

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

FLORIAN PUMHÖSL
selected texts & press

FLORIAN PUMHÖSL

Florian Pumhösl's work is constituted by a constellation of historical references encoded within a visual language that appears purely formal. The apparent abstraction of his paintings, films, and installations is anchored by specific archival sources: 17th century kimono designs, avant-garde typography, WWI military uniform patterns, cartography, Latin American textiles, and early dance notations. Through the selection, reduction, rearrangement, and reproduction of his source materials—unsystematic and subjective modes of transcription—the artist arrives at a vocabulary that is at once abstract and semiotically motivated.

Pumhösl's compositions establish points of contact with realms traditionally consigned to the margins of modern art. Through attention to the social, political, and geographic genealogy of given forms, his works reveal that the modernist fantasy of complete self-referentiality was always already haunted by irreducible specificity and cultural instability. "I am calling into question to what extent it is possible to act within a space defined by the artist himself – a space that emerges from the hierarchy between my own authorship and its research sources, between historical references or concrete borrowings and what I can depict," Pumhösl states. "My medium is the physical and historical space that I create using painting, architecture, film or photography."

For his 2014 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, Pumhösl created formally reduced compositions based on the Georgian Mkhedruli alphabet and a 19th-century rabbinical map ("Eretz Israel," from Boundaries of the Land by Rabbi Joshua Feiwel ben Israel, Grodno, 1813). The austere motifs, carefully stamped on ceramic plaster panels in oil paint using cliché, a 19th-century technique, are delicately situated between the proto-mechanical and the handmade. Through the reproduction and displacement of his dual sources, Pumhösl reflects on the hierarchy of the graphic, semantic, and phonetic denotations of text and underscores the arbitrary nature of the sign. In emptying these systems of their use value, he opens them up to other associations. This is emblematic of his process at large, which examines the imbrication and reciprocal permeation of formalism and historicity—of abstraction and specificity.

Saltern is Pumhösl's 2019 series of painted metal reliefs, which refers to a coastal horizontal structure consisting of ramparts, canals, and plains. As Pumhösl notes, the saltern is a "man-made landscape between sea and inhabited territory with modules characterized by flow and stagnation." Following a morphological line of thought that adapts the spatial, temporal, and pictorial aspects of the saltworks, Pumhösl identifies the saltern as "an abstract image par excellence, because it is able to dissolve everything that appears manifest in it into relations." The malleable ridges of Pumhösl's reliefs allude to the saltworks' embankments, creating boundaries and thresholds within the field of each work. Utilizing bookbinding techniques, the sheet metal is folded with a bonefolder and aluminum cliché. Occasional segments of the folds are cut and pressed against the mount, pointing to the openings of the basin within the imaginary saltern and resisting the common notion of a painting as a closed structure.

Florian Pumhösl (b. 1971, Vienna) lives and works in Vienna. Solo and two-person exhibitions of his work have been staged at Galerie UM, Academy of Arts, Architecture & Design (Prague, 2023); Schindler House, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, with Vincent Fecteau (West Hollywood, 2021); Kunsthau Bregenz (2012); Art Institute of Chicago, with Liz Deschenes (2012); Mumok (Vienna, 2011); Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen (Düsseldorf, 2010); Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Luxembourg, 2009), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 2008); Neue Kunsthalle St. Gallen (2005); Centre d'édition contemporaine (Geneva, 2004); Kölnischer Kunstverein (Cologne, 2003); Secession (Vienna, 2000); and Salzburger Kunstverein (1998), among others. His work was featured in Documenta 12, (Kassel, 2007), São Paulo Biennial (2006) and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003). Recently, Pumhösl's work appeared in group exhibitions at the V-A-C Foundation (Venice), Pinault Collection (Venice), Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Haus Der Kunst (Munich), City Gallery Prague, Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach), Generali Foundation (Vienna), MACBA (Barcelona), Raven Row (London), Künstlerhaus Vienna, and Museum of Modern Art (Warsaw).

He has had solo exhibitions at Miguel Abreu Gallery, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin and Cologne, Lisson Gallery, London, Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna, and Dvir Gallery, Paris, and his work is in the permanent collections of Tate Modern (London), MAK – Museum of Applied Arts (Vienna), Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), MUMOK (Vienna), Generali Foundation (Vienna), Kunsthau Bregenz, Pinault Collection, V-A-C Foundation (Moscow), BSI Collection (Lugano), and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

(Madrid), among others. Several monographs are dedicated to Pumhösl's work: *Florian Pumhösl: Works in Exhibitions 1993-2012* (Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2012), *Florian Pumhösl: 678* (Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), and *Florian Pumhösl* (Lisson Gallery/Galerie Buchholz, 2008).

A two-person exhibition with Vincent Fecteau, *I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that's it.*, was held at the MAK Center Schindler House, West Hollywood, in 2021–22, accompanied by a publication of the same title. An iteration of the exhibition traveled to Galerie Buccholz, Berlin in late 2022, opening in tandem with his solo exhibition, *Florian Pumhösl*, also at Galerie Buccholz. *Lithosphere*, the artist's fourth one-person exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery was held in spring 2024. The artist's solo exhibition, *Recital*, at Dvir Gallery, Paris, was held in winter 2023–24.

Since 2018, Pumhösl has served as Chair of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich.

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Florian Pumhösl: *Lithosphere*

By Benjamin Paul



Florian Pumhösl, *Lithosphere (weathering 1)*, 2023. Gouache on Finnapppe, mounted on wood, 36 1/4 x 30 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

