

# *Riegel*

## Jan Hüskes

### 8 October – 1 November 2025

On September 2nd, I received the following email with descriptions from Jan Hüskes related to an upcoming show titled, *Riegel* at Gratin.

“Attached you’ll find a file with some images of the elements that will be part of the installation in NYC. The final selection of parts and the way they will be installed will be decided on site, since the space is hard to grasp from photos. I’ve tried to describe what the photos show, though it may feel a bit abstract when reading (check photos beforehand). It might be easiest if we simply talk about it in person.

The installation consists of two large wooden/cardboard pieces. Each is a sequence of stacked profiles or units, made in different wood types and sizes, yet all sharing a similar basic form. One of these sequences is topped by another sequence of wooden and cardboard chairs: two wooden chairs and four cardboard chairs. Each pair of cardboard chairs is topped by a wooden one. The seats of the chairs are replaced by frames that will hold passepartouts: the cardboard chairs will hold wooden passepartouts, while the wooden chairs will hold cardboard ones. All chairs are rather small (about 50x25x25cm).

In addition, there are three pine trees (Christmas trees): one has been peeled, tied into a specific form, and covered in glitter. I might add my collection of small shiny fragments/objects that I picked up on the streets over two years. Two trees are cast in plaster within cylindrical molds, which are then cut into beams (much like cutting a tree into lumber). One of these trees is cast horizontally and then placed on two additional wooden chairs which will hold passepartouts but also glass plates. The other is chopped into pieces that are then cast vertically. It then is arranged, imitating the basic form of the wooden sequences mentioned above” (Jan Hüskes).

This description is impressive on many levels. The clarity of sequence in thought, contradictions and adjectives are stimulating but one word jumped out as strange; not only as a French word but one not often used in the United States. We would use “mat board” to describe the material that is a cardboard cut out placed between a frame and the picture plane to “protect” the artwork. (ChatGPT has informed me that its existence is more than protective and even claims that it is an important tool to separate the picture from its environment and the frame and that it is one of the most original forms of picture presentation).

I googled “passepartout”. A quick search to determine the origin of the strange word revealed typically unexpected responses.

Synonyms included: master key, passkey, skeleton key and pass anywhere.

According to my search, the word is a literary derivative from “a point of view” character called Mr. Passepartout, found in the Jules Verne novel “Around the World in Eighty Days”. In this novel, Passepartout is a “comic relief- point of view character” in that his reaction to strange places and to the events he encounters leave him with a tendency to get trapped, abducted or, on at least one occasion, left behind.

I am off and running now.

This is so fun.

If storytelling is essential to the actual making of artworks as well as the making of artwork’s public..... (the very set of visual frames given to an artwork relieves the viewer of the difficulties encountered when trying to say

anything about abstraction sound plausible) .....then at the highest level, a good story should reflect its audience and harbor that sense of reflection within the complex bundle of decisions and ideas that make an artwork.

The horizontal orientation of the installation, *Riegel*, is full of direction and duration. If there is a narrative here it carries a pastoral landscape of tribal proportions. It is produced largely with the material of human built habitats and campfires. At once driven by the expectation of building stable structures for protection and the liminal impulses of destruction.

Planks of wood organized into seemingly natural dimensions of varied lengths move along until they begin to tangle and swallow the stability of the chairs in a provocative, surprising dance that disturbs the flow but is not an entirely unpleasant moment along the way. The shapes created are clear, comprehensible, capacious in their expansive role.

Another bundle of planks, with beautifully detailed fissures, lie at an adjacent angle and both are balanced in an active, precarious tilt. It's as if they are the remnants of a shipwreck. Identifiable now only as property belonging to no apparent owner.

Two chairs stand steadfast and connected by a plaster cast of chopped christmas tree near the angled moment of the wood bundles. One chair is offering a vertical dimension, perhaps a theatrical comic relief moment to the very charged thought of discarded post christmas trees. In an extraordinary way, Jan has managed to mummify and distill mixed feelings of horror and joy.

I did meet up with Jan at BAR DU MATIN in Brussels a few weeks ago. We went through the images he had attached to his description email. It is the reason we are meeting in person. Some things I mention he respectfully ignored and tended to elaborate on something else, moving in another direction all together. This deflective device perhaps protects the private stories that make up his reasons for making art.

Perhaps they make up the most random and thrilling moments in the narrative.

Yesterday, I received a small video of the installation in process; evidence that tomorrow's opening will happen. I am surprised. My first impressions are from the initial images sent in September and are now in need of proof. Things have evolved, new things have appeared. More meaning has accrued. Tiny objects tangled in a bronze castaway branch of a christmas tree that was mentioned but never revealed appears. Two beautifully crafted composite elements mien, lingering at the sidelines. I have the feeling I am missing the micro stories that are at work in this installation. The details, the half stories, the hints of distant, larger scenarios. I wonder if artificial intelligence will be able to create a story like this. I wonder about the visceral encounter with *Riegel*. What could it yield? I imagine access.

– Rita McBride