

# KW



**Michael Stevenson**

***Disproof Does Not  
Equal Disbelief***

**3 July –**

**19 September 21**

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The exhibition *Disproof Does Not Equal Disbelief* by the Berlin-based artist Michael Stevenson (born 1964 in NZ) presents an unconventional survey of his practice over the past 35 years. Since the 1980s, Stevenson has developed an artistic language that operates at the juncture of economy, technology, education, and faith, exploring the infrastructural systems that underpin these disciplines. Here, early works are encountered alongside more recent large-scale installations and new commissions. Over the years the artist has adopted an anachronistic approach to his own practice, whereby fragmentation becomes a default mode to revisit older bodies of work, transforming the gallery into something akin to the boneyards of industry. The way in which the first five gallery spaces of the exhibition can be navigated was developed through analogy—that of a great fish or a whale’s digestive tract. In this way, architecture becomes anatomy and, by extension, the exhibits become studies in entrails. Provided with insights from the belly of our constructed world, Stevenson’s exhibition raises awareness that disproving rational theories does not automatically and irrevocably equal disbelief.

The first digestive chamber squeezes a series of early prints from the series *Call Me Immendorff* (2000–02) together with more recent inserts (2021). The outer perimeter of the room is lined in full with headline posters pulled from New Zealand newspapers: arranged chronologically, they form a timeline of events in and around the October 1987 share market crash. A counter-narrative to this is revealed in the concurrent daily reportage of German painter Jörg Immendorff’s, infamous residency in Auckland “IMMENDORFF IMMINENT,” “I HATE CHEAP CHAMPAGNE,” “JUNIORS BLAMED,” “ZOMBIE STOCK (...)” the coverage spins on. The voice is at once journalistic, sensational, tawdry, and banal, broadcast in monosyllabic phrases which, when consumed in bulk, recall concrete poetry or enigmatic tweets.

The next large-scale work spills across two chambers: it is digested in parts or bite-sized pieces. *Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare* (2014–21) concerns a phenomenon known as the “door problem,”—meaning the often-faced dilemma at a door: *push or pull?* The piece is dedicated to the mathematician José de Jesús Martínez (1929–91), who believed each time the wrong force was applied, i.e. a push instead of a pull, the resulting resistance proved the existence of the devil. The installation was built to test this curious belief and consists of two interactive free-standing hinged doors through which viewers are encouraged to pass.



Michael Stevenson, *GURUS PROBE FUTURE MIST*, from the series *Call Me Immendorff*, 2021; Courtesy the artist

At KW, Amazon’s in-house “door desk” (a desk made from a door) becomes the working door-model to be tested by the piece. Amazon understands this most cost-effective workstation as a legacy product and as a business model in 3D, foregrounding frugality as their founding ideology and corporate identity.

Testing these desks for their affordance as doors in this system draws together many of the exhibition’s themes—economy, technology, and belief. This is further reflected in a series of wall drawings, beginning from how-to instructions for the home-assembly of a door desk and proceeding to other Amazon pride tokens. They are drafted in the sparse hand-drawn style of the French Swiss graphic artist Annie Vallotton (1915–2013), known for her illustrations in the Good News Bible. Frugal of line, these drawings evoke an earlier account of proselytizing and global mass dissemination.

The doors are part of a larger system which, at unknown intervals, slyly changes the direction in which the doors open. Another part of the system is located in an inflatable chamber, already visible in the previous space; now it draws our attention back, prompting a reverse in the digestive process. A set of computer

games playing off against each other in this walk-in blackbox setting reveals a hydraulic system that updates the latest push or pull of each bedeviled door. Back at the doors; a small sticker depicting a Schiphol fly has been stuck to each face, nudging viewer's attention toward the doorhandles.

