like a dream." The song is caught in the treetop and the tree sends it out to all those with open "heart, soul, and ear."

The song – the wind – the tree – the dream finally sinks into the ears, souls, and hearts of those whose happiness is not entirely shadowless though they allow themselves to be beseeched by the shadows of Kafkaesque castles. The magic music fills them with happiness.

What sort of a substance is "happiness"? Is it a liquid, is it a breath, a breeze, does it tinkle? In the end one feels "full" or rather, fulfilled. The void is suddenly filled with this steamy happiness bubbling up because happiness is lighter than champagne. And having thus been gently propelled, the happy ones find themselves afloat.

The sentimentality of the song "Elizabeth" is almost supreme. Why then are we still susceptible to the magic radiance of its glockenspiel? Because it touches the past, a time when we could not yet see the shadows of the castle? We used to listen to music in the style of the Günter Kallmann Choir at home. On Saturdays, before lunch. Mario Sala must have heard it too. And I imagine we even sensed, at the time, that this tender happiness was ephemeral, a fata morgana, but we still relished the moment. We sensed that we would later see through the "magic" and would discover its "leaks."

In Sala's installation, in his *Ballroom*, people dance only in their imaginations. Even ballerinas would have to be light as a feather to dance there in reality, for otherwise the plaster, only three centimeters thick, would crack. DANCE SHOES GO INTO THE BALLROOM, it says on the wall, AND DANCE HARD AND DRY. Hard and dry, like the paste stuck into the tin mounts as a cushion for the words AND DANCE HARD AND DRY. The adverbs have been materialized: they grow increasingly rigid until the signifier and the signified have become one.

The hard, dry dance of the parquetry shoes and the bright, fragile glockenspiel; the synthetic, plastered floor and the delicately colored lozenges of the remodeled chandelier; the Styrofoam columns "tarred" with sawdust and the Styrofoam wall: on studying the course of the materials Sala uses – which are evoked only by means of drawings and words in his *Projects* – we notice how the semi-synthetic music of the glockenspiel is refracted in the warm coloring of the glass prisms on the chandelier. How great the contrast is between this glittering, sparkling chandelier and the matt, dry dullness of the sawdust-covered Styrofoam wall. How the "fulfilling" music finally penetrates the very toes of the linen-bandaged shoes wound around pieces of parquetry.

Sala's work is teeming with synesthetic combinations. Smell, taste, sound, and touch are interwoven. Aggregate states are in flux: solids liquefy, liquids

thicken and evaporate. One might, in fact, claim that this art thrives on the precise order of different components. The outcome is an array of extremes, including emotional extremes.

Interfaces are also created by interweaving different arenas. In a so-called *Fernmodell (Remote Model)*, institutions are juxtaposed: museum, zoo, hospital. "The functions of the three institutions overlap in the storerooms," Sala explains, "white hospital equipment is standing in pools of dried paint. Miniature parrots with short, yellow beaks, so-called bottle openers, live in this area. Neither the museum supervisor nor the zoo warden nor the technical department of the hospital service these 'hybrid rooms.'"

The "hybrid rooms" are left to deal with the immanent momentum of an almost anarchist future. Professional sectors overlap and turn experts into amateurs. Works of art have to defend themselves against illnesses and animals. Animals consume art and nurse the sick, or rather, attack them. The institution "crashes"; it breaks out of the course of evolution with chaotic, destructive but also liberating consequences. The people, the animals, and the (art) objects are reduced to their rudimentary functions; the bonds of civilization have been cast off; instincts have free rein.

To conceive of and then to materialize these "untenable conditions" (Sala) is not an easy, popular thing to do. Sala exposes himself to these untenable thoughts, which threaten to split people, and develops scenarios out of his experiences. "I've seen everything," he says; everything with which and about which he works. But we don't know where he has seen it – in reality, in daydreams, in dreams?

"Experiences always arise out of layering, out of the simultaneity of events. I want to find out how my experiences come about and, in the final analysis, to prove to myself that they really exist." The point of departure for these experiences is always an imagined or given image. In both the painted pictures and the remote models it was photographs of televised pictures. "When I press the release in front of the television set, it's like pulling the emergency

brake: Reality stutters to a halt and I build it up again on the basis of independent laws. Important are detailed views, often combined with extremely distant views." Pulling the emergency brake in the express train of reality in order to prove to oneself that one's own experiences even exist: these "hybrid experiences," these "hybrid spaces" are not only created by superimposing institutions but also by compounding private and public spheres. A basin, half of which is filled with red-tinted water, the other half with vegetable oil, runs along a highway and is open to the public for swimming. It "begins in the wall-to-wall carpeting of a nearby living room and ebbs into the earth of an orchard" (*Project – The Long Basin*, 1995, Kunstmuseum Winterthur). The transition between private and public spaces is seamless. The pissoir in a department store has been inserted into the mattress of a bedroom (ill. p. 29). "Public" drops of urine mingle on a matrimonial mattress. The (foreign) bed becomes a picture within a picture.

Layering, transitions. Between intimacy and public spaces. Between feeling good and feeling not so good. Between pleasure and pain. Violence and tenderness. Claustrophobia and agoraphobia. Anxiety and security. Between the artificial and the organic. Between experiencing, remembering, and inventing. And, of course, between reality and fiction. Inside and outside. Body and mind. Both sides are always present. Mutually determined and dependent. The reconstruction and the construction. And what is the point of it all? To look for this fragile happiness, to surrender to the "magic" – without evading the other aspect that squeezes in between, the penthouse, for example, the docked self-mutilation container with its "fenced-in CORRAL" where the severed limbs "expire" in the sand (ill. p. 28)?

"A work always begins from scratch," says Mario Sala. If he put together different elements, if he made things seamless that cannot be seamless, then it would be suspect, then everything would be beautifully rounded out. The work is interesting only "when an element is seized with perversity." This causes a leak through which the work seeks its own paths. To Sala's mind,

the work's autonomous pursuit of immanent laws casts a new light on everything that was previously ordered; and it is of the essence to make room for these leaks.



1997/1998, 64 × 155 cm
1998, 160 × 60 cm
1998, 158 × 60 cm





1998, 110×80 cm
1998, 60×150 cm



