

Paul Geelen *Sliding under Traces*

A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam 11 February – 13 March

Paul Geelen's installation *Sliding under Traces* (2016) in *A Tale of a Tub* gallery takes us into the domain of the humble snail. We follow its glistening slime trail, and even hear the creature chomping noisily. Or rather, creatures: in the atrium of the former public baths, under the auspices of the Dutch artist – who is in his mid-thirties and often works in the overlap between art and scientific research – dozens of escargots crawl over a suspended wooden grid covered in pink Plexiglas. On the ground floor we can see them from underneath, their grey slippery bellies slithering across the transparent ceiling. From the gallery they can be viewed from above; a gleaming plain dotted with numerous green-brown shells.

Meanwhile, unappetising slurping and unsavoury crunching resonates throughout the space. These are the sounds the snails produce, recorded with special equipment in a so-called anechoic studio and massively

amplified. From eight speakers, hung along an imaginary line that follows the cochleoid outline of a shell, a loud *grande bouffe des escargots* resounds. I am not wild about sound pieces, but this brash concert has a surreal beauty that tickles the cochleae in our own ears.

Underneath the ceiling stands a large glass display case. It is a shrine to the precious stuff around which everything here revolves: snail secretions. During the 1980s, a Chilean farmer from Concepción discovered that the mucus snails secrete moisturised his hands. When the healing and rejuvenating effect of the substance on human skin was proved scientifically, he set up a snail farm. A golden idea, because snail slime has become a basic ingredient in antiwrinkle cream. In the triple-limbed glass retort here, no less than the secret of eternal youth glistens. Lit from below, the bottle containing the milky white substance, like a display of cosmetics, looks magical and luxurious. It's also the result of an artistic

research process: this exhibition marks Geelen as the winner of the C.O.C.A. Foundation Art Prize (for young Netherlands-based artists), and stemmed from his travelling to Chile to look into and collect primary materials and recordings relating to the snail's youth-preserving capacities.

The Donald Judd-style grid, the beauty salon's shell-pink sheen, the glass grail containing the slime from the *Cornu aspersa* (Müller): several worlds come together in *Sliding under Traces*. Geelen combines art and nature, myth and science, and manages to transform the old baths into a source of eternal youth. Strange, nevertheless, to think that the escargot that makes wrinkles disappear is also, at other times, consumed as an hors d'œuvre. This may explain why, here, the promise of immortality is accompanied by deafening crunching. No beauty without disgust.

Dominic van den Boogerd

Translated from the Dutch by Suzanne Jansen



Sliding under Traces, 2016 (installation view).

Photo: Luciana Cupato

Courtesy the artist and *A Tale of a Tub*, Rotterdam