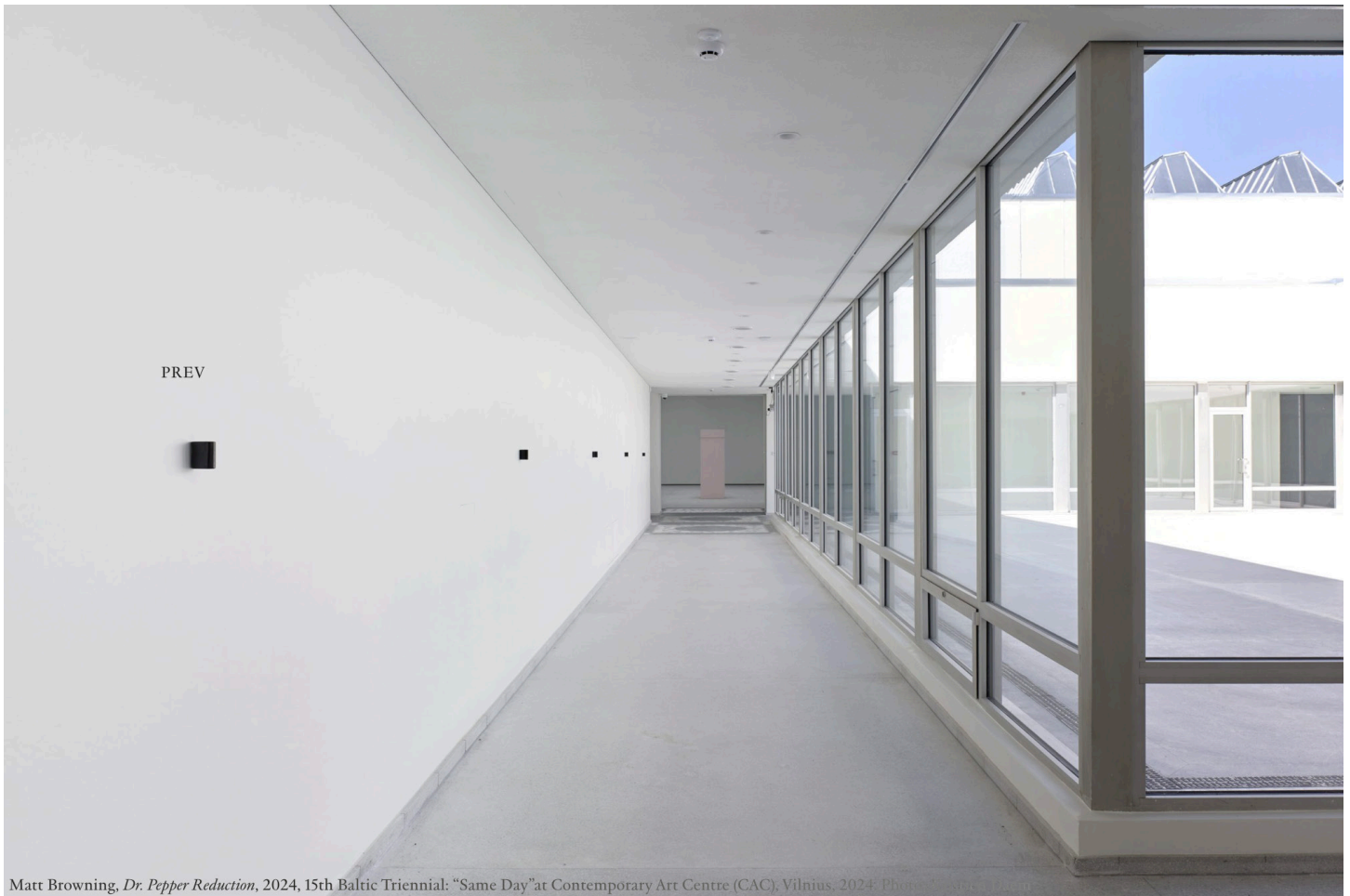


# MOUSSE

15th Baltic Triennial: “Same Day” at Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius, 2024  
by Emile Rubino



Matt Browning, *Dr. Pepper Reduction*, 2024, 15th Baltic Triennial: “Same Day” at Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius, 2024. Photo: © Emile Rubino

At the newly renovated Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius, the 15th Baltic Triennial curated by Tom Engels and Maya Tounta is something like a puzzle box. Delicate kinetic works, secret compartments, and interconnected subplots make for a generous exhibition where losing track of time is almost inevitable. Visitors are often required to get close, even kneel down, to observe the many small-scale works, which are arranged with nonchalant accuracy throughout the imposing rooms of the CAC. The anti-monumental approach favored by the two curators in these large spaces fosters an intimate and unexpectedly physical form of engagement. Awkwardly sized works like Bradley Kronz’s cut-down childhood bed, *Square Sleep* (2021), and Matthew Langan-Peck’s *Brown Box 2* (2023), a plywood crate painted to resemble both a small house and an oversized box, make you feel as though it is your own body that has shrunk. The phenomenological nature and directness of the show is also heightened by the absence of wall labels. Information about the works and artists is to be found in a booklet and an exhibition map—a well-designed guidebook package for what turns out to be quite a journey.

