



IV

# Gardar

# Eide

Installation view from Gardar Eide Einarsson: Power Has A Fragrance, 2011, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: Nils Klünger  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York



By Margherita Dessanay  
Photography by Carol Sachs

# Einarsson

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*The Thing*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 213,4 x 182,9 cm  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York

Encounters

WHERE IS

THE

BOMB?



Installation view from Gardar Eide Einarsson: Judge, 2007, Team Gallery, New York  
 Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York



Norwegian artist Gardar Eide Einarsson landed in the US the day before 9/11 and, even though his art avoids direct reference to the event, the artist has been exploring the fallout from it (the bureaucracy, the paranoia, etc.) in challenging visual narratives. Margherita Dessanay caught up with the artist as he was busy putting up his show at Maureen Paley's.

When I arrive at the gallery for my meeting with Norwegian artist Gardar Eide Einarsson, he welcomes me in the room where his works are still in the process of being installed and hung. Canvases painted in graphic black and white lie on the floor, as if resting up before a bout of activity.

I cannot resist the temptation to start the conversation with a basic question I have had in mind since I first saw his work. Why black and white? I ask him. 'All my images are taken from other existing images. Painting them in black and white is a way of making it clear that they come from somewhere else. It is a sort of photocopy idea. They are not a representation of the world but a representation of those other images.'

On closer inspection, his 'photocopy-like' canvases reveal the kinds of marks associated with 'proper' paintings. The dripping and imprecisely defined contours are opposed to the simple idea of a photocopy. 'These tricks are intended to undermine the craft a little bit. Undermining in the sense that my paintings are bad paintings, they're not very well executed. I don't want them to be impressively done. If there is this exaggerated painterly gesture, it is because I want it to be clear that they are about the act of *painting* these images. My paintings are about the image they come from, but they are also about the act of pulling them into the art space. It is in that moment that the images represented gain a totally different meaning compared to their original context. Part of my work consists in pulling them all together into a sort of larger narrative, where they are forced to take on a different meaning. When I think about a single work, I think of it in association with other works and in their relationship – in the way one work is able

to take away authority from another one and so on.'

