



“Make Class Warfare Fun Again!”

David Robbins talks to Jacob Fabricius about the online exhibition, *100 Wall Safes*

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Jacob Fabricius, Director of Art Hub Copenhagen: I am ecstatic about your imaginary vaults in 100 Wall Safes. There is something mind-blowingly cheeky about this online exhibition of yours.

David Robbins: They state the obvious then launch it into space. Collectors hang investments on their walls? Into assetization, are you? Have at it! Amazing, really, that no one had gotten

to the idea of wall safes yet. Of course there also has to be something about the execution which is pleasurable on its own terms and transcends mere idea...

It is a very convoluted project and embraces an absurd face value of the art market. Would you agree?

The Wall Safes are strange flowers grown from inorganic soil. Their subtext is twisty because the art system has become absurd – sort of a victim of its own success. Contemporary art is completely institutionalized, conforming to the needs and rituals of the venues that display it. The art system's worldwide expansion reinforces a narrowing definition of art as "something made for its marketplace." That's what I mean by "inorganic soil." It has a hollowing effect on art, which makes art more susceptible to manipulative strategies of unnatural selection. From another vantage, it's a subject ripe for comedy.

The project talks about value, fictional value, and has a value in itself (you are selling them as NFTs through The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, and Misako & Rosen, Tokyo). The 100 Wall Safes appear as beautiful gold and/or jewel encrusted Wunderkammers - each of them has their own unique appearance. They are somehow timeless - futuristic but at the same time I can't help thinking about old art nouveau architecture in Bruxelles or the Danish 1970s jewelry designer Arje Griegst. What inspired their design?

In their ostentation the *Safes* sell a fantasy of wealth that's both glamorous and grotesque. Their visual style mixes Baroque and sci-fi, Rococo and Cartier, with here and there a dash of Giger or a sprinkling of early Roxy Music. Stir artificially. The results are both futuristic and nostalgic for periods that may never have been, quite. Their impossibility is then contradicted by photographic verisimilitude. They seem real, at the same time they suggest something out of reach.

Can you reveal how you have constructed them?

No big secret. I made them by fooling around with artificial intelligence. I know that some find AI creepy but it's conducive to experimenting at high speed. I'm not a responsible technologist type artist who loses sleep over the larger implications of the tools I'm using to communicate. I'm a high entertainer using available tools to create contemporary synthetic experience. The result is sometimes more radical than art. But this is a much larger conversation. Warp speed production is also useful because I no longer allow making things

for the art system to take up too much of my time; I have books to write. Look, art is faith-based – our belief in it is what makes art “go” – and I discovered decades ago, during an active career as a “professional contemporary artist,” that I’m just not a believer. If you’re not a believer, all that’s left is the theater of it. But with the right idea, “the theater of it” is plenty! Good is good, it doesn’t matter how you arrive at it.

An NFT is an embedded safe in itself – a constructed, fictional value, some might say. What is your relation to NFTs?

“A constructed, fictional value” – you’ve hit the nail on the head, Jacob. An NFT is a kind of cartoon of the premise that underwrites the worth of any artwork. With an NFT, not only is the art’s value a construct but the instrument of valuation is as well.

I’ve been thinking about assetization and wall safes for a while. Initially I thought about making them as physical things – paintings or prints or sculptures for the wall – but then I figured out that I could just make a gallery in the computer and create an exhibition that way. Much more modern. [That became the first iteration of the *Wall Safes*.](#)

How do most of us see art and exhibitions? Via a photograph of an artwork or a video of an exhibition. In that respect an exhibition made in the computer – invented “artworks” hanging in a 3D “gallery” – and rendered as an animated video occupies the same plane of reality as the way that the majority of exhibitions of physical artworks reach us. Who cares whether it’s actual? Isn’t communication the point? By the way, I think it’s safe to say there aren’t a lot of people in their sixties who have taught themselves Cinema4D… I like this approach well enough – it’s fast, it’s inexpensive, and there’s virtually no storage – that I don’t anticipate ever needing to make another physical exhibition. The *100 Wall Safes* share in this philosophy. *How have you worked with NFTs in the past?*

A few years ago The Green Gallery presented an NFT of a short video called [*Retrospective*](#), at the June Fair at Art Basel. It was a good experience. No shipping, no storage, no fuss. Leaves the hands free to do other work.

Adapting a question posed by an early Richard Hamilton work, just what is it that makes today's NFTs so different, so appealing?

The NFT has survived its very public boom and bust. What is it now? Is an NFT a trading

card, a casino chip, an artwork? All three at once? The NFT may be a nervous form but it isn't going away. Digital technology has been too widely distributed, people are not going to stop innovating digital communication, and it's logical that there be some way to digitally value a digital creation, whether or not we end up titling it by as awkward an acronym as the current one.