The digestion of works continues on into the last chamber, were several smaller spaces form the appendix. Stepping inside, one is confronted by a vast oversized cheque. Drawn on latex and stretched over the back wall, it details a six-digit figure. As if dredged from the depths of a TV prop room, the parties of this made-for-camera financial contract are the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand and a live-TV marathon charity fundraising event a.k.a. a telethon. Its rubbery, tacky, cartoony nature speaks to the underbelly of live TV, the exploitative nature of telethons and their phony transactional kayfabe logic. Pressed into the backside of this rubber cheque is a display of telethon memorabilia that becomes visible when one reverses, leaves the appendix and exits the alimentary tract. Stretching the stamina of participants, employing questionable means and instrumentalizing the desperate, exhausting nature of the live feed, telethons reflect on our current relationship with the logic of mass media.

The notion of a two-room model has long given structural guidance to Stevenson's practice. It is re-invented here via an anecdote regarding the studio habitus of American painter Philip Guston (1930–80): 'What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into frustrated fury about everything and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?' The artist's studio time in Woodstock, NY in the 1960s and 70s is said to have been split across two adjacent spaces: a painting space and a lounge room furnished with a large TV. The constantly flickering screen was a live-feed to the turbulence of the times. Guston's restless shuffle between two imaginary poles—between a mediated space and a sequestered space—speaks to a transaction at play that effectively breaks the 4th wall, a model in which architecture itself plays a significant role.

The two-room analogy is deployed on several occasions in the exhibition; most immediately, in the appendix, where it configures the media-saturated telethon room with a second space. Built from scaffolding and covered in a skin of shrink-wrap, it forms the second pole. Inside, a selection of early paintings and washes by Stevenson are hung in rows. Made in the late 1980s, they depict an assortment of stacked hymnbooks and offering-plates. These



Michael Stevenson, *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/CS183*, 2017–2019. Installation view, Monash University Museum of Art, 2019; Courtesy the artist, Michael Lett, Auckland and Fine Arts, Sydney; Photo: Andrew Curtis



Michael Stevenson, *Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle*, 2020/21; Courtesy the artist, Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland, and Fine Arts, Sydney

minimal, frugal, religious props point to an exploration of the evangelical worldview that runs as a leitmotiv through Stevenson's practice and influences the metaphorical and physical composition of his work. While their cartoonish outlines are reminiscent of Guston's paintings, their dates refer us back to Stevenson's artistic beginnings in New Zealand, in the moment of market failure and under Immendorff's imposing gaze.

Having left the chambered spaces, the exhibition now offers space for a post-digestive pause. Here, the viewer is presented with a birds-eye view of the work *Serene Velocity in Practice: MC510/C183* (2017/19), with which Stevenson transforms the large hall into a campus. The viewer's immersive experience consolidates Stevenson's ongoing interest in various conflicting knowledge structures, origin myths, or worldviews, and compares them directly side-by-side. The installation takes on architectural scale: two classrooms, each with an adjoining covered walkway, orient the campus toward KW's back doors, and beyond. The work is inspired by two historical tertiary-level courses that were taught in California and have until this project remained unrelated. Evangelical Christian pastor John Wimber taught *MC510: Signs and Wonders* in the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena between 1982–86. *CS183: Startup* was taught by the Silicon Valley libertarian and serial entrepreneur Peter Thiel in Stanford's Computer Science faculty in 2012. In another nod to the two-room model, the classrooms are experienced discretely, but their imminent proximity suggests a common ground. Moreover, the disparity of the content of the courses—one a practical course in faith-healing and exorcism, the other in startups, or how to build the

future—leaves architecture as the default common container and critical tool to explore broader understandings of education, technology and belief, and the entanglement of such institutions.

Exiting *CS183*, the walkway leads to a door and access to KW's garden, the extension of the campus grounds, where a custom bicycle rack, entitled *Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle* (2020/21), is installed. The piece references a prank Stevenson once stumbled upon. Its design incorporates an evangelical fish symbol and proclaims a world that is effectively less than 8,000 years old. As a practical joke, students extended the fish's symbolic affordance and added Darwinian legs, a claim now to its evolutionary emergence some 375 million years ago. Stevenson interprets and recreates the prank as a de facto meme, colliding entrenched assumptions as a series of layered negations.

A two-volume publication designed by Will Holder will accompany the exhibition. It brings together contributions by art historian Anna Parlane and writer Heike Geißler with a plethora of voices. Published together with Sternberg Press and Kunststituut Melly, it will provide a print-based analogue to the exhibition.