The title of the exhibition, *Same Day*, was borrowed from a 1984 poem by the relatively obscure Greek poet Emerson and hints at the circular and often confusing nature of time. This title is also a quasi-choreographic principle in an exhibition where a number of artworks incorporate rotating mechanisms that perform a familiar score, repeating actions over and over again. These discreet works come together like gears and clock parts, akin to the ones that make up Michèle Graf and Selina Grüter’s *Clock Work* (2024), a series of small and completely nonsensical mechanisms mounted on museum plinths that are activated by a sensor whenever a train passes at a nearby location. Additionally, it is worth noting that the mood in the exhibition fluctuates according to the time of day, like a big sundial, since none of the works are displayed under direct artificial lighting.

Placed on the floor near the entrance to the main room, Cameron Rowland's *sundown* (2024) is a small, weathered cardboard box filled with heavy-duty flashlights, also known in police jargon as "alternative impact weapons." The work is complemented in the exhibition booklet by an excerpt from "An Act for Settling a Watch in Charleston" (1701), a text pertaining to nighttime slave patrols in South Carolina. Hovering on the wall above Rowland's piece, a swirly patch of vibrant colors comes into view like an apparition. Shot from across the room, *Sun* (2020) is one of Elena Narbutaitė's four laser works which surreptitiously punctuate the exhibition. At once beautiful and ominous, these works, one of which also features a rotating contraption, cut through the space with military precision. The witty pairing of Narbutaitė's *Sun* and Rowland's *sundown* poetically evokes the movement of light throughout the day while suggesting that a seemingly innocuous light source can also be a weapon in disguise.

In a hidden corner, *Wolves* (2023), a video by Aria Dean and Laszlo Horvath, is projected inside of the museum's old freight elevator. For twenty-five minutes, a stationary camera recorded a nighttime pastoral scene in Puglia where a flock of sheep and a white dog were illuminated in chiaroscuro by a single spotlight. This deceptively simple film feels like an unresolved fable about who exerts control and who is really guarding whom: the dog, the sheep, the artists behind the camera, the unseen wolves. Upon returning to the main room, the sporadic barking of the dog remains audible in the distance, partaking in a pleasant cacophony with the seven short video pieces looping on three square TV monitors positioned on the floor throughout the space.

One of those short videos is Rosemarie Trockel's *Egg Trying to Get Warm* (1994). With this black-and-white overhead shot of an egg spinning on a hot plate, Trockel poked fun at minimalist and structuralist tropes. Her deadpan humor exemplifies an ambivalence found throughout the exhibition, whereby the elegance that mostly prevails is counterbalanced by perfectly dosed pockets of realism where the quirkiness of contemporary life comes rushing in. In Matthew Langan-Peck's *Player 1* (2023), a minimalist-looking wooden trunk acts as a container for *Red Light Problem 2* (2023), a podcast-like audio piece. The artist, who plays an everyman in his car waiting for a light to turn green, records his thoughts on a recent TikTok marriage proposal trend. It takes a minute to appreciate the contrast between the austere aspect of the box—a strange mix of pirate chest, boombox, and Richard Artschwager sculpture—and the mundane existentialism of someone overanalyzing the technicalities and implications of 2.0 marriage proposals.

In a long hallway leading to the main room, Matt Browning's five *Dr. Pepper Reduction* (2024) works are tastefully installed on the wall at distanced and regular intervals. These "little shiny blimps begging for attention," to use the artist's own words, quoted in the exhibition pamphlet, are made from boiled-down soda contained in small glass bottles of Weleda deodorant cut in half (you can tell by looking at their undersides). The two substances merged, resulting in dark, visibly condensed objects with a reflective surface that words can hardly describe so much it manages to appear as pure matter. To borrow the title of one of Bradley Kronz's works presented in the main hall, there is an *Everyday Minimalism* reminiscent of Arte Povera in the way these works bridge the triviality of everyday life and the formal realm of art, its codes, and its histories.

There is something quite similar at play with Kitty Kraus's wonderfully simple kinetic sculpture *Untitled* (2024), where the handlebar of a shopping cart from Maxima, a Vilnius-based supermarket chain, is suspended from the ceiling with fishing wires attached to a motor. The small object whirls in the middle of the gigantic space at incredible speed. As in many of the aforementioned works, the mesmerizing effect of Kraus's piece comes with a sense of threat—get too close and you'll get smacked in the face. Like the baton of a conductor, Kraus's handlebar invisibly enlarges the scope of its presence in space as if orchestrating the rest of the exhibition. In fact, it could be said that the works in the exhibition are performers of sorts. On a curatorial level, each is asked to bring forth its intrinsic meaning or set of concerns while also performing in a relational manner through a subtle game of echoes and ricochets. In this way, what is essentially a very ambitious group show becomes much more than the sum of its parts—an easy thing to say, but a hard thing to do.