The Wall Safes are very inexpensively priced. I take it that's part of the content?

Sure. First off, they could be assigned to another, art-adjacent category of invented communication — as you know, I'm interested in high entertainment and concrete comedy; see my books about them — and the pricing ought to reflect that ambiguity. Secondly, the *Wall Safes* are priced to participate in two economies Where the pop economy looks to sell as many affordable units as possible and the fine art economy wants to sell the unique thing for the highest possible price, the point of intersection of the two economies is unstable. That instability appeals to me.

Selling art for a lot of money — personally I was never comfortable with that. Even in the early days, when I was at the white hot center of things in downtown New York, after working for Warhol, then educating myself by doing interviews with artists, eventually finding my way to Nature Morte in the East Village, mid-'80s, very happy years, the market side of art never inspired me. I sold things, sure, but I was in it for the intellectual fun — an attitude toward the art game that used to be common then but, due to the cost of an art education today and the cost of real estate, is more rare now.

How does this series relate to your previous work?

The *Wall Safes* relate to early works like *Talent* and *The Art Dealers' Optical Tests* and the lesser known *Demographics* series – all instances of comedic anthropology. When I think about art I tend to identify a pattern in the art system and freeze it in a form that displaces the pattern. From the beginning, the role of the artist was my material; I've always been more interested in the mortar than the brick. What *Talent* did forty years ago, crystalizing the contemporary artist's role in business civilization with the entertainer's headshot, the *Wall Safes* may well do for assetization!

We collaborated on your book Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy. How does the idea of Concrete Comedy relate to this new body of work?

The *Wall Safes* are concrete comedy. I'm positioning real-world systems to produce comedic theater. Concrete comedy is the comedy of doing rather than saying. And it's not make-believe. Happily, concrete comedy can be adapted to the new digital conditions, it's not just an analog thing.

I'm not concerned to contribute to art history, I'm about contributing to and extending the history of comedy. I'm not in cynical relation to art, I'm in sincere relation to comedy. It's there my refinement is located, and my artistry, such as it is.

You have been in and out of the art game for a very long time.

That's a larger conversation but yes, after very active participation I withdrew from the art system, more than a dozen years ago now. I wanted to find out what my imagination did on its own, without its being constantly formatted to think in terms of exhibitions, as is the way of the "professional contemporary artist," a model I inherited from my time in New York but ended up rejecting. The artist doesn't just make art, he or she also makes a model of the artist. Turns out that, unprompted, I wrote books and made videos, which I think of as personal television. Any modern person is deeply imprinted by many kinds of synthetic experience – TV, movies, pop music – not just art, and this entertainment imprinting, when not suppressed in the name of art, results in a very different kind of imagination, one which I consider to be more free than the artist's, whose goal is, invariably and to my mind narrowly, art. My mind has generated other imaginative categories – concrete comedy, high entertainment... I don't identify as an artist but as a one-man entertainment company, approaching entertainment through material culture rather than traditions of performing or story-telling. My fidelity is to my own imagination, as everyone's should be, and I accepted long ago that no professional context exists for the way my imagination works. I well know what the art world can and can't give me. I'm not angling for a comeback! From long experience I know that the art world and I don't see eye to eye, pun intended.

How do you see the art circuit now? Clearly you've taken note of the changes in the gallery's role within the art market and in the way collectors purchase works for their investment value.

I see the situation in terms of supply and demand. What in the art equation has permanently changed? Supply. Fifty years ago contemporary art was a fragile thing made by a few dozen people in a few cities, and supported by a handful of museums, colleges, and alternative spaces. Today we have a guaranteed supply of the stuff, with thousands of self-identified

contemporary artists around the globe, each of whom is producing dozens, in many cases hundreds of artworks a year. With the supply guaranteed, power moves out of the hands of artists and up the food chain, into the hands of non-artists – dealers, curators, collectors, investors – who direct an unceasing flow of product. Art becomes whatever best serves their aims, which has the effect of reinforcing a narrow definition of the “artist” as someone who makes marketable objects for the art system. Which development, I contend, warps the organic evolution of the artistic imagination. Assetization, where the art’s principal “meaning” is its value in the commercial marketplace, is a symptom of control having moved out of artists’ hands and up the food chain. A “buy low, sell high” narrative, of going from less to more – art as the land of opportunity! – has become the narrative that overrides all others. Is that what art is for? Maybe we ought to view assetization as a tax on the acceptance of modern art and its progeny, contemporary art.

Who or what are the *Wall Safes* mocking? Well, who is it that has directed the assetization of the art object? The poor? Of course greed isn’t limited to the rich, they just get more times at bat! Assetization, financialiization — call it what you will, it has infected everyone’s perception. We now look at art self-consciously, through the prism of market value. Mocking the prism is the least favor we can do ourselves.

image: David Robbins, *Wall Safe #89*