



If there is any ability of the contemporary artist to manipulate his/her audience, the artist always seems to be the bad one. This position is ethically under-developed and comparable to the myth of the Wild West (for example) with its fatal, basic distinction between the good and the bad and their final shooting.



Couldn't be harmless public entertainment: An artistic action entitled AKT SALOON – in the evening of 22 March, 2005, at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts (HISK) in Antwerp, Belgium, initiated by the artists Kristofer Paetau (Finland) and Ondrej Brody (Ecuador).



In a good quarter of the exhibition space the scene took place; spotlights, some straw; one edge of the room hidden behind a large panel covered with a photo studio background paper in a smooth cashmere pink colour, like a leaf of a rose blossom. This very easy installation of ground and background was filled with the presence of a posing bodybuilder and a sheer cooperative Shetland pony (both paid for participation).



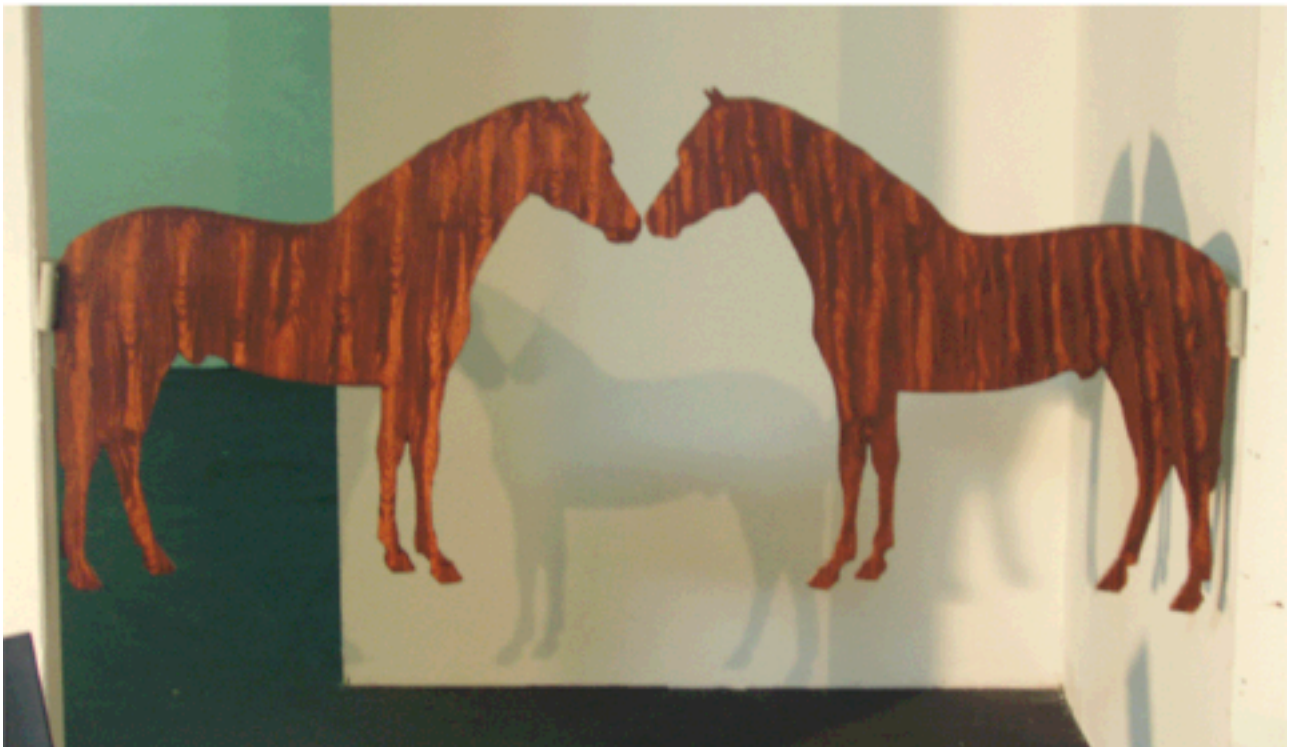
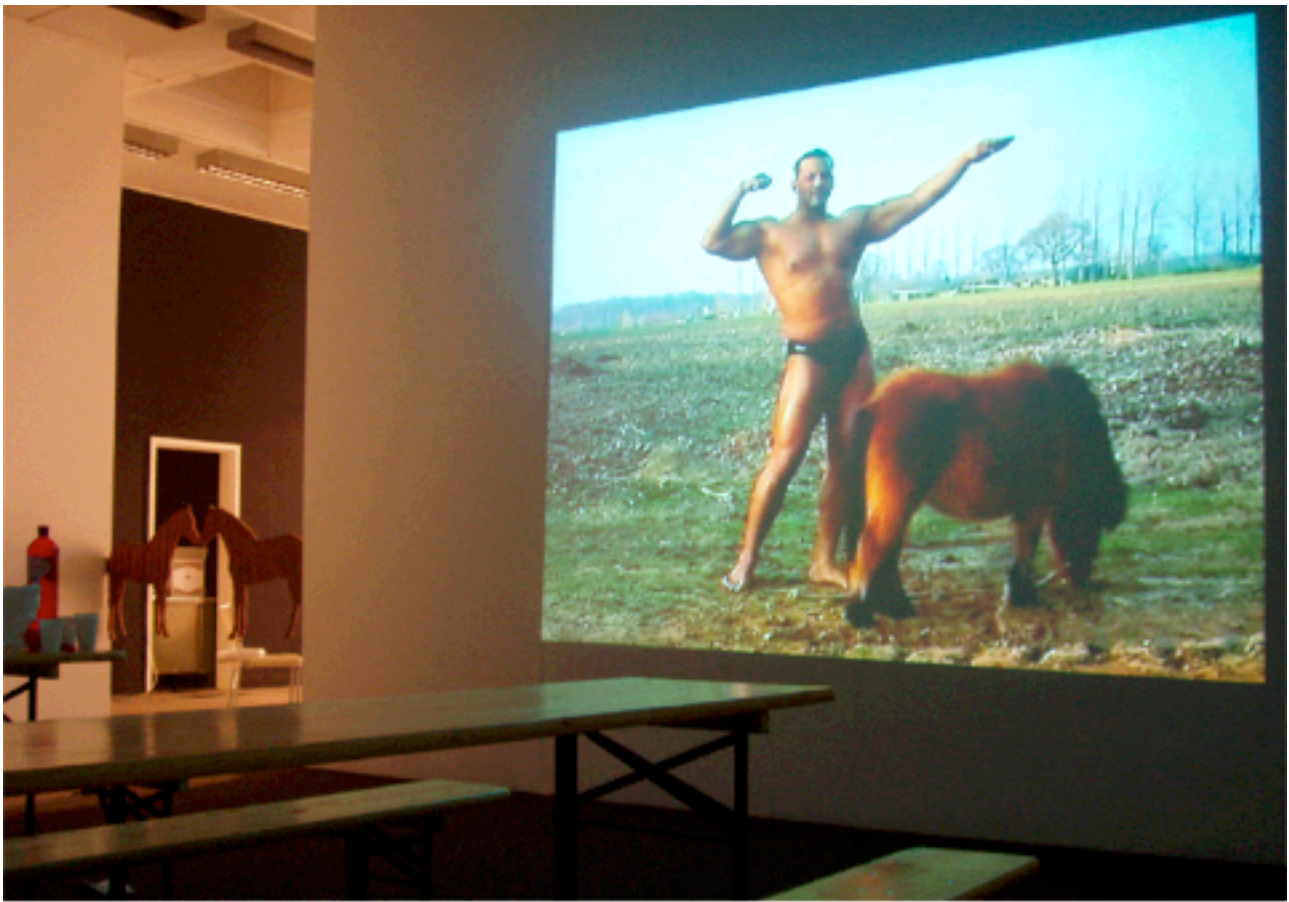
The guests were sitting on chairs occupying nearly the rest of the room. They were invited to draw with coal sticks on large paper sheets on wooden panels, in a behaviour familiar from traditional nude & animal drawing classes.



