

Javier Téllez
Caligari and the Sleepwalker
Opening on February 13 at 7 pm
Exhibition running from February 14 through March 21, 2009

We are happy to show with Javier Téllez' new video *Caligari and the Sleepwalker* the second exhibition of the artist (born 1969 in Valencia, Venezuela) in our gallery. The film has been coproduced for the exhibition *Rational / Irrational* (Nov 08, 2008-Jan 11, 2009) by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (HKW), and the galleries Peter Kilchmann, ArratiaBeer and Figge von Rosen. One of the locations for the film was – besides the cinema of the HKW and the garden of the Vivantes Klinikum in Neukölln, Berlin – the legendary Einsteintower by Erich Mendelsohn in Potsdam. Téllez worked, like he did for most of his films, also in this case with personnel that stands at the margins of our society and that he had recruited – in this particular case – in the psychiatric department of the Vivantes Klinik after intensive casting-sessions. Téllez created – in a dialogue with his lay-actors – with *Caligari and the Sleepwalker* a filmic reference to the famous silent movie *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene (1920), a film-classic, known for being the first horrorfilm and as a milestone of expressionistic films in general – comparable to the Einsteintower (1919-22), that is considered an outstanding example of expressionistic architecture. In one sentence: Téllez related contemporary artifacts of the early 20ies in his new film and he used them as background for the multilayered research into "normality".

Caligari and the Sleepwalker is a filmic collage of staged dialogues and documentary interviews with patients of the Berlin Vivantes Klinik. This brings doubts about the possible levels of reality that are also the basic topic of the original¹ film. Téllez strengthens these doubts systematically: for instance, he creates a prologue in which a man (the actor-patient Eckehard Ide) declaims a paragraph of Jean Genets play *The Blacks*². This causes a significant distance on two levels: the distance that is caused by the cited text itself and the distance caused by the citation of a third text in the new film. Here, like in the following scenes a plethora of variations about distance, perception and categories is created: who am I, how do I see me and the

¹ In Wiene's *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* a man in a dark suit, sitting on a bench in a park tells his neighbor on the bench the story about Dr. Caligari and his sleepwalking assistant Cesare, who was used by the master for his murderous intentions. At the very end of the movie it becomes clear, to the viewer, that the person telling the story is a patient in a psychiatric hospital and that the supposed murderer is his therapist. The narration of a "true" story turns out to be a delusion, as the visual facts – a man who looks like Dr. Caligari treats and medicates another man, the sleepwalker Cesare – are absolutely dependent on the subjective perception by the subjects of perception, that is: the patients or the medical staff. However: the viewer remains in a state of uncertainty – even though the supposed murderer turned out to be just a helping doctor doing his research –, because the viewer does not know for sure whether the positive solution to the film is not just a phantom again.

² „Quiet please. This evening we will perform for you. But, in order that you may remain comfortably settled in your seats in the presence of the drama that is already unfolding here, in order that you be assured that there is no danger of such drama's worming itself into your precious lives, we shall even have the decency – a decency learned from you – to make communication impossible. We shall increase the distance, that already separates us, by our pomp, our manners, our insolence – for we are all actors. When my speech is over everything will be played out here. Here! In this delicate world of denial, discontent and damnation.“ (Archibald in Genets *The Blacks*).

world and how does the world see me, what is normal and with what kind of medication am I supposed to approach a state of "normality".

Téllez uses the heavy distorting treatment and editing of such artifacts, that are inscribed in our cultural memory, as a screen that helps the filmic discourse on the fact, that his acting protagonists are different, to gain conciseness. Their being-different (we talk about "they" and "them" in a distanced manner – instead of talking about "we" and "us"), but also their being similar to us, is strengthened through diverging from the known original master.

For instance, Téllez makes declare Cesare (the actor-patient Henry Buttenberg), who is presented to the audience of an annual fair by Dr. Caligari (the actor-patient Hanki) as a curious sleepwalker from the Slave Star, he makes him declare – by writing on a blackboard – that "The whole Star is a psychiatric hospital", in other words, that the people who drop out of our society are, in the end, only part of a large phantom. But Téllez refers in his scenes not only to the reality of the patients, but he lets them talk and explain themselves on different levels of the film. For instance, Caligari – as a personnel of the film, not as Hanki, the actor – poses questions to Cesare in his bureau in the Einsteintower, questions that could be asked by a psychiatrist and that all circle around Cesare's identity and his state of the mind or his existence within society.