ON VIEW

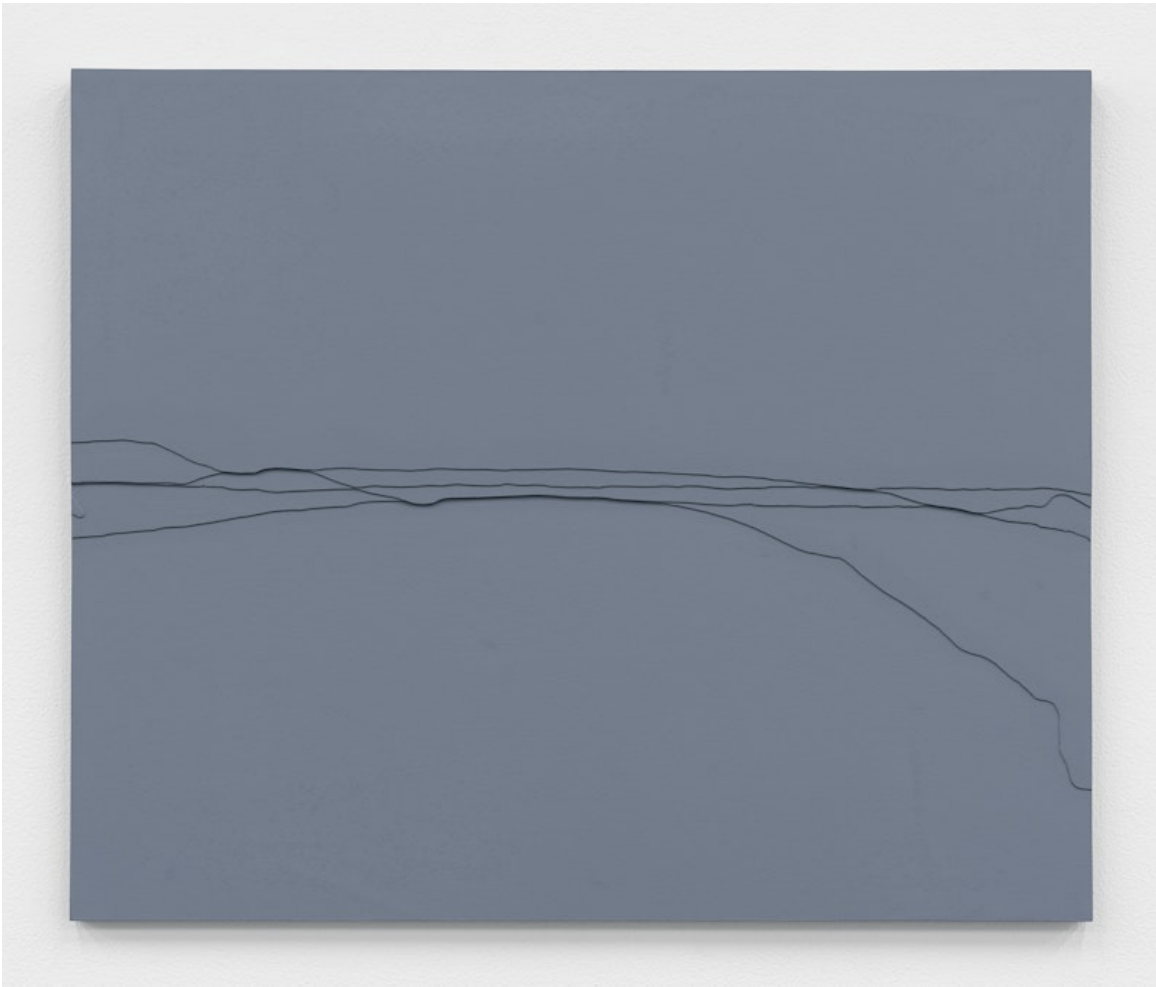
Miguel Abreu

Lithosphere

March 14–May 11,
2024

New York

It is hard to believe, but Florian Pumhösl has begun to dig even deeper into the strata of modernism—this time, though, his excavations are real and not just figurative. For more than two decades, the Austrian artist has methodically explored the legacy of abstraction. In series after series, he engages with its different facets, conflicts, claims, and aspirations, mostly focusing on forgotten aspects and unfamiliar appearances in paintings that emphasize line and geometric shapes and are usually made on canvas but can also be on glass, plaster panels, and linoleum.



Florian Pumhösl, *Lithosphere (phreatic cave 1)*, 2023. Oil on Finnapppe, mounted on wood, 22 1/8 x 26 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Recently, he has applied these concerns to work that has adopted a more sculptural note. In the warped reliefs of 2022, Pumhösl took discarded, irregularly shaped lead sheets that were originally used for roofing, folded them, and then hid the surface structure behind a thick coat of color. Tightly squeezed together and about an inch high, the folds make for elevated lines, thus subtly transforming the monochrome plane into a relief with positive and negative spaces, in which the resulting shadows create color, line, and shape.

Lithosphere, his latest exhibition currently on display at Miguel Abreu, in a way reverses this approach by moving from construction to subtraction. Rather than positive space, it now is the negative that forms relief and lines. Pumhösl glues up to four sheets of cardboard on top of each other and removes sections of individual layers with an X-ACTO knife. In order to increase the irregular formation of the edges and make them look more organic, he slightly burns them with lighters. Finally, he covers the entire work with gray, purple, or white paint. At first, and from a distance, the resulting subtle lines appear drawn on a monochrome ground. With time,

however, it becomes apparent that they result from removal, and thus evoke the sensation of moving into depth. What is more, since the light inevitably hits the picture plane unevenly and from an angle, the impression of the edges changes in time and place. In areas in which the contours of the subtracted sections point in opposite directions or face each other, the directly illuminated ridges contrast with those that create shadows.



Florian Pumhösl, *Lithosphere (section 1)*, 2023. Oil on Finnapppe, mounted on wood, 30 1/8 x 36 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

By likening the layers of cardboard to the tectonic plates comprising the lithosphere, Pumhösl sets out to excavate what lies hidden beneath the surface, pointing to the multifacetedness of the earth's crust. In this respect, his look into the interior may even contain a referential and thus figurative dimension. In fact, Pumhösl carefully prepares the cut-outs in drawings, which he then transfers to the final work. Yet, unlike the young Ellsworth Kelly—another artist obsessed with the legacy of modernism, who, in order to circumvent both the arbitrariness of the sign and composition, used real life elements such as slide-windows as starting points in order to arrive at his abstractions—Pumhösl identifies abstractions in the real world by imagining

what contours in the lithosphere might look like. Rather than copying or abstracting from, he emulates the accidental structure of silhouette in geology. The haphazard appearance of the shapes in nature accounts for the arbitrariness of his lines. Because non-referential, Pumhösl's contours are referential precisely because the lines in the lithosphere are irregular, as well, and do not follow any apparent logic or derive from any shapes or forms beyond themselves. With regard to the history of modernism that has concerned Pumhösl for the longest time, this dialectic implies that the language of abstraction may indeed be universal. But because of its hidden yet constitutive referential structure, only at the price of the utopian dimension modernism had originally aimed for.

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Contributor

Benjamin Paul
Benjamin Paul is an art historian and critic living in New York and Berlin. He teaches Italian Renaissance art at Rutgers and works on early modern and contemporary art.

Facteau & Pumhösl

By **Raleigh Barrett** - 12/03/2021



The MAK Center for Art + Architecture. L.A. | Facteau & Pumhösl

The MAK Center for Art + Architecture. L.A. presents the Facteau & Pumhösl exhibition “I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that’s it” at the Schindler House.

Tucked away from King’s Road in WeHo is the Schindler House, considered to be one of the world’s first modern homes (albeit built from 1921 – 1922). In the care now of the the [MAK Center for Art + Architecture](#). L.A., the Schindler House was designed and constructed by Rudolf Michael Schindler (R.M. Schindler), a Viennese architect. Schindler was brought to Los Angeles to oversee construction of the Hollyhock House for Aline Barnsdall in 1920, and remained in L.A. until his passing in 1953. The MAK center itself was founded in Los Angeles in 1994, and remains an experimental and multi-disciplinary headquarters for Austrian-American architect R.M. Schindler.



With an open, flat floor plan with sliding doors and windows which let light into the space so well that it blurs the lines of indoors and outdoors, you realize that the Schindler House design has now become a must-have for modern California dwellings.

More than that, the Schindler House insulates you so well from the L.A. hustle and bustle that you forget you're in Los Angeles at all.



The house itself interrogates notions of indoor and outdoor, as well as invites a reformulation of public and private. Schindler and his wife, Pauline, opened up their home regularly to poets, musicians, artists, writers, and actors. They transformed the House into a place for art and inquiry, and is still used today for events, exhibitions, and architectural inspiration.



The Schindler House's current exhibition is by Vincent Facteau and Florian Pumhösl. Entitled "I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that's it." abstract in intent, Facteau & Pumhösl juxtapose pictorial and three-dimensional artwork. Facteau & Pumhösl likewise leverage the beauty and intelligence of the Schindler House in regards to materiality, surface, pattern, color, and light. The name of the exhibition itself draws its content from Clarice Lispector, a Brazilian writer. Employing their own private collection of objects alongside respective workstudies, Facteau & Pumhösl encourage imagination through snapshots of production. They beg you to ask how they were created and how they complement the space so well.



