Scene of a Scene
Fact and Fiction in the Art of Tobias Kaspar

By Julia Moritz

(Next page) Untitled (NFS21-Purple and violet Wintercost, Greyhound, Gold White, Descending), 2018. Embroidery (84% WV, 11% VL, 5% PL), fleece, neoprene, thread. 51½ x 39½ in. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
OMNES VIAE ROMAM DUCUNT – all roads lead to Rome. 
In the case of Tobias Kasper this may hold true, given that 
Roma, just like Italo Calvino’s quintessential “invisible city,” 
Venetia, is a mirage. Or is it the road that really is fantasy? 
Getting a grip on the multifaceted work of Kasper is best 
started with The Street, a project sited in Rome and about 
Rome, too, his then place of residence, tied to New York, 
the art-world capital. A compound work, as is typical of Kasper’s 
practice, the project was presented in the form of a teaser 
in 2015 at the Istituto Svizzeri di Roma, as part of Art Basel 
Parcours, and culminated in a one-day event in 2016 in 
Rome’s legendary Cineteca Film Studios, accompanied by 
The Street Times, a project newspaper (a reprint of which 
was featured in issue no. 309, June–August 2016, of this 
magazine). Kasper described the complex choreography of 
the place, which took place at an outdoor studio film set used 
for Martin Scorsese’s epic crime drama Gangs of New York 
(2002, starring Leonardo DiCaprio), as “a twenty-four-hour 
theme park.” Wandering this Roman road, nothing was what 
it seemed to be: the makeshift gallery, the store that is more 
a concept, the very lights of that city of cities. Tackling the 
concoction of metropolitan life, and art’s dependence on it, 
this exemplary work is a testament to Kasper’s principal quest 
to present a making-of of civic imaginary itself.

That is: film, a recurring reference in Kasper’s work. The Devil 
Wears Prada, The Bling Ring, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s 
Nest, and Melancholia make up other cornerstones of 
Kasper’s more elaborate works. Their smallest common 
denominator? Madness in style, perhaps. In any case, 
there’s clearly something wrong with the social systems 
depicted; meanwhile the filmmaking itself stands out for 
it’s utter artfulness. And yet, Kasper has made no film work 
to date, except for three relatively plain videos, such as Hydra 
Life (2013), a half-hour silent close-up of Inka Meissner (the 
artist and co-owner of Lars Friedrich gallery in Berlin 
and protagonist in Loretta Fahrenholz’s early films) in a film-set-like 
changing room, wearing an elegant white batrobe and 
slowly applying moisturizer: an intimate backstage moment, 
a scene of a scene.

More directly than Kasper’s fascination with film, the art 
form of the literary novel transposes to practice proper: Leo 
Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina to Anna K (2017), a series of framed 
photographs of a tennis court underneath printed quotes 
from the novel; or Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of 
Tristram Shandy. Gentleman to Toby’s Tristram Shandy Shop 
(2015), a Berlin project space turned store for the sale 
of the rare original edition of the novel. Another novel, Alteus & 
Anorexia (2000) by art-world and -theory insider Chris Kraus (which I just happen to read while writing this text), proves 
particularly instructive in terms of what Kasper seems to be 
after with his use of both cinema and literature: “The ‘idea of 
the movie’ is that emotion is a place. It’s site-specific. Just as 
the optic nerve makes outlook cut-outs of objects for the 
brain to reassure, emotion happens in and out. It’s a symbiotic 
loop: a country that we enter through our bodies.”

So back to the roots: Tobias Kasper, Basel-born in 1984, 
now living and working in Zurich and up north near Riga 
where he keeps a country house with his Latvian-born partner 
and former collaborator, the curator Egija Inzule, and their child. 
The first work of his I saw consisted of a set of espresso cups 
and saucers, each printed on the inside with variations on the 
impossible statement “Ich wurde geköpf” – in reference to 
Danton’s pre-guillotine quote, “You can say, I’ll be beheaded. 
But you can’t say, I’ve been beheaded!”, as reported by the 
19th-century French writer Stendhal – and titled after the 
Italian cities where Stendhal once lived: L’Aquila, Firenze, 
Genova, Modena, Milano, Palermo, Pescara, Portofino, Pozzallo,

Roma, Trieste, Venezia (2011) – his contribution to the slightly 
headless super group show “Based in Berlin.” Besides the 
capital, Kasper has had German residencies in Frankfurt am 
Main, where he studied at the prestigious Städelschule, and 
otherwise north in Hamburg, where he experienced his first art- 
school years.