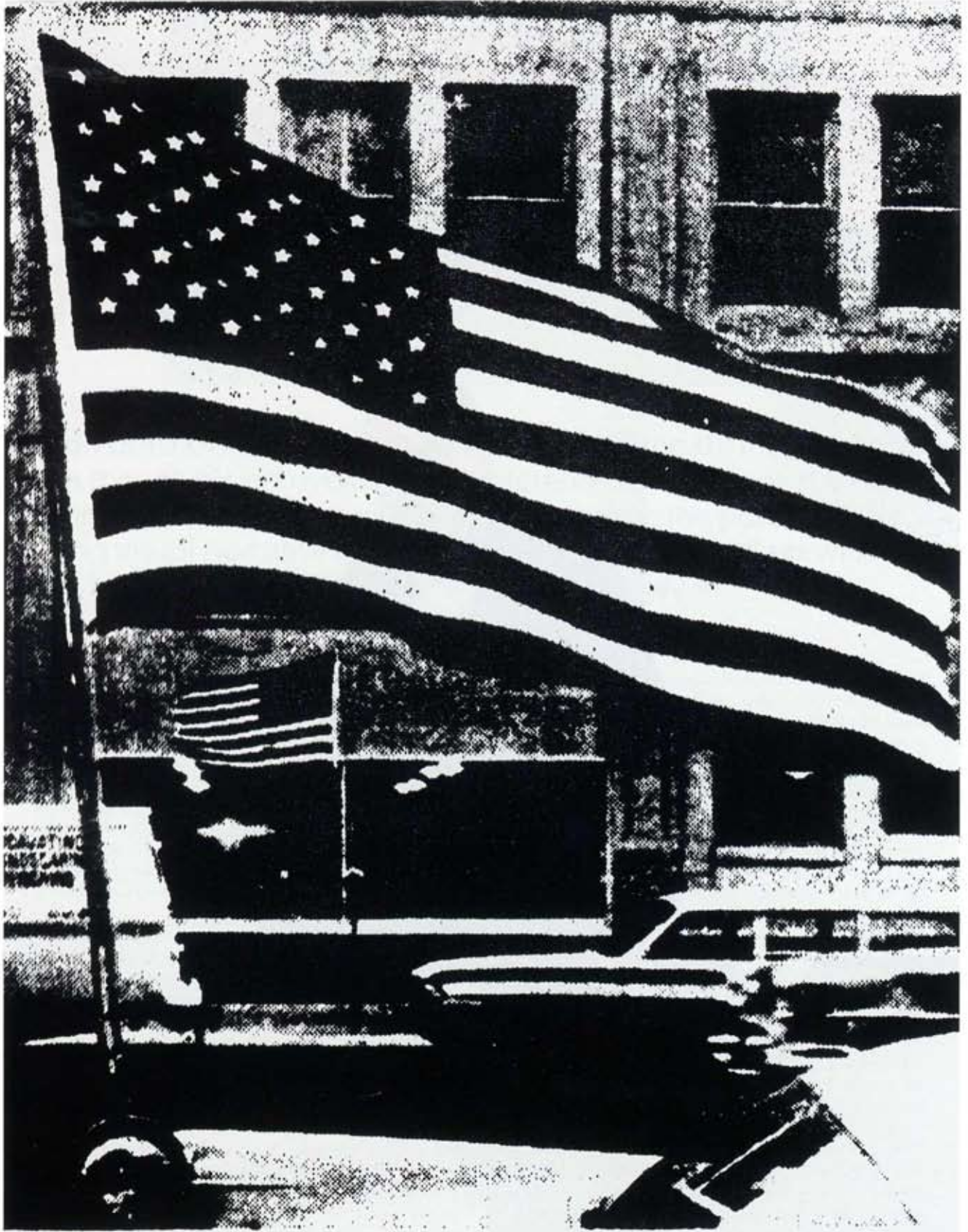
For his repertoire of images, Einarsson draws inspiration from disparate sources: posters, newspaper photographs, manuals of various kinds, leaflets, etc. 'I collect all these images and I usually have them around for a long time. I collect this massive repertoire of images. Sometimes I look at one and think: "Oh, I want to do this!" But usually, when I like one image I don't really know how to put it into a narrative. I usually come back to it and put it together with others. Afterwards, I decide if the image should be a silk print or an ink print or even inked on some heavier support and be more sculptural. It depends on what other things will be shown at the same time, so as to try to subvert the original meaning a little bit.'

#### Images like words

Einarsson's creativity has a narrative dimension. Every piece functions like a word in a story. In a novel, words make sentences, sentences make paragraphs, then chapters; the story emerges through this structural concatenation. In the same way, Einarsson creates with a 'narrative' mind. His interest in a single piece is always connected with a larger plan, developed through years of accumulation of images and ideas. Sometimes a reader is guided through complex narratives with the help of footnotes. Being in the presence of the author, I cannot but take advantage of the situation and I ask Einarsson to guide me through the works.

First we look at *Problems of Wind Direction*. 'The image is from a police manual on how to deal with crowds. For a lot of the work I do I use old manuals, often police manuals.





*Problems of Wind Direction*, 2011, silkscreen on canvas, 87.9 x 119.9 cm  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York

## PROBLEMS OF WIND DIRECTION

## For me the way language is used in these kinds of situations is interesting. There is some kind of absurdity in that kind of authoritarian language

This is from a chapter on tear gas and it is about how to take into account wind direction when using it. Apparently, my work is just illustrative, but here the wind is blowing in two different directions and the flags go in two separate ways. I think it is a bit humorous. It's just a very standard portrayal of a flag but then the other one comes out as really subversive. It has a shifted meaning with the flags going in two separate ways. It becomes ridiculous rather than heroic.'