Facteau & Pumhösl's work blends so beautifully with the Schindler House that you wonder if it's not a permanent installation. However, it is not, in fact, a permanent exhibition: "I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that's it." runs from October 16, 2021 through February 20, 2022.



Artist:

Vincent Facteau and Florian Pumhösl

Exhibition:

"I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that's it."

Location:

835 N. Kings Rd.
West Hollywood, CA 90069

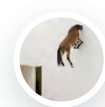
Hours:

Weds – Sun 11:am to 5:45pm

Special Notes:

Reservation Only

[Homepage](#)



frieze

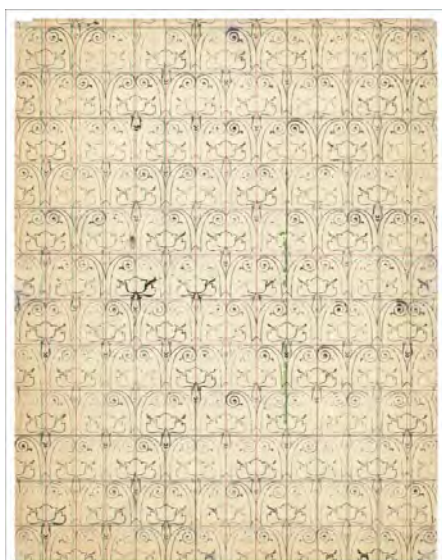
Paul Bonet. Drawings and Bookbindings compiled by Florian Pumhösl

4 May 2018 — 16 Jun 2018

Galerie Buchholz

17 East 82nd Street

NY 10028 New York

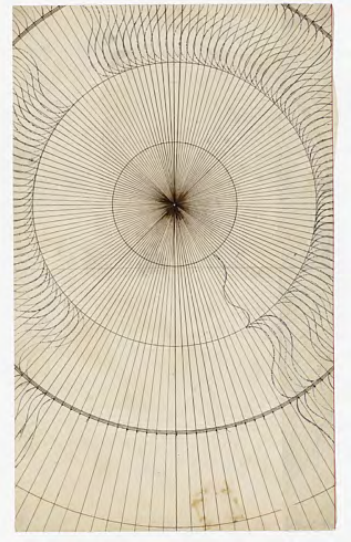


Your Guide to the Best Shows to See in New York

The French bookmaker Paul Bonet (1889–1971) is largely unknown in the US. He has no English-language Wikipedia page, though his drawings for book covers, endpapers and binding patterns, are in the collection of the Morgan Library and other prominent US institutions. This week, Galerie Buchholz opens 'Drawings for Bookbindings', an exhibition compiled by the Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl, providing a rare chance for US audiences to encounter a selection of this enigmatic artist's work. While the show has yet to open as of this writing, we can expect that it will showcase the intricacies of Bonet's abstract drawings, which were regularly used by the legendary French publisher Gallimard in the mid-century, from his curvy mandalas and ribbony lions's faces to dazzling, almost cosmic plant life. Or, perhaps, we'll find a new Bonet ferreted out of the archive – as German visitors did in the gallery's Cologne venue in 2013, with another Bonet exhibition organized by Pumhösl. In either case, taking ample inspiration from this French cosmologist, I hope Buchholz inaugurates a new generation of Bonetistas among New York's poets, artists and bookmakers.

- Andrew Durbin

ARTFORUM



Paul Bonet, untitled, no date, China ink, printer's ink, pencil, and die-stamp impressed on paper, five parts, dimensions variable.

NEW YORK

Paul Bonet

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ | NEW YORK

17 East 82nd Street

May 4 - June 16

Cartonnage is a term that denotes a material the ancient Egyptians used for their funerary masks and sarcophagi—layers of linen or papyrus mixed with plaster to protect the bodies of the hallowed deceased. In the (much) later invention of French bookbinding, *cartonnage* became a method of trussing precious pages. Across both traditions, embellishments and other graphic elements were added. These serial sets of symbols often pulse with aesthetic pleasures, which we know from studying the repetitious ciphers of early civilizations. The same kind of “reading” happens in this astounding exhibition of *cartonnages* Paul Bonet made for bookbinding between 1925 and his death in 1971.

Compiled by the Viennese artist Florian Pumhösl, who has been collecting Bonet’s work for several years from French antiquarian bookstores, each of the delicate, sometimes punctured drawings was used to produce a bespoke cover for the owner of the tome, and this unique practice was how Bonet developed a signature style. Offering barely any text, his designs for covers of books by André Malraux, André Gide, and Paul Valéry, among others, often resemble modernist geometric abstractions, with gilded semicircular embossed motifs, gridded patterns of dots, and perspectival lines of erratic girths. They remind me equally of Art Deco and Tibetan *thangka* paintings, though to construct some comparative art-historical lineage is unnecessary.

The show unsettles. Despite its relative straightforwardness, at its depths the work is unknowable, indescribable, and, certainly, it’s not easy to reproduce in photographs. Pumhösl notes in an accompanying text that Bonet’s book covers emit much less information than those made today, and that they are “kind of blank.” That’s true in more ways than one. Let’s not forget: for many ancients the word *cipher* was tied to the idea of nothingness, i.e. zero.

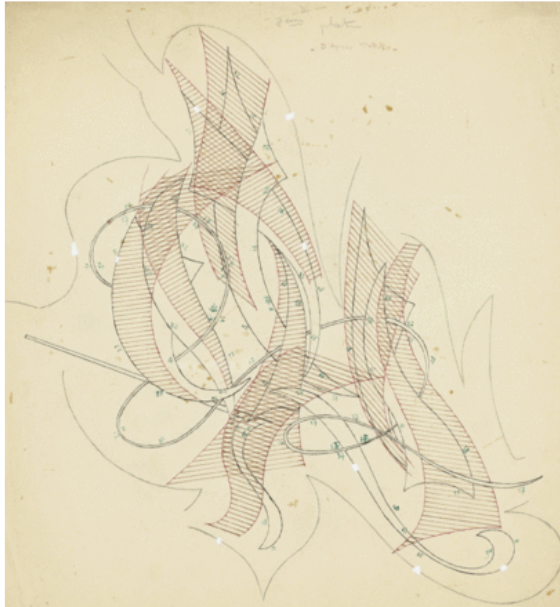
— Lauren O’Neill-Butler

ArtReview

Pick of the week: Paul Bonet at Galerie Buchholz, New York

5 May 2018

By **Sam Korman**



Paul Bonet, *Untitled, n.d.*, China ink, ink, pencil, perforated, impressed on paper, 34 x 30 cm. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Colog...

With friends in town, parties every night, and the first nice weather in New York since last August, the opening of Frieze New York is generally defined by overindulgence. But seldom does the frenetic sprint from art fair to opening to dinner to party to opening grant the type of joy available at an exhibition of Paul Bonet. The show, featuring a selection of the late French bookbinder's designs, curated by artist Florian Pumhösl, affords the absolute pleasure of looking, permitting special attention to all the little pernicky details of the binder's craft.

There's a few things about the history of books you need to know to make this exhibition a bit richer (I certainly didn't know these things until my visit). First, by the 1920s, book collecting consisted of a special procedure: a patron purchased a paper manuscript, perhaps directly from the poet, and then enlisted the aid of a specialised bookbinder to create a unique, usually leatherbound cover. Bonet worked on volumes by Surrealist poet Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Valéry, among others. They in turn appreciated his formal inventiveness, which veers between biomorphic patterns and industrial geometries: one sketch for example diagrams a cover for a Apollinaire's concrete poetry collection *Calligrammes* (1918), and spells out each letter of the writer's name using the full name itself. Pumhösl organised the exhibition having seen Bonet's designs in French antiquarian bookshops, and pays homage to this environment through his creation of special display cases in which to show the work, my favourite of which collects the jacket designs for sheet music by Wagner, Liszt, Chopin and others. Another presents only book spines. There is a sense of self-conscious wackiness to Bonet's design work, revelling in the perversity behind the fussiness.