## Public Program

Film screening *Serene Velocity* (1970)

Directed by Ernie Gehr, USA

With an introduction by film curator and writer Madeleine Bernstorff, followed by a conversation between Bernstorff, Michael Stevenson and KW curator Anna Gritz

3 July 21, 9:30 pm

Venue: KW Courtyard

Please register in advance via [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de).

In English

Guided tour through the exhibition with curator

Anna Gritz

4 July 21, 2 pm

In German

Admission: included in exhibition ticket

Focus tours

4 and 18 August, 1 September 21, 5 pm

Venue: KW and KW Digital

Please register in advance via [mediation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:mediation@kw-berlin.de).

*Black Swan: The Communes*

Black Swan DAO

27–28 August 21, 4 pm

Venue: KW

Please register in advance via [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de).

Book Launch Michael Stevenson

11 September 21, 3 pm

Venue: KW Courtyard

Please register in advance via [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de).

In English

Guided tour through the exhibition with assistant

curator Léon Kruijswijk

16 September 21, 7 pm

In English

Admission: included in exhibition ticket



Michael Stevenson, (sketch for a wall drawing), 2021; Courtesy the artist

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### Opening Hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm  
Thursday 11 am–9 pm  
Closed on Tuesday

### Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €  
berlinpass holders 4 €  
Free admission to visitors up to and including 18,  
Friends of KW and Berlin Biennale, and  
KW Lover\* cardholders  
Free admission to all visitors on Thursday evenings  
from 6–9 pm

### Tours with KW Guides

During regular opening hours, from Monday to Friday,  
visitors of KW can participate in short introductions to  
the exhibitions by the KW Guides. Please reach out to  
our staff at the ticket counter. Participation is free of  
charge.

### Public Guided tours

Saturday 17 + 31 July, 14 + 28 August, and  
11 September, 4 pm, in English  
Sunday 11 + 25 July, 8 + 22 August / 5 and  
19 September, 4 pm, in German  
Admission: included in exhibition ticket.  
Participation only after prior registration with  
Museumsdienst Berlin. Limited capacity.

Museumsdienst Berlin  
Tel.: +49 (0)30 247 49 888  
(Mon–Fri: 9 am–3 pm, Sat–Sun: 9 am–1 pm)  
museumsdienst@kulturprojekte.berlin

### Hygiene measures

In accordance with the applicable standards of the  
State of Berlin, comprehensive hygiene measures  
have been taken to protect visitors and staff. The total  
number of visitors permitted into each floor of the  
exhibition is limited and depends on the current  
regulations. Updated information will be available on  
our website. Wearing a FFP2 mask is obligatory during  
your stay at KW. We ask you to observe the cough  
and sneeze etiquette. Disinfectant dispensers are  
available for you at the entrance.

Please only visit KW if you feel healthy.  
We look forward to your stay!

### Colophon

Curator: Anna Gritz  
Assistant Curator: Léon Kruijswijk  
Public Program and Outreach: Linda Franken,  
Sarah Wessel  
Head of Production: Claire Spilker  
Technical Management: Wilken Schade  
Head of Installation, Media Technology: Markus Krieger  
Installation Team: KW Installation Team  
Registrars: Monika Grzymislawska,  
Carlotta Gonindard Liebe  
Education and Art Mediation: Katja Zeidler, Duygu Örs  
Press and Communication: Natanja von Stosch,  
Janine Muckermann  
Text and Editing: Anna Gritz, Michael Stevenson,  
Léon Kruijswijk  
Translation: Lutz Breitingner  
Trainee: Sofie Krogh Christensen  
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Hofmann, Sophie Huguenin, Orphée Ibrahim,  
Justin Mamat, Maria Papadouli, Janina Schnitzler

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*Disproof Does Not Equal Disbelief* is co-presented in  
partnership with Kunststituut Melly (Formerly known  
as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art) in  
Rotterdam, where a previous iteration was presented  
from September 20, 2020–March 21, 2021.

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