Art students, participants from evening drawing classes and all kinds of art lovers from the city of Antwerp were invited to this free evening drawing class with a Turkish bodybuilder posing, accompanied by the mentioned brown Shetland pony. - Adequate to the ambient country music from CDs, the title of the show - AKT SALOON, cut out in plywood and over-painted in brown veneer style - was fixed on the back wall of the room.



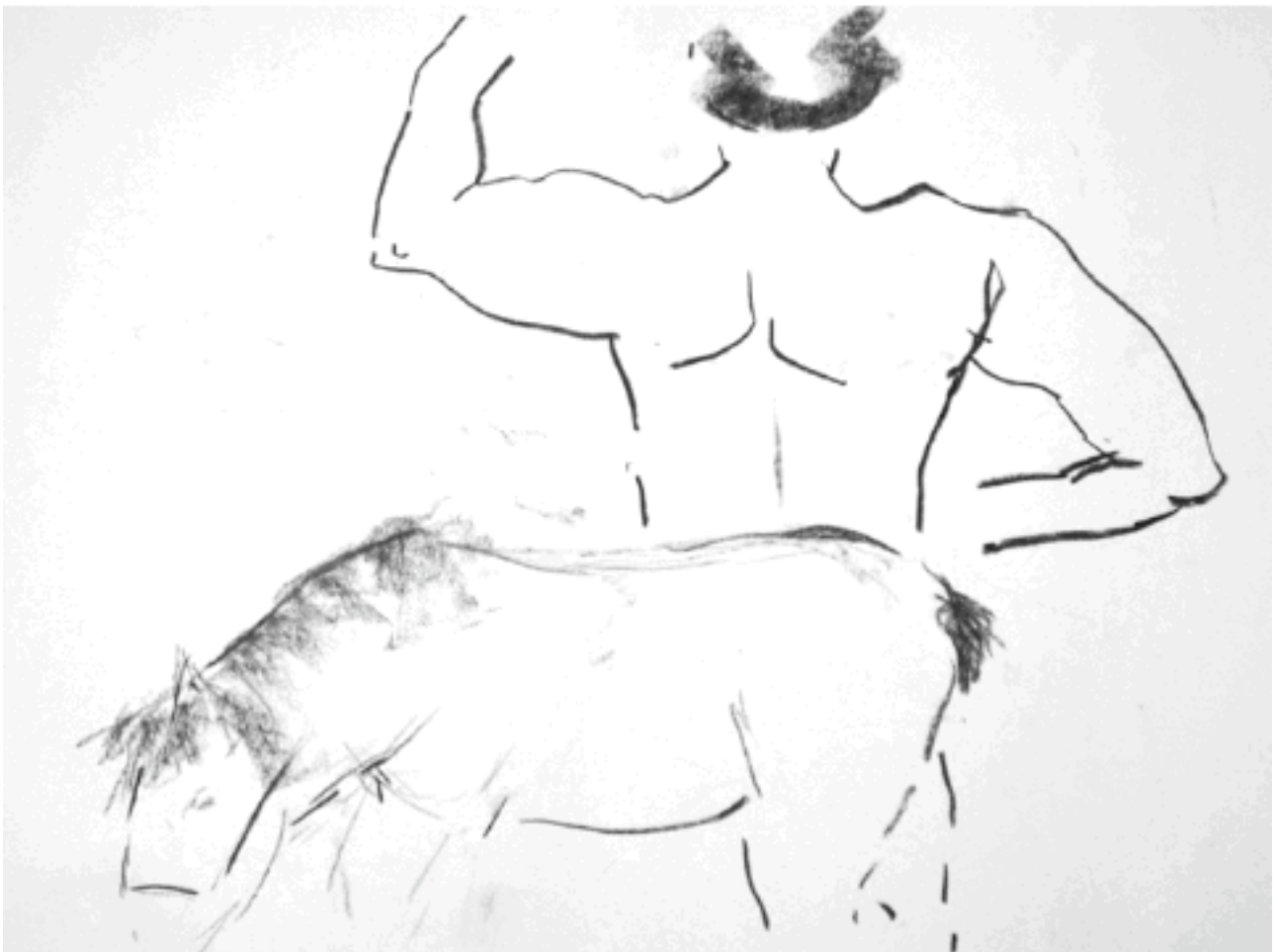
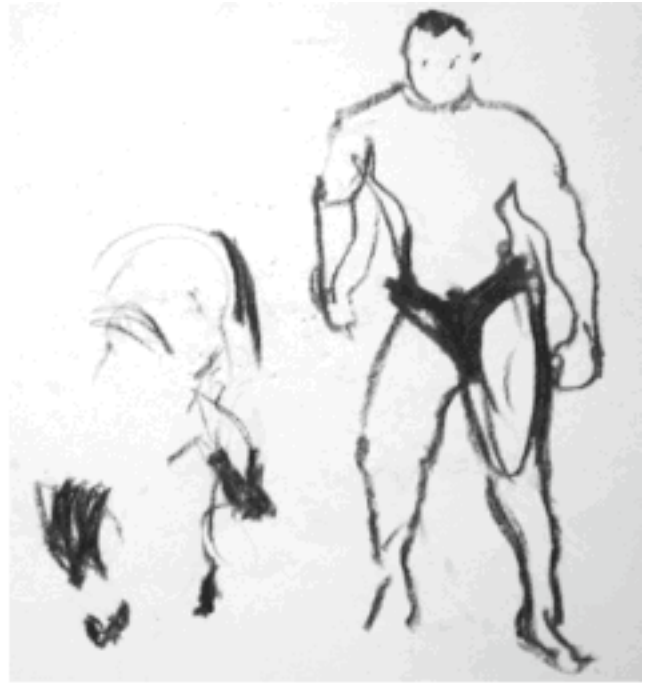
A special attraction – the ColorVision drawing machine – was monitored by the French artist Xavier Gautier and offered a low-tech digital alternative to the traditional drawing technique. The machine turned out to be of no interest for the draughtsmen/draughtswomen present.