Paul Bonet. Drawings for Bookbindings compiled by Florian Pumhösl is at Galerie Buchholz, New York, through 16 June

ARTFORUM

Florian Pumhösl

GALERIE MEYER KAINER



Florian Pumhösl, *Kanal Abschnitt VII* (Canal Section VII), 2017, anticorrosive paint on galvanized sheet steel, 86 5/8 × 30 3/8 × 2".

Karl Marx argued in the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) that it is impossible to grasp the complexity of the world with an abstract concept. An idea is merely a starting point, which must be fleshed out through “the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete.” When applied to the aesthetic realm, this fundamentally anti-Platonic conception of abstraction runs counter to the idea that artists reach abstract forms via distillation, the process Theo van Doesburg famously illustrated with his 1917 abstraction of a cow. But if abstraction is a starting point and not a goal, the separation of the abstract and the figurative in art is a false dichotomy, because every artwork is a developed form of abstraction regardless of its style. This idea moreover enables us to reexamine art history not as a progress toward abstraction, but as a large pool of solutions for how to give concrete form to incomplete abstractions.

Florian Pumhösl explores this path toward the concrete via abstraction. In his works, usually produced in ensembles, he begins with a system of representation or instruction that aims to abstract the world—a method of mapping, an architectural drawing, an alphabet. Pumhösl analyzes this system as well as the results of its application, comprehends its visual genealogy and sociopolitical context, and uses it to generate concrete forms that are finally exhibited as artifacts, “rising from the abstract to the concrete.” A piece by Pumhösl is a physical actualization of a system in the form of an object. His recent exhibition “*Kanal*” (Canal) included seven pieces, titled *Kanal Abschnitt* (Canal Section) I through VII and all dated 2017. They are made from sheets of galvanized steel each measuring about seven-and-a-quarter by two-and-a-half feet, and painted in anticorrosive paint with an earthy red hue. Each piece is folded and pinched in an individual manner, and hangs on the wall as a unique relief.

The forms of these elegant reliefs were related, in the artist’s mind, to canal systems, perhaps to the one that regulates the water flow of Vienna. Pumhösl examined the structure of these systems and developed a general principle according to which his forms were in dialogue with those of real canals. His principle was related to other strategies of urban growth as well. For instance, Vienna’s canal and subway systems were intertwined in their early development. The history of the city’s modernization has been the history of how its systems to regulate flows of traffic, goods, people, capital, and water evolved. Indeed, urban planning is arguably an abstract system par excellence that aims to remodel an entire society and its built environment according to its conceptual framework. Thus, these seemingly austere reliefs are in effect conceptual portraits of the city’s modernity.

The material, the technique, and the paint used for these reliefs are normally used for roofing, meaning that their physical properties are derived from another system that controls the flow of water to keep building interiors dry. Rainwater from the city’s rooftops may eventually flow into the very canal network from which the forms of these pieces were derived. The formal and substantial aspects of the works are perfectly in sync with their historical conditions and conceptual structure, creating a picture with formidable complexity that is nevertheless wholly resolved. Extensive historical knowledge and the understanding of the logic behind the system of abstraction are concentrated in the concrete, sophisticated forms of the exhibited works. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx wrote that an abstract concept is valid only when it is “a rich totality of many determinations and relations.” This is an apt description of Pumhösl’s works.

—Yuki Higashino

Relief (for Dresden Raum)

ARTREVIEW *Briefly describe your contribution to Space Force Construction.*

FLORIAN PUMHÖSL I am showing a group of plaster reliefs inside a reconstruction of El Lissitzky's 1926 *Dresden Room*. The iconic design of the room unites some of the main characteristics of how space has been understood at this moment in art history: architectural space as influenced by cinematic and photographic thinking, new concepts in museology, the use of colour and new materials. It was originally built for a temporary exhibition, as a space for contemporary paintings, and that is how I am still seeing and using it. My reliefs are small, simple studies of relations between spatial and pictorial shifts. In a sense, I am only adding another spatial layer.

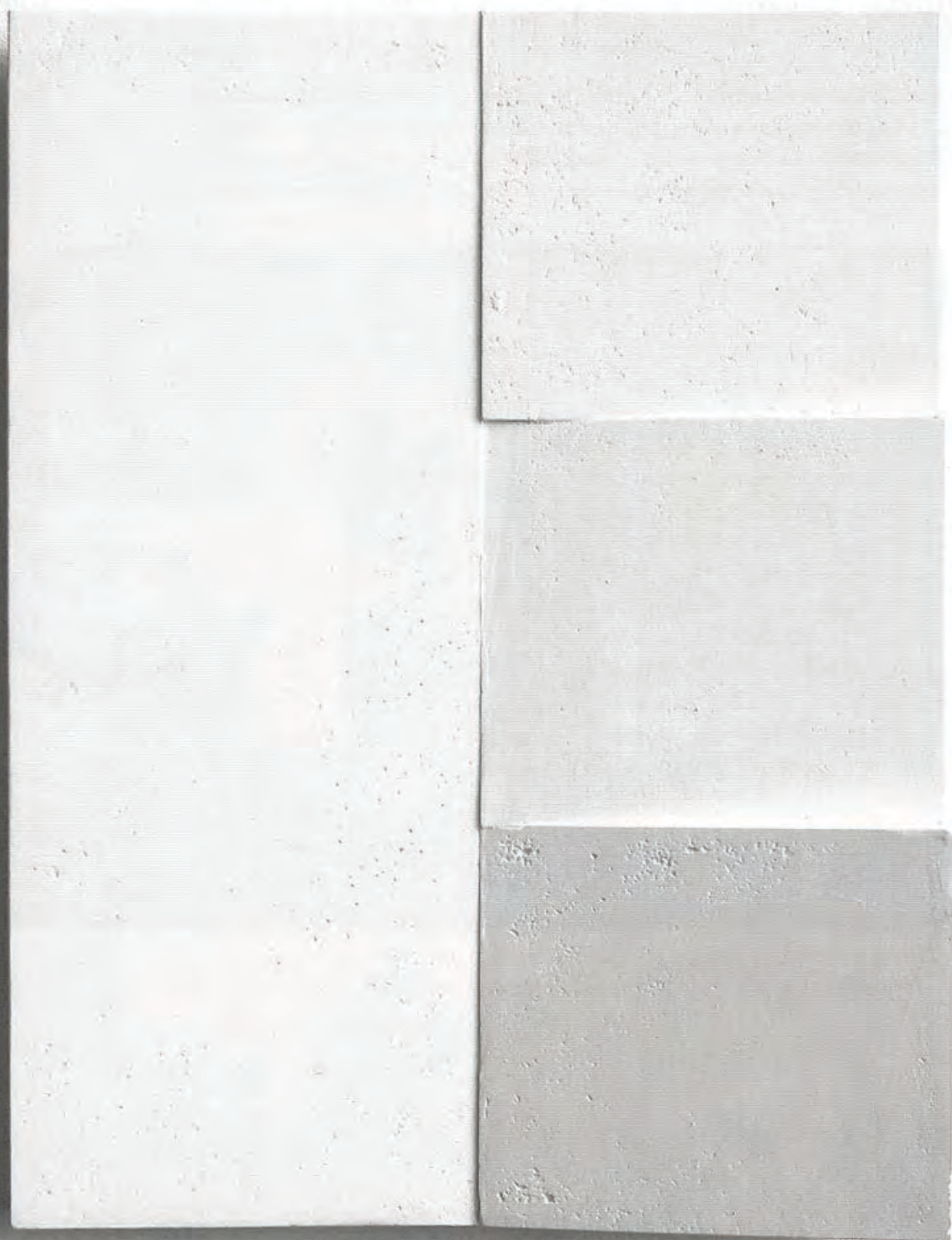
AR *Does the centenary of the 1917 Revolution impact your work and your thinking?*