Another example: Hanki and Cesare climb the Einsteintower and Hanki abandones his role as Caligari and talks about his psychosis: he explains that he is moved by "thousands of questions" and "thousands of answers" and that he – consequently – becomes afraid.

He knows that he is having a psychotic episode when he feels to be "in a different film" Exactly this, the phenomenon of being in different film, is, what Téllez works on in many of his works with his actor-patients: he commented on this artistic strategy with direct reference to his film *Choreutics* of 2001 and explained, that "the work [...] is meant to be a metaphor in another sense, too: I wanted to bring a peripheral and invisible situation into the center [...] and thereby operate in the space between center and periphery." (©Interview, Übersetzung, Porträtfoto: Gerhard Haupt & Pat Binder, 2001).

To come to an end: Téllez' œuvre combines two things: on the one side he has a great empathy *with* and an interest *in* human beings that are defined / categorized as being sick and that are treated with medication and therapeutic sessions. He gives these people a voice, respectively allows them to brake out of their daily routine, which is dominated by tranquilizing medication, and to express themselves in a specific, self-conscious way³. On the other side, Téllez is, which could be

³ Téllez's parents were both psychiatrists and he himself sees some autobiographic elements in his work: "When I was very young, my father took me to the hospitals with him. I think, that led to a breakdown of the distinction between what is

proofed with many examples, highly interested in classical plays and films that show exactly this: stirred levels of reality (what is reality, what is imagination, what is perception, and what are facts), and argumenting with the categories sane / sick, normal / abnormal, etc. In working on these topics, he methodically uses historically significant pieces, especially from the history of the cinema⁴. It remains to be underlined, that not only his own works, but also these examples circle around topics like delusion and its perception, or levels of reality and the questioning of free will, of fate and determination.

The presentation of *Caligari and the Sleepwalker* will be complemented by a few installations that consist (technically) of film projectors and figurines and that can be subsumed with the phrase "Cinema without Film". These works are related to the questioning of reality and categories that can be seen in the film, because each installation consists (concept-wise) of the projector, the figurine and the image that is thrown by the figurine on the wall. Like in Plato's parable of the cave, in these installations it is not clear where the artwork as such is situated: is it the image on the wall or is it the figurine that casts the shadow, or is it also the projector and its source of light? The categories of image, film and sculpture are mixed-up.

Javier Téllez exhibited in 2008 – besides the exhibition *Rational / Irrational* in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin – amongst other shows at the *16th Biennale of Sidney*, at the *Whitney Biennial* in New York as well as at the *Manifesta 7* in Trentino-South Tirol. In the near future more works will be seen in Berlin in the exhibition *Islands & Ghettos* in the NGBK and in Téllez first institutional single-exhibition in the Kunstverein Braunschweig (April 18-June 14, 2009) as well as in the Kunsthaus Baselland (April 18-June 28, 2009).

For more information, images or request for interviews please contact the gallery.

considered 'normal' and what is considered 'pathologic'. My work functions in this grey area." From an interview with Javier Téllez from 2001: ©Interview, translation, photos: Gerhard Haupt & Pat Binder, translated from the German version by Holly Austin. In another interview Téllez goes even deeper in his explanation for his basic motivation: "My interest in mental illness is deeply related to my biography as a son of two psychiatrists. I grew up in a very special environment where I shared my daily life with mental patients that were always around the house because my father had a consultation room in our house and then for me the people that are living with mental illness are not necessarily different to us even if I do respect their difference I think they are basically equal; in my work I always try to create a bridge between those who are living with mental illness and those who are not," (Backyardradio, Audioguide to the exhibition *Rational / Irrational*, download from www.backyardradio.de, transcribed by Figge von Rosen Galerie).

⁴ See, for instance, the video *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital, Sydney)* of 2004, that draws on the (almost) homonymous mute film by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1928), or his *Œdipus Marshal*, for which he transferred in 2007 the Œdipus-tragedy by Sophokles in a western scenario.