Paweł Althamer The Neighbors

For over twenty years, Paweł Althamer (b. 1967 Warsaw, Poland) has been dedicated to joining sculptural representation with social engagement. Althamer is committed to the principle that art can be used to better understand our physical, psychological, and political position in the world. Through this conviction, figurative sculpture has become a distinctly social medium for the Polish artist, and his sculptures often take the form of surreal portraits of himself, family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Althamer also frequently uses the occasion of his exhibitions to bring together various communities, treating interpersonal social hierarchies and public space as materials that can be manipulated and transformed.

Althamer studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (1988–93) under legendary professor Grzegorz Kowalski. During his studies, he gravitated toward both sculpture and performance as mediums that provide the greatest communicative potential. Since graduating, Althamer has collaborated with other artists, with his neighbors in Warsaw, and with individuals as well as groups who often occupy a marginalized position in society. "Paweł Althamer: The Neighbors" is the largest survey of Althamer's work to date and provides the first opportunity to examine the ways in which his disparate projects engage personal relationships and social forces. In addition to a selection of key works, the exhibition has been activated by Althamer through a number of interventions that incorporate different communities as well as exhibition viewers. These include a rotating line-up of over fifty street musicians performing in front of the Museum, with their music broadcast into the Third Floor gallery, and the artist and his collaborators operating a sculptural workshop, creating works specific to his experience in New York during the exhibition. Furthermore, Althamer has initiated a coat drive in support of the Bowery Mission, a neighboring institution serving the homeless and hungry since 1879. By donating a new or gently used men's coat, visitors will receive free admission to the New Museum.

This floor brings together two of Althamer's most affecting series of works. In "So-Called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Mind" (2003–4), Althamer attempts to reach new levels of personal discovery using external stimuli. Across eight videos filmed by the artist Artur Żmijewski, Althamer takes a variety of drugs and medications, undergoes hypnotherapy, and witnesses the birth of his daughter Weronika. These works are presented alongside Althamer's most recent series, "Venetians" (2013), created for the 55th Venice Biennale. Each sculpture depicts an individual encountered by chance on the streets of Venice, together capturing a cross section of the city's invisible population—including street vendors, illegal immigrants, waiters, and seasonal workers. Casting the faces of these passersby in plaster, the artist then brought the casts back to Almech—the small plastics factory in Warsaw, previously run by his father, where Althamer now produces his sculptures—and incorporated them into a haunting series of steel and plastic figures. Presented here, they comprise a ghostly collective portrait as seen through the eyes of a singular artist.

"Paweł Althamer: The Neighbors" is curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Associate Director and Director of Exhibitions, and Gary Carrion-Murayari, Curator.

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