FP A lot of artists and writers active around that event have been a huge influence for me. What unites a lot of the diverse practices of that era was the idea to play an active role before a social and economic experiment. That is still unique in art history. They have been successful in many ways, but less so when it comes to politics, power, the state. I think it cannot be paralleled to today's artistic practices, as we simply lack the political experiment. But the works of that time contain so much more than just that single narrative. In Constructivism, the conflict between social self-enablement and artistic immanence leads to systemic questions, which can hardly be answered in one satisfactory way. They need to be experienced, specified.

From a contemporary perspective, the spatial concept of the *Dresden Room* seems more influential than its historic function as a cabinet for paintings. The *Dresden Room* might not be as explosive and liberated as El Lissitzky's *Proun Room* [1923], and not as concise as [his] *Abstract Cabinet* [1927–8], but it was conceived for a temporary exhibition, not for a museum. In that situation, the sliding compartments of the installation are synchronising the act of seeing and the act of historicising: by covering one work you make another one visible, and vice versa. They are shutters in an architectural, photographic and archival sense.

The multifaceted walls invite viewers to change their position in space. So the spatial design already anticipates many questions regarding perception, effectiveness, understandings of time and space. It offers a lot for a contemporary debate. Structurally there is nothing to add to this total design. And yet the idea of the picture as an irregularity in space was created at that time. That is a modern conception of painting that always convinced me.

Florian Pumhösl, *Relief (for Dresden Raum)*, 2016–17, plaster. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne and New York



MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Exhibition: Florian Pumhösl

Dates: March 2 – April 27, 2014

Reception: Sunday, March 2, 2 – 7PM

Miguel Abreu Gallery is pleased to announce Florian Pumhösl's first solo exhibition at the gallery and in the United States, opening on Sunday, March 2, 2014. The show, which will inaugurate the gallery's second space at 88 Eldridge Street, will be also on view at 36 Orchard Street.

The exhibition is comprised of six paintings depicting formally reduced letters from the Georgian Mkhedruli alphabet and twelve paintings based on a 19th-century rabbinical map ("Eretz Israel," from *Boundaries of the Land* by Rabbi Joshua Feiwel ben Israel, Grodno, 1813). The austere motifs, carefully stamped on ceramic plaster panels in oil paint, were produced using a separate rubber *cliché* for each line in the compositions.

Pumhösl's work can be characterized as an unfolding constellation of references encoded within a visual language that is purely formal. His paintings, films, and installations address the exhibition space as a medium. The mode of production of this most recent series, delicately situated between the proto-mechanical and the precise hand gesture, suggests early 20th-century avant-garde experiments in typography and graphic design. The geometricity of the rabbinical map—an abstracted representation of an imaginary land conjectured from historical writings—may recall the aesthetic idioms of Russian Futurism and Constructivism. Print publications are further evoked through Pumhösl's manipulation and exhibition of the map. The diagram is divided into twelve equal fragments that are organized in a horizontal array, as if pages in a book. This method of display, which the artist considers an interruption of the architectural space, brings to the fore the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity that constitutes the book form and language in general.

Through his transfer of the map and interpretation of Georgian letterforms, Pumhösl underscores the arbitrary nature of the sign. In emptying these systems of their use value, he opens them up to other associations. Transformed lines of obsolete and contemporary Georgian script become pictorial when freed from their linguistic weight and the linearity of written text. Similarly, a single line in a rabbinical map might simultaneously signify a territorial demarcation of land, a river, and a travel route. Cartographic text, too, functions arbitrarily, through its linkage of names to geographic locations. Pumhösl's restaging of these sources exploits the threshold between the referent and the space of the image. The letterforms are stamped with a darker Pompeian red that brings to mind the tradition of fresco murals, while the map is rendered in a vivid orange-red favoured in modern design.

Through the displacement and abstraction of his dual sources, Pumhösl reflects on the hierarchy of the graphic, semantic, and phonetic denotations of text. Whereas the Georgian graphemes are highly phonemic representations of linguistic utterances, the reformulated letter motifs remind us that the form of the written word is not necessarily motivated by the spoken, and that an alphabet is fundamentally compositional. Here the shapes of the letters are deconstructed into nonhierarchical units that could constitute any character – horizontal, vertical, diagonal lines, and curves.

While Pumhösl's panels might appear to be formalist abstractions, their signification is anchored by their historical sources. Thus he uses a vocabulary of reproduction to create works which underscore the fact that the fantasy of completely self-referential art was always already haunted by culturally specific aspirations.

Florian Pumhösl was born in Vienna in 1971, where he lives and works. He studied at the Höhere Grafische Bundeslehr und Versuchsanstalt Wien and the Hochschule für angewandte Kunst Wien. Solo exhibitions of his work were staged at Kunsthau Bregenz (2012); Mumok (Vienna, 2011); Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen (Düsseldorf, 2010); Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Luxembourg, 2009); Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 2008); Neue Kunsthalle St. Gallen (2005); Centre d'édition contemporaine (Geneva, 2004); Kölnischer Kunstverein (Cologne, 2003); Secession (Vienna, 2000); and Salzburger Kunstverein (1998), among others. His work was featured in Documenta 12 (Kassel, 2007), São Paulo Biennial (2006) and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003). In 2012, he exhibited his work in Parours, a two-person show at The Art Institute of Chicago that he co-curated with Liz Deschenes and Matthew Witkovsky. Recently, Pumhösl's work appeared in group exhibitions at Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach), Generali Foundation (Vienna), MACBA (Barcelona), Raven Row (London), Künstlerhaus Vienna, Museum of Modern Art (Warsaw). He had solo exhibitions at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, and Lisson Gallery, London, both in 2013.

Several monographs are dedicated to Pumhösl's work: Florian Pumhösl: Works in Exhibitions 1993-2012, Bregenz: Kunsthau Bregenz, 2012; Florian Pumhösl: 6 7 8, Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012; Florian Pumhösl, London and Cologne: Lisson Gallery and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, 2008.

For more information or for visuals, please contact the gallery:

Miguel Abreu Gallery
88 Eldridge Street (between Hester & Grand) / 36 Orchard Street (between Canal & Hester)
New York, NY 10002
Telephone 212.995.1774 • Fax 646.688.2302 • post@miguelabreugallery.com

Hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 10:30AM to 6:30PM and by appointment
Subway: F to East Broadway; B, D to Grand Street; J, M, Z to Delancey / Essex Street

Art in America



Florian Pumhösl

at Miguel Abreu Gallery,
through Apr. 27

88 Eldridge St. and 36 Orchard St.

In his first U.S. solo, spanning Abreu's Orchard Street location and his new venue on Eldridge Street, the Vienna artist Florian Pumhösl offers achingly elegant paintings, based on either the letter forms of the Georgian alphabet or an early 19th-century map of a fantasy of Israel drawn by a Russian rabbi. Each line is created with a rubber stamp on a ceramic panel. These abstractions based on abstractions are alive with references to art historical and literary precedents, and are a stripped-down visual feast.