Einarsson uses the strongest symbol of American culture here, the flag, questioning – if not undermining – the values it embodies. He moved from Norway to the US the day before 9/11. His art never refers to the event directly, but the cultural consequences of it are a constant thematic thread in his narratives. 'When 9/11 happened, and even in the year just after, I didn't think that it was so important to me. But looking back at it, it became very much part of the work, not so much the event itself, but the kind of environment that developed right afterwards. It really became a weird paranoid environment. Paranoia is something really present in my work, something that I constantly try to work with. Paranoia is intended as a way to force the signs (like the flag in my work) to be something they are not, to force everything into a master narrative. I did feel that that influenced the work a lot.'

In front of us is a work that reproduces a bomb checklist. Its typographic treatment and graphic layout remind me of the questionnaire you have to fill in at US borders and the almost surreal situation of being asked to say candidly whether one is carrying bombs or nuclear material. 'For me the way language is used in these kinds of situations is interesting. There is some kind of absurdity in that kind of authoritarian language that is used. That bomb checklist started with concrete questions like "where is the bomb?"

or "what kind of bomb is it?" and it is transferred into abstract questions like "who are you?" It just becomes something that all of a sudden does not make logical sense, like a subversive song.'

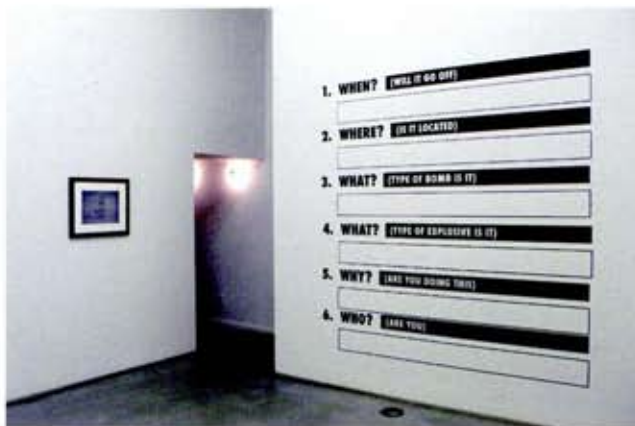
This creative strategy is even clearer in the work *death/Death*, a dictionary-like painted definition taken from the lexicon of a comic book, as the explanatory text makes clear. 'This work has this idea of an absurd type of language again. It's about an ungraspable event like death, but it explains it in a comic-book language.'

### Narrative spaces

Einarsson's sources are varied and subtle. For them to work together requires an engaged spectator. Once again, the comparison with narrative is evident. His visual language is like a verbal one, making a continuous interplay between images, sentences, internal connections and external references that are not always immediately accessible. 'I think about my work in a very literary way. I consider all my work very textual and titles are very important. This very strong textual dimension is not just in the works that have text. I think writing is very similar to my way of working around things. I especially like poetry because it's non-linear.'

I ask him if the subtlety and non-linearity of his work risks causing misunderstandings or misreadings of his work. 'I am not scared of that. It happens a lot, actually! It's something I think about a lot because I don't want to make work only for people who have the same background as me. I hope that the work has these different levels of entry, where different backgrounds can lead to different and equally useful interpretations. But I do for sure think that if you see just a few pieces it's easy to misunderstand and I really don't mind that, I sort of like it. I think it is a fruitful opportunity that somehow can lead me to a revision of how my art works. But I think that if you see more than one of my shows it is difficult to misunderstand my work. Part of it is because you see it in the space of an art gallery. One of the misunderstandings that I don't really like is when people are comparing my work to street art, which I think has nothing in common with my discourse. My art wouldn't work in that context. One is expected to spend time understanding what is in an art space, and that is the reason why I think it is possible to play with misunderstanding.'

Although Einarsson considers the art gallery to be most suitable context for reading his work, a couple of years ago he created a piece for a high school in Norway. He reproduced a quote from the novel *Valis* by Philip K. Dick on its walls. The text says: 'Those who agree with you are



Untitled (Bomb Checklist), 2007, vinyl wall lettering  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York







Installation view of Gardar Einarsson: Power Has A Fragrance, 2011, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: Nils Klinger  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London and Team Gallery, New York



insane/Those who don't agree with you are in power/Some of those in power are insane/And they are right.' Einarsson used it as a sort of motto for the students of the school. 'I found it quite surprising that they had accepted something so challenging. It is especially interesting considering that I have lived in the US for over ten years now and this would be completely impossible there. I tried to play on this kind of school motto and the typical statements that you can expect in this kind of institution, but in a confusing way. The quote is super-confusing. It's also related to some fascist or totalitarian imagery that I use a lot. The one thing that fascism or totalitarianism don't want is confusion. Their imagery is very direct and clear. So, by using that imagery in a confusing way, the work undermines them. It's funny that a lot of the misunderstandings that surround my work are the opposite of what I think my work is about. According to some, it has a really macho language. But for me it is about a sort of critique of that kind of language, of this kind of totalitarian imagery, of painting as a kind of masculine gesture.'

Einarsson keeps returning to many sources, visual and textual. Every piece has different layers of reference, and – when put together – the paintings engage in a cross-referenced play of connections and resonances. I imagine that for something like this to happen, the research part must be extremely time-consuming. 'Yes, that's the hard part. Making the work is not the main labour. I've studied Fine Art in Norway, in Germany and in New York. I wasn't that kind of kid that has always wanted to be an artist and paint all the time. When I started being seriously interested in art it was through quite radical works. It was through Conceptual Art and Institutional Critique. It was the dominant model of thought in the school that I went to. That was my background and that was the kind of art that made me want to be an artist. But I am not really interested in critique as a sort of judgement, rather as a form of investigation. For me,

what is interesting about art is that you don't have to have a completely mapped-out idea of what your art is about. It can be about certain themes that interest you and about how to circle around them without having to come from a convinced standpoint. There are no other intentions than describing some themes I find interesting. It is a presentation. It is like saying: "Look, I think that these themes are interesting and I am having an ongoing dialogue with them. Join me if you'd like to!"

#### Violence and paranoia

In approaching the complex net of ideas and themes that run through Einarsson's work, the strong visual drive should not be overlooked. Looking at the work *Japan Protest (After Paolo Uccello)*, I am reminded of the Occupy movement and the protests occurring nowadays all over the globe. Do they have some fascination for this artist often interested in forms of social and political discontent? 'Aesthetically, there is something about the Occupy phenomenon that I am not interested in. I feel that it is very controlled and that in its own way it is very politically correct. And I am more interested in weird and uncontrolled eruptions of anger. The image for *Japan Protest* is, again, from a police manual. What I like is that the image in itself is so abstract. It's just a protest, a moment of eruption of violence where different fronts and views clash. Form-wise, I liked it and it reminded me of Paolo Uccello's paintings of medieval battles. It was just an archetypal clash of opposing forces. The work is a re-presentation of these ideas as art. It is not about the specific event anymore. Its flatness and coldness make the image sort of allegorical. The image is also so low-resolution that it becomes just an encounter of black and white abstract forces.'

The last work we look at together is a painted text that says simply 'In the Dust of This Planet'. 'It's the cover of a recent non-fiction book.' This book, by Eugene Thacker, proposes the horror genre as a way of thinking about and understanding reality in its most terrible aspects. Although Einarsson may refer to the content of the book, his work also speaks to people who have no knowledge of the book. 'I've done a few of these paintings that are just book covers, where just the text is left and all the other images are taken out. In this way, it becomes a really abstract language that is forced to go into the narrative created by the other works exhibited with it. The way art can put all of them together is similar to how paranoia works. Every single thing is tweaked into a specific world-view. My whole work is about how much you can trust images and how much you can trust text. For this to happen, I think that to some extent my pieces can never be outside of the art institutions. That institution can follow them along; they are tainted by it. And I can't escape that, because as an artist that is the way I have to work.'