

# THE KNIGHT'S TOUR

Xander Karskens, 2009

*A contemporary sculpture show*, De Hallen Haarlem

The Knight's Tour is an old chess conundrum introduced by the 18th century scientist Leonhard Euler which still exercises puzzlers, chess players and mathematicians today. The puzzle is simple: on an empty chess board with 64 squares and moving according to the rules of chess, the knight must visit each square exactly once. Some mathematicians argue that there are over 13 billion unique solutions for the Knight's Tour. (1) Georges Perec used the principle of the Knight's Tour as the basis for the narrative structure of his novel *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978), known as *Life A User's Manual* in the 1987 English translation: the sequence of Perec's chapters was generated by moving an imaginary knight through the floor plan of the apartment complex that was central to the book, creating a fragmented multitude of separate, sometimes interlinking, narrative threads.

The knight's move is rather an anomaly in chess: the other pieces on the board follow a more or less 'logical' path by moving forwards or backwards in straight or diagonal lines while the knight makes a more or less illogical l-shaped 'leap'. Consequently, the knight is by far the most unpredictable chess piece which, thanks to its quirky behaviour, can execute the most spectacular and wondrous tactical combinations. This paradoxical tension between the anomalous 'illogic' of the knight's move and its encapsulation in a rational environment, the game of chess, reminds me of the prerequisites for a successful artwork in general (which is difficult enough to explain) and one of Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* in particular in which he argues that, in conceptual art, which is generally considered 'rational', 'irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically'. (2) A statement by Dutch chess grandmaster and publicist Jan Hein Donner who once said that, in a match, after great thought he sometimes moved a piece to a square because it 'felt good', 'hard yet soft' without being able to offer a rational explanation of why this should be so or what it meant, is interesting in this regard. It can hardly be coincidental that the computer has not yet succeeded in figuring out the game of chess completely, and that unquantifiable phenomenon 'intuition' (as it does in art and science) continues to play a decisive role.

The artists in this group exhibition are all engaged in a Knight's Tour, each in their own way, whereby conceptual logic is infected by less controllable factors such as coincidence and intuition. Their artistic positions

are typified by belief in a kind of spiritual materiality, where the aura of the materials used is of vital importance to the meaning of the work. The traditional boundaries of sculpture are thus challenged and questioned: the idea that the sculptural object, that classic three-dimensional end product that brings the sculpting process to completion, is constantly under pressure in the exhibition. In some cases it is even radically resolved in a phenomenological limbo where suggestion predominantly nurtures perceptions of the work – when the object no longer exists as such but is manifest as an imperceptible presence.

In 'The Knight's Tour' the process is fundamental: that which occurs between the idea and the final result, and the ambiguous status the artwork commands once it is 'finished'. The presumption that an artwork can be rationally delineated and known is systematically eroded. Because is not art is the very domain in which an intrinsic distance ought to exist between 'making' and 'knowing'? (3) Now that the present juncture requires artists to assert the autonomy of the artwork, and to seek out new opportunities for aesthetic experiences that resist a purely rational explanation, does something like the 'aura' of specific materials and processes still hold potential? An aura that, as Walter Benjamin once proclaimed was stripped away in the modern era of reproduction and that, in our superfast digital image culture is increasingly elucidated as an object of nostalgic longing and an entree to the devouring fetish. But if art wishes to hone its analyzing, disruptive and evocative properties it must continue to cherish uncertainty, coincidence and irrationality as vital elements of its actualization. If the contemporary conceptual artist is still a mystic (4), the aura – the immeasurable faculty of the object that makes it unique – is assuredly one of his or her tools in creating a successful artwork.

At the start of this millennium, Jennifer Tee produced a series of playful, semi-ritualistic performance works that appealed to a revived need for intense, shared experiences. The objects used here (such as a tent, costumes, a potion) invariably had both a symbolic and a functional component. Tee's more recent sculptures, such as those presented in 'The Knight's Tour', occupy a more autonomous position, however. Their thing-ness seems to have become more prominent: in these works, the promise of performativity is sublimated in a single object, so rendering her sculptures more ambiguous; charged with the suggestion of spiritual functionality. An arc-shaped mobile finished with brass and silicone human teeth becomes a portal that may offer access to a parallel reality; a knitted woollen floor sculpture with the geometric structure of faceted crystal is transformed into a blanket with magical potential.

- (1) Each of the 64 squares can serve as the first square. In a closed tour the knight ends on the square from which it began; in an open tour, this is not the case. That, after considerable practice, I am still unable to discover even one of the

13,267,364,410,532 solutions is naturally due to the fact that I do not possess the talent required to such mathematical exercises but for all that, it is nonetheless a number with great imaginative appeal. rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach'.

- (2) Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, 0-9 (New York), 1969. Sentence number five. The gist of the statements is summarised in the first Sentence: 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach'.
- (3) A thought that is apparently at odds with Giambattista Vico's notion of verum factum: a principle which asserts that 'the true' can be known through the things we create.
- (4) Now I am adding to the enormous inflation to which the term 'conceptual artist' has been susceptible since it was coined: with this I am referring, as is now more or less accepted, to the artist who methodically executes a preconceived idea.