The New York Times

Weekend Arts

Art Trek

Boldly Go

70 Galleries
To See This Spring

MIGUEL ABREU Not to take anything away from the Austrian painter Florian Pumhösl's intensely cerebral works, but the best reason to see his exhibition is to behold Miguel Abreu's gorgeous new fourth-floor gallery in an old industrial building on Eldridge Street. Stretching an entire block, from Eldridge to Allen Street, it calls to mind the loft-style galleries of SoHo during the art market boom of the 1980s.

Complementing the gallery's ethereally minimal architecture, Mr. Pumhösl's 12 paintings consist of thin brick-red lines printed on white ceramic panels. Each is based on a map created by a 19th-century European rabbi — more of a geometrically abstracted diagram, actually — of Israel. Mr. Pumhösl's reasons for drawing inspiration from such an unlikely artifact remain obscure, but it's interesting to ponder the connections between two myth-saturated realms: that of the Holy Land and that of high art.

THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN: ART

FLORIAN PUMHÖSL

The chaste elegance of large white paintings bearing a few neat red or sepia lines belies the Austrian artist's eccentric technique and arcane subject matter. The lines were applied with rubber stamps to canvas coated with porcelain clay. The designs are exaggerated letter forms of the Georgian alphabet and details of a map, by an early-nineteenth-century Russian rabbi, of a fantasized Israel, with boundaries defined partly by routes of historic Jewish migration. Even without explanation, the works radiate auras of things long ago and far away. Are they genuinely mystical or just gratuitously mystifying? Either way, they look good. Through April 27. and 88 Eldridge St.



Florian Pumhösl

Art
Painting | Lower East Side | Until Sun Apr 27

Posted: Wed Mar 19 2014

The Austrian artist fills Abreu's original space, and inaugurates its second on Eldridge Street, with austere white panels featuring linear motifs that curve, bend or intersect one another. The panels themselves are made of ceramic plaster, a material usually employed to create molds for slip-casting pottery. The lines are imprinted in oil paint using custom rubber stamps and are derived from two sources: the Georgian alphabet and a 19th-century rabbinical map of Israel. It's a lot of backstory for works that are so reductively formal, but their elegance is hard to deny.

Eric C.H. de Bruyn, "Beyond the Line, or a Political Geometry of Contemporary Art,"
Grey Room 57, Fall 2014, pp. 24–49

Grey Room



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An **active** line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk's sake. The mobility agent is a point, shifting its position forward (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1

The same line, accompanied by complementary forms (Figs. 2 and 3):



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Fig. 3

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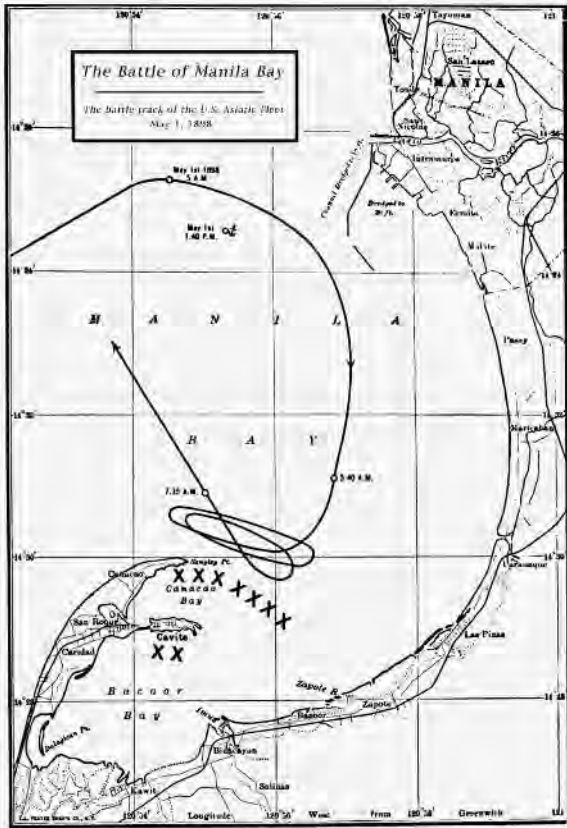
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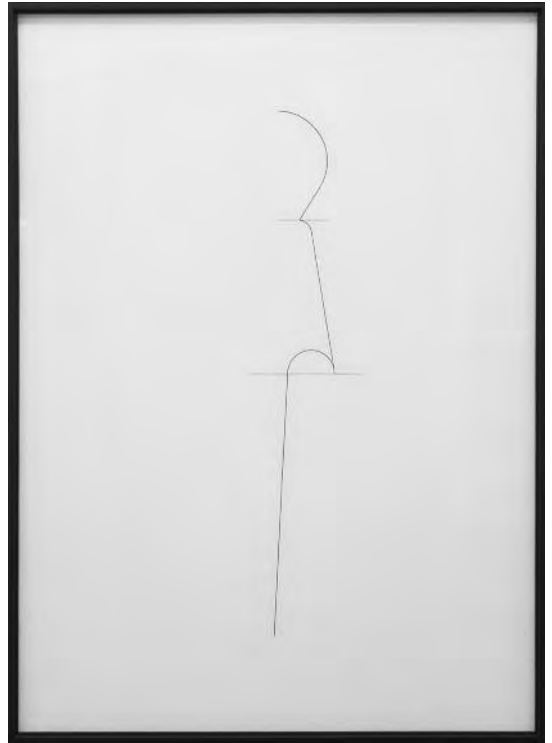
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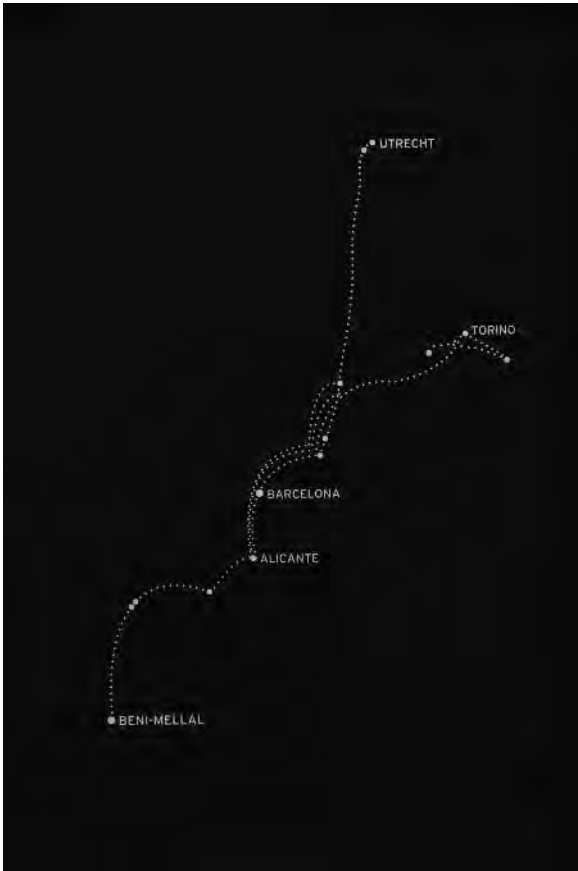
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ARTFORUM

BEST OF 2012 The Artists' Artists



Kulapat Yantrasast for WHY Architecture, *Window Screens*, 2008, fabric and metal. Installation view, Bucksbaum Gallery, Art Institute of Chicago, 2012. From "Parcours."