Which brings us back to the peculiar site-specificity in 
Kasper’s work – the fact and fiction residing right in between 
the geographic and the discursive as we know it. For 
example, Provence: Tobias Kasper the publisher, and his 
friend and fellow, the Hamburg-based art historian Hannes 
Loichinger, light-handedly relocated Provence, the geo- 
cultural region and layer cake of clichés (think Elle Decor) 
to PROVENCE, “the eight-issue magazine dedicated to 
hobbies,” with each issue corresponding to a letter of the title 
and dedicated to an associated activity, such as the most 
recently issue “C” (for “critique”). The magazine was launched 
in 2009, in Basel, with an exhibition of works by artist’s 
artist John Knight. The show also featured a survey on the 
advertisements created by Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, a French 
critic and collector of Conceptual Art whom Kasper would 
also address in his 2012 exhibition at Halle für Kunst Lüneburg 
( curated by Hannes Loichinger and Valerie Knoll), titled 
“Bodys in the Backdrop” (2012), after Elisabeth Lebowitz’s 
essay on Mollet-Viéville’s lifestyle and self-presentation. 
The site in Kasper’s work can thus be understood as 
predominantly a social site: “the place to be,” continuously 
recast by the beings at stake, a ready-made of relationships. 
Appropriation art – one may wonder whether its relevant 
to Kasper’s work. The notion of property provides a steady 
horizon for Kasper’s agile criticality. Like Kasper’s method 
of siting his work in ways specific to the thinking of and about 
a place, it’s the property of the mind, the most pernicious of 
properties, that forms the core of his interest. It is intellectual 
property more specifically, which performs as a protagonist 
in Kasper’s conceptual construct. Form follows function here 
too, and the intellectual property, the idea, which is to be 
released onto an ever-smarter market, becomes the prime 
site for the speculative function of capital in action. But 
capital is of course inherently relational, as does the Marxian 
mantra. Which is not to say – in general and in this artist’s 
work – that its immaterial form doesn’t materialize into all 
kinds of repositories for desire (see Kasper’s Das Leonardo 
DiCaprio Album, 2009). And it’s right there, precisely, at the 
intersection of idea and commodity, that a very peculiar 
feature of Kasper’s work occurs: it’s all made in such a way 
that you can never really tell if his object-works (including the 
photographic and painterly objects, for example the Untitled 
(150201) series of laser-engraved reflective fabric from 
2016) are intentional one-liners – a no-fills appropriation 
of commodification’s deadpan functioning to expose that fact 
alone – or if their well-crafted superficiality only serves as 
a thread in a broader tissue of contemporary skepticism, a 
flagship circumnavigating its product.

The short track from idea to function via desire is fashion. 
It paves its tarmac road right through the self, bulldozing 
towards, well, Milan rather than Rome. And Kasper’s work 
has seen plenty of runways, for example the show put 
together by the institution’s staff for the performance 
Warsaw Wardrobe at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw 
(2016); the “signature style” namesake collection of white denim 
for the white cube titled Holiday (launched at his institutional 
solo debut at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, 2013); 
or the heavy-metal footwear, a life-size pair of iconic shoes, 
cast in bronze, cut open, and polished only on the inside 
(1406 Dr. Martens, 2017). However, Kasper’s sampling of 
styles is knottier than this listing can imply. Emotion happens

(Next page, top) Installation view at Jenny’s, Los Angeles. Photography by Jeff McLane. 
Courtesy of the artist and Jenny’s, Los Angeles.

(Next page, bottom) Madame Walter Takes a Hand, 2010. C-Print, text printed on mat. 32.5 x 42.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
in and out. In other words, affect — affirmation, say — is produced by a short-circuited outer and inner stimuli. Yet while the outside fabrication of “a look” — subjectivity, say — is clearly bound up by institutional parameters, say those of the Museum of Modern Art, there’s that inner country of headless devotion, say critique, that Kaspar cuts up carefully, for the beholder to reassemble. Such laboring through the thicket of estrangement could also be understood as critique via over-affirmation, a deadly embrace.

Institutional critique — one may figure out, and ride another road to Rome. Or is it Romanticism? For Kaspar’s practice clearly outlined the idea of “the outside,” of a place for art beyond the realm of canonical racket or commercial contest. Kaspar’s friend and fellow traveler, Merlin Carpenter, has dealt with this question extensively in the essay that surrounded his solo exhibition “Midcareer Paintings” at Kunsthalle Bern (curated by Valérie Knoll). Carpenter concludes, “At the risk of directly saying what I mean, I suggest that the new revolutionary subject might be new groups, forming inside existing groups.” By breaking away from premade allegiances, the social systems of belief, new solidities are to arise from the ashes of burnt bridges. Roads to nowhere? Look at another group of works revolving around the “problem” (which it is) of residency, of home: Two Cities — Two Lives (at Solo Shows, in Tobias Maier’s apartment in Sao Paolo, 2015) reveals Kaspar’s personal investment into this question. Pitting his ever-blooming geo-cultural imaginary against the goliath of leisure industries, art included, Kaspar’s work faithfully remains at odds with its institutional context and its own function therein at all times — fully circaring the fantasies of fashion (fine feathers, fine people), publication (publish or perish), and leisure (when a habit costs money, it’s called a hobby).

It’s July 2018, some eight weeks before the much-anticipated solo exhibition at the much-respected Kunsthalle Bern (the Swiss capital), just after its hundredth anniversary. I browse the institution’s website and see: a colorful video clip of the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights, rotated by ninety degrees to smart-phone-screen format, which used to be called “portrait” format, suitable perhaps for the face looking at the screen but by no means to the landscape on view in the clip. Accompanied by meditative music and a French ad for ShareWood Switzerland, a forest investment company, the loop underneath the header “Independence” evokes a geography of desire, a heavily mediated concept of the surplus of elsewhere. I replay the muzak while writing, which efficiently makes a crucial fact drift almost into oblivion: the absence of any artist’s name attached to “Independence,” to the show, to the concept. Has the artist dissolved into a rural retreat’s blissful disconnection from art as a business as usual? Will the suggested investment into predominantly natural resources herald an ever-more-entangled grappling with renewable economic evil?

The invisible artist, just like the “invisible city,” is the one most present. What you see is what you get, what you imagine is what you really want. Present not as a place or a person to count on, to count in, or account for — and thus evading a basic equation of value production — but omnipresent as an apparition, as a devil in the details, as subjectivity as such: an “inscape” (Kraus) after all. Eliminating the given name from the exhibition is eliminating the solo from the show, or the mid from the career. What remains is not the much-sought-after space of one’s own, but some “haute collaboration” (Kaspar) indeed: a pretty social fabric or a roadmap to Romansh.

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“Independence” is on view at Kunsthalle Bern from September 22 to December 2, 2018.

1 Chris Kraus, Aliens & Anorexia, New York: Semiotext(e), 2000, p.131.

(Page 64) Untitled, 2016. Laser engraved reflective fabric (34% Ek, 34% Po, 32% G). 65 x 53 x 1.25 in.
Photography by Jeff McLane. Courtesy the artist and Jenny’s, Los Angeles.

(Page 65) Hunter (III), 2016. Bronze cast, partly polished. 11 3/4 x 11 x 2 in. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.
(Previous page, top) Warsaw Wardrobe (black to orange), 2017. Detail. Birch plywood, paint, screws, clothes, photos, paper, tabloid with mp4 file, incl. audio, with headset. 175 x 100 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
(Previous page, bottom) | Especially Hated People Making Love on My Bed, 2012. C-print, text on mat. 79 x 64 cm. Courtesy the artist.