Finally, after about two hours of drawing, you could cross an identifying swinging western saloon door: two little brown plywood horses, nostril to nostril. Thus you had access to the real "Saloon", situated in a second, small dark room where you could sit at long tables and sip whiskey while watching a video screened on the wall.



The video showed a recent sample of the bodybuilder's acting together with the pony in a landscape nearby. His self-conscious presentation in front of the camera made a sharp and comical contrast to the leisurely attitude of the pony nibbling grass and licking, from time to time, the man's feet.



And this was not the end of the evening, since the participants were asked to sign their worst drawings and hand them over to the organizers (and many were willing to do this after a few whiskeys), signing a contract too that transferred all rights to Kristofer and Ondrej for any further misuse.



Confusion reigns while thinking about motivation, perception and the project organizers' unspoken ambitions (they were just hovering around in the session as filmmakers and photographers). One has also doubts about the meaning of the country & western frame around the re-enactment of a traditional art school's nude & animal drawing lesson within this real art institute.



The idea for this project started with Ondrej's discovery of a "Nude Art Gallery" in Berlin, called "Akt Salon". Once this gallery invited a young man and a horse to pose at their weekly nude drawing sessions - and Ondrej happened to be there.



Kristofer's idea was to create a work referring to Picasso's quite known painting of a slender boy with a horse from the blue period (shifting already to pink). By inverting the size and corpulence of the models, he wanted to bring a dubious suspense into the iconography and to set free some zoophilic fantasies...



Animals are classical subjects in art, as you know from Picasso's horses and bulls, Prometheus's eagle, the dolphins of Raffael's Galatea, Beuys's encounter with the coyote, and Courbet is said to have brought living deers into his studio. A pony might indicate an aesthetic of the nice and the friendly, but, misquoting the (male) artistic tradition, another meaning layered pure tradition, a suspicious over-dose of muscles combined with the offensively innocent yet needed shimmering soft pink panel in the background... So it wasn't all about handicraft, although nude & animal studies were carefully produced as long as the session endured.



To go on with a classical question: Was there a "work", and where? Was it the concept, the model's and the pony's performance, the set, the drawing, the drawings themselves, the documentation about the event, all of this? And why are Kristofer and Ondrej interested in insisting on the project as a balance of multiple levels, as a manipulative intervention? The supposed main part of the project, the drawing session, was well-accepted by the large audience (who only criticized the fact that the model changed his poses too fast, according to his practice as a bodybuilder).



As Kristofer wrote to Heike about one week later (quotation transl. from German): "It is about manipulation, and even though I was always trying to explain the project as openly and clearly as possible to potential participants, their references were simply different, and their motivation different from mine." The manipulative aspect of the work seems to be directly connected to the multiple references & layers and their subsequent (mis-)interpretation. The main indicator of manipulation here seems to be the difficulty to define the status of the people during the event: Were they the artists, the public, participants, actors or supernumeraries?



The catch is, to be distinctively cooperative in a contemporary environment generally results in issues of individuality and responsibility. The idea of manipulation might be the result of a genuine and 'honest' feeling... The tasty shapes of the model, the rose coloured panel and the little animal invite to an intimate Lolita art discourse, kind of a tableau vivant mutating into a Reality Show. – At least no animal was harmed during the event...



Text by Heike Wetzig & Kristofer Paetau, April 2005. All **photographs** by Kristofer Paetau except the Akt Salon photograph by Ondrej Brody. **Akt Saloon:** a project by Ondrej Brody & Kristofer Paetau, 22 March 2005. **ColorVision Assistance** by Xavier Gautier.

Bodybuilder: Mohamed Badi. **Pony:** Jule (thank you Mrs. Eleane Cordia for letting Jule participate!). **Draughtsmen/Draughtswomen:** Patricia Van Den Borne, Roel Borstlap, Philippe Delbeke, Dorien Delvaen, Seger Dircken, Xavier Gautier, Joke Gossé, Kristien Heymans, Yi Hong Huang, Danny Joris, Aibjan Kamo, Frieda Maes, Philip Marnef, Rita Mertens, Johan De Meulder, Marianne Praet, Verna Reusens, Josine De Roover, Guido Van Den Sael, Laure Stroo, Annelies Timmermans, Kim Vandaele, Bart Vermaercke, Joris Vermeulen, Theo Weber, Heike Wetzig as well as some anonymous contributors. **Thank You:** the HISK (Higher Institute for Fine Arts, Antwerpen, Belgium) and especially Bert Ghysels, whose engagement made the project possible.