BARBARA KASTEN

"Parcours" (Art Institute of Chicago) More for artists, perhaps, than for the general public, this deceptively simple exhibition provided a surfeit of poetic moments along a "path" constructed by artists Liz Deschenes and Florian Pumhösl with curator Matthew Witkovsky. Taking as their inspiration an unrealized curatorial plan by Bauhaus artist and educator Herbert Bayer, the team installed a wall of window screens taken from the museum's recently renovated McKinlock Court garden, and selected photographs from the permanent collection by modernists such as László Moholy-Nagy and Florence Henri. Serene glass sculpture by Pumhösl and impossibly luminous, light-absorbing photo-based works by Deschenes lent conceptual depth to each physical encounter. This *parcours* connected, as if by dots, transparent materials—glass, screens, light—to the transparency of process, leading me toward a new view of modernism.

MOUSSE

Agenda

1. Florian Pumhösl, Three Animated Films

LISSON GALLERY
Via Zenale 3, 20123 Milan
lissongallery.com

The three films that you bring together in the Milan show clearly point to a backdoor toward abstraction. This is one that does not try to invent a new world or language, but rather is linked to the body (through clothes or dance) and the traces left by its absence. Is it your intention to question the "received principles" of abstraction?

To reconsider the received principles of abstraction, one might have to go back to the late 19th century, when the possibility of nonrepresentational visual languages became conceivable. This happened because of non-Western cultural and technological influences. Abstraction since then has accompanied modernization and emancipation, and it went through just as many paradigm shifts. But from its very beginning, the project (if you can call it one) dealt with two main concerns: a relationship and reconnection with historical art, and its ability to analyze, transform, and circumscribe the human figure, the body, the subject—present or absent. What all of the animated films presented in Milan have in common is the abstraction of a human figure: as the anthropomorphic frame or canvas a kimono might represent, the mechanization of the human body represented through a uniform pattern, or as the receiver of a dance instruction.

What is the relationship between your drawings and the animations? In other words, how does the element of time work in your projects?

The "scripts" for these films—a uniform pattern, a notation system, a pattern catalogue—do not qualify as dramatic narratives. The films just organize my drawings in time and space—the space and time of the exhibition. I think of them only as projections, not as media art or film. As much as I love abstract film, expanded cinema, et cetera, I understand the work as physical—more spatial, maybe, than filmic.

In 678 at Mumok Vienna you curated a temporary exhibition from their collection. How did you approach it, since you were also showing your work simultaneously?

That exhibition consisted of two parts: the collection display entitled "Abstract Space" and the presentation of three recent works of mine: the film installations *Expressive Rhythm* and *Tract*, and a series of glass paintings called *Diminution*. It seemed most natural to me not to mix up the formats but to put them in parallel. In the collection part, the curator Matthias Michalka and I basically tried to contextualize Mumok's abstract inventory in correspondence with other collections from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Germany. Vienna pretty much wants to historicize itself as the hotspot of Jugendstil and forget the rest, so in a local context, focusing on abstraction might point to blind spots, tragic biographies, and interruptions. The historians Sabeth Buchmann and Christian Kravagna organized a conference discussing what is not represented in a collection of modern art that was mainly conceived in the 1960s. In the end, I believe that the way a museum collects, and the way I as an artist relate to or experience historical art, are of a different nature. The museum is not a person, to begin with.

I did not visit the show, but I am very interested to hear how you conceived and put together the room called "concrete media" containing issues of selected magazines arranged on shelves like a collage/painting.

It seemed logical to place avant-garde magazine and editorial production in the center of the exhibition, making it equal to the original artworks in the show. To me, they represent the emergence of a modern art audience and debate as we know it. Egidio Marzona, who loaned the magazines, is an amazing collector, and we had access to complete sets of publications, which

also made the aesthetic and editorial strategies more obvious. Looking at the experimental and radical work that pre-war avant-garde artists invested in those publications, one gets a sense how important, liberating, and exciting those means of communication might have been. The role abstraction plays in their designs has always been an ideal for me.

In relation to what you just said, how do you see your relationship to history? Do you see your practice as enabling a different, diagonal historiographic model?

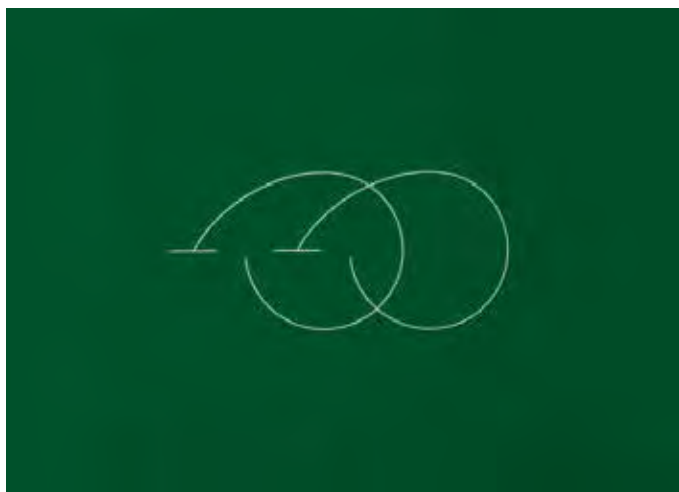
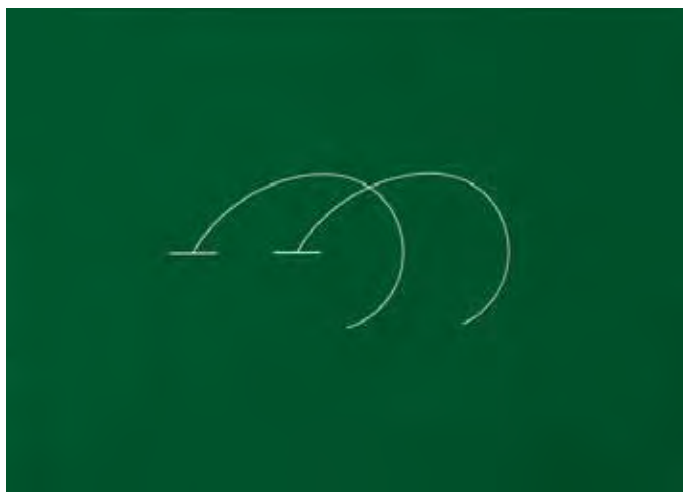
No model, I am afraid, just a practice. One reason why my generation seems to be so fixated on connecting with historical issues might be that we are witnessing very fundamental econo-archival enterprises and changes in our field. When I started as an artist, the "end of history" had just begun. As much as it cleared the air to question originality and linearity within 20th-century art, it was also essential for me to learn that this is exactly where the historical avant-gardes had begun. Emancipation means to act in relation to history.

Rather than asking you what you are working on now, I'd like to know what you are reading, looking at, thinking of—or, to use a metaphor, "digesting"—at the moment.