This is an exhibition made of relationships between objects, but also between artists and between curators. While some relations are created across time and space, others are based on preexisting connections. For instance, Maria Toumazou, who had a show at Grazer Kunstverein curated by Tom Engels in 2022, is a friend of Marina Xenofontos, another artist from Cyprus with whom she used to co-run an exhibition space. These personal connections are neither made apparent in any direct manner, nor concealed. Together, they create an underlying sense of kinship that binds the show with invisible ties. Throughout the CAC and notably around the sunny atrium at the center of the building, Toumazou's makeshift pinhole camera sculptures surveil the space. Fabricated from repurposed boxes or in one case, a suggestive piece of driftwood evoking Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866), Toumazou's unassuming cameras "perform" recording just as they actually record the quiet performances of the works around them. Powered by an engine, Xenofontos's *Control Board* (2023–24) is composed of five wall-mounted copper tubes (17.8 meters in total) jointed at a perfect 90-degree angle in the corner of a room. Constantly rotating just above ankle height, this machine provokes an unsettling bodily discomfort in the viewer in a way that echoes Kraus's spinning handlebar. As with most of the kinetic works in the exhibition, there is something absurd about the task performed by this machine—something which speaks to the notion of animism with a funny sense of self-awareness, as it is made clear that these objects are neither moving on their own, nor moving with a clear intent. At times, the whole thing could best be described as a kind of structuralist puppetry.

In some cases, the works perform in an even more literal way, as with the electronic sculptures of Estonian artist Villu Jõgeva. Dating back to the 1970s, these works, which involve light and sound, look straight out of an old Soviet sci-fi film. *Object No. 1* (1971–73) is a set of four interconnected white wooden crates forming a totemic structure on the wall. The bottom crate features a big red button—the kind cartoon characters would press to launch a rocket. When visitors push the button, a series of lamps arranged in various odd configurations within each crate activate, as if the machine was calculating something in preparation for a grand reveal. After a few seconds, the whole thing switches off.

A few photographic works carefully dispatched throughout the exhibition temper its theatrical and moody tendencies and affirm it as something other than a stage. These notably include *Legs In the Morning* (2009), a collaged sequence of small color prints by Geta Brătescu in which the then eighty-three-year-old Romanian artist photographed her bare feet near a ray of sunlight in her bedroom. From one picture to the next, her feet enact a stripped-down and very moving performance. Similarly, *Sculpture* (1971), a black-and-white picture by Serbian artist Rasa Todosijevic, documents a brief performative action where he turned his bare teenage chest into a sculpture with a simple piece of cloth. Another example is Běla Kolářová's *Hair* (1964), a black-and-white picture where the Czech artist photographed strands of her and her close friends' hair on a white background. These photographic works all document ephemeral happenings enacted for the camera. Performed at various stages of life (another cycle), they also add a self-reflexive layer to the exhibition's performativity by introducing another temporality.

But the function of photography in the exhibition extends beyond these small framed pictures. Many works display photographic qualities without being photographs per se. In a black-box room, the dim light of Christos Tzivelos's *Lampe "Le Rayon X"* (1983–85) sets a full-moon mood. Its opaline globe fitted with cutouts of tools and insects casts a gentle glow over Rey Akdogan's three rotating slide carousels, which project what first look like abstract photographs, but are in fact colored gels or bits and pieces of found plastic sandwiched between glass. Both works appear as real-life photograms in the sense that they only exist when light shines through them. In turn, Akdogan's colorful and rhythmic abstractions are absorbed by the uncanny mirrored surface of Tarik Kiswanson's astutely titled *Contact Sheet* (2016), a large sheet of stainless steel polished over time through repeated circular motions. On the other side of the room, another one of Villu Jõgeva's machine, *Orange Tower* (1970s), produces a mysterious synthesizer blipping sound. Tucked away in a small corridor next to the electric switchboard of the CAC, this sleek orange speaker shaped like the Empire State Building and topped with an athena emitting light, sporadically goes wild, as if aspiring to give us its best performance one last time before giving up.

At a moment when everyone is concerned with machine learning and AI, this unexpectedly analog, kinetic and contemplative show comes as an opportunity to consider the brilliant "dumbness" of machines, young and old. By following a multilayered, circular and relational script, the exhibition itself operates as a kind of machine that gently bounces you from one work to the next. This very analog form of spectacle might also be the reason why, long after the end of the actual performance program, visitors do not get the feeling of arriving too late, only to witness the aftermath of the party—a familiar feeling if you have ever attended any major art event after opening week. In *Same Day*, constant movement also becomes a form of stasis—everything returns! Here, this ambivalent and highly philosophical idea is grounded in the everyday in such a way that the passage of time itself continues to be an event.

at Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius  
until January 12, 2025