

Art

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■ Roman Vasseur

Austrian Cultural Institute London June 12 ongoing

The protagonist of Bram Stoker's famous novel, an English man by the name of John Harker, is first described by the author as being in a feverish state, babbling about a monstrous force he has encountered. The nurses who care for him do not know whether the horror he describes is fact or fiction and by the end of this most famous book, Harker himself does not know whether his subsequent struggle against the evil force was real or imagined; or, as the writer Elizabeth Bronfen suggests, whether the evil force was an hallucination, that is, an episode of hysteria.

On June 12, a wooden crate arrived at the Austrian Cultural Institute, packed with earth from the Borgo Pass in Transylvania. The one metre cubed box of soil was harmless enough, as verified by the exhibited documentation. In fact the crate had been awarded a phytosanitary certificate in Romania which guaranteed that the cube of Transylvanian dirt posed no threat to the European Union environment. And the artist responsible for the consignment, Roman Vasseur, has been keen to communicate the ordinariness of the box and its contents, both in literature for the exhibition and in interviews for the press. In an image accompanying the box the artist can be seen digging for the soil he sent to London. Not top soil, I was informed, which teams with vertebrate life but sub soil, excavated from 12 feet below the earth's surface. Vasseur has even gone so far as to say that all attempts had been made throughout the project to avoid referencing the myths associated with Eastern Europe and Transylvania; which of course was a convenient way of drawing attention to such

myths (and also the ways in which a viewer might start to build myths around Vasseur's crate). After all, didn't Bram Stoker's *Dracula* transport a number of crates to England and is it not claimed, on good authority, that vampires cannot travel over water and so line their coffins with earth?

Of course there is another sub-text to Vasseur's ordinary box of earth which, but for its origin and documented journey, might have passed as an innocent piece of post-minimalist sculpture or an homage to Walter De Maria. Exhibiting work that comments on immigration and the European Union risks didacticism but Vasseur avoids this by allowing the narratives that the box accumulates on its travels to suggest complex allegories. The box entered the EU through the border between Hungary and Austria, the latter having gained bad press internationally for appointing fascists and racists to its ruling political institutions. From Austria the box travelled to Britain, which has recently revealed its own racist core when William Hague introduced the term 'bogus asylum seekers', causing many a British subject's pulse to beat faster. Into this context Vasseur sent his consignment of earth, which I was told by the curator of the show, Anthony Auerbach, is a

guest of the Austrian Cultural Institute. The box has been invited to stay indefinitely. Initially it seems, the crate of soil was conceived of as something like a commercial venture in which interested parties could purchase shares: 73 share certificates were purchased in all. But the box has had problems in travelling to London (again this is something that is documented but might equally be another layer of fiction). Somehow the box crossed the borders of Hungary and Austria without being examined or documented and so did not exist in the eyes of the Austrian authorities. The crate was thus a bogus consignment. Only some obscure rule allowed the box to be flown to London without the need for further investigation.

Vasseur's project is timely but not heavy-handed and it allows the Austrian Cultural Institute to voice some concern over the recent turn of events in Austria, even if it is a symbolic gesture. The Institute's planned programme of exhibitions has been interrupted by the arrival of the box of earth from Romania, its guest for the near future. This work transcends political commentary and gesture in its exploration of how an ordinary, banal substance such as soil from foreign parts can gather so much ideological and mythical baggage; a process which, if you possess a safe European home, is difficult to disassociate yourself from. *500 pounds of common earth, 1 meter cubed, Transylvania to London* is not much to look at but it exposes a number of myths, both new and old. ■

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Roman Vasseur
500 pounds of common earth, 1 meter cubed, Transylvania to London 1999.
Crate being carried to Congress Hall, Poina Brasov, Transylvania