The book designs of Paul Bonet and the life and work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. And what to do after the exhibition at Kunsthau Bregenz, which opens October 25. (Florian Pumhösl interviewed by Francesco Manacorda)



ARTFORUM

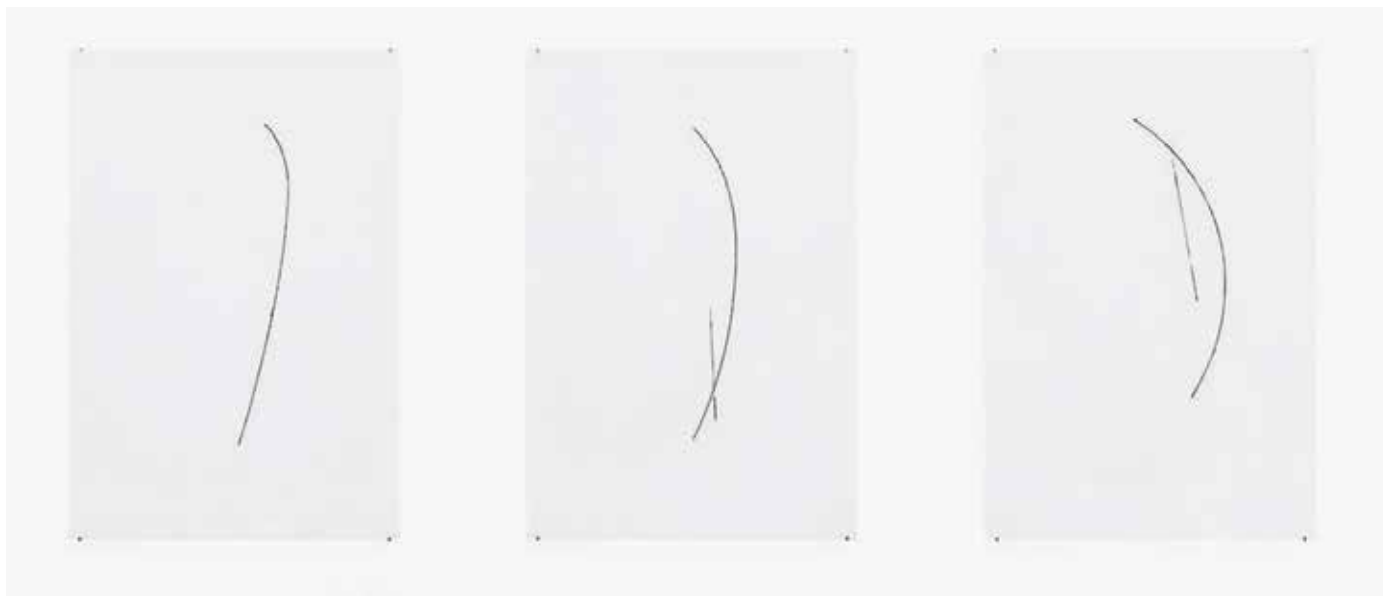


BEST OF 2011

"Florian Pumhösl: 6 7 8"

Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien

DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN





Opposite page, top: **Florian Pumhösl, *Tract*, 2011**, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 9 minutes.

Opposite page, bottom: **Florian Pumhösl, *Diminution* (detail), 2010**, acrylic lacquer on 2-mm float glass, each panel 26 1/4 x 17 3/4".

Above: **Florian Pumhösl, *Expressive Rhythm*, 2010–11**, color film in 35 mm, 28 minutes. Installation view, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2011.

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, it seems an increasing number of shows have given rise to vehement debate. Such debate has often been both informal and productive: Conversational circles that for years enjoyed consensus on the merits of this or that exhibition are now having to reevaluate their views in light of new controversies. The largely tedious legibility of rooms filled with art—tedious because we now read them automatically—has been repeatedly upturned, as is evident not only in a surprising plurality of readings but also in almost physical responses on the part of viewers. And while it sometimes seems that everything that happens in the art world is recorded and stored, this phenomenon was not: The casual conversations diverged markedly from discussions about the same exhibitions in art journals. Yet another com-

monality shared by these exhibitions—which I often find myself defending to quite various groups of people—is that they have managed to conjoin so-called artistic and so-called curatorial elements. I am thinking of such shows as “The Death of the Audience,” curated by Pierre Bal-Blanc at the Wiener Secession in 2009; “*Principio Potosí*,” organized by Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer, and Andreas Siekmann, which was on view in Madrid, Berlin, and La Paz, Bolivia, in 2010–11; Willem de Rooij’s show “Intolerance” at Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie in 2010; and, most recently, Florian Pumhösl’s “6 7 8” at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien this past summer—the show I will be focusing on here.

These contested exhibitions all suggest that addressing the archival history and the literal and

metaphoric architecture of an institution, a strategy long familiar to us as a response to the demand that contemporary art address its contexts, has given way to something new: a certain virtuosity. The contextual approaches no longer seem a violent rejection of other, more hegemonic modes, and this is less because such reflexive gestures themselves might now count as hegemonic but because the plurality of methods has blurred the distinctions between them. Like the historicizing and interrogation of institutions, the art exhibition’s educational or discursive function has become familiar, a matter of course. Often such shows have had a genuinely critical background, but sometimes this was nothing more than a trick of neoliberal cultural politics, an attempt to undermine the sacrosanct status of these costly, state-

What modernism said when it said very little was the substantive question Pumphösl here posed.



View of "Abstract Space," 2011, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.



Typeface designs by Herbert Bayer, 1928, ink and pencil on paper, each sheet 16 1/2 x 23 1/2". From "Abstract Space," 2011, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.

subsidized institutions by playing with other uses for the buildings that house them.

Florian Pumphösl chose a different path. Admittedly, his show "6 7 8" could be read as didactic: It featured systems, instigated symbolic and actual architectonic openings, and was concerned with deconstruction in the truest sense of the word. The panes of frosted glass on the sixth floor (per European numbering, as throughout) of MUMOK, for example, were removed to allow brighter, more direct light to strike the cycle of clear glass panels with minimal black markings that made up the exhibition's central work, *Diminution*, 2010. But Pumphösl's method of calling attention to space, surface, light, and emptiness was also, conversely, decried as sacralization. Had he in fact built a temple to modernist formalism, wrested eternal aesthetic values from the grip of polemical confrontation, and raised them up in veneration? Or was this merely a laconic visual withdrawal? After all, must empty space in large rooms always mean an exaltation of the remaining objects, or can it also be read as purposefully taciturn—in keeping with the artist's endeavor to express his central concerns with the barest of means, to drastically reduce modernism's formal languages to their smallest, most significant elements, just short of the collapse of their basic parameters?

Pumphösl's resolve to take the laconic as far as it would go had decisive consequences, in that he pushed it to the extremes of two possible outcomes. On the one hand, the laconic allowed for a profound earnestness that took on the largest imaginable themes (modernism, its transcendence, its catastrophes), willfully disregarding the proximity to sacralization. On the other, these powerful acts of omission and reduction

constantly pointed to an even greater instance of going unsaid—one that might also have room for uproarious laughter. The exhibition's title itself sounded like one of those typically modernist numerical titles that serve to underscore the rigorous immanence of an artistic project. But the title was also, of course, simply a list of the floors of MUMOK occupied by Pumphösl's show. It thus pointed blithely to the act of devoting three floors of a museum to a solo contemporary art show, only to represent a selection of modern art (largely from the museum's own collection) jointly curated by Pumphösl and curator Matthias Michalka in a separately titled exhibition, "Abstract Space," on the eighth floor, while showcasing a grand total of three of the artist's own works on the other two.

Being laconic in this case fundamentally meant having it both ways, both exaggerating proportionality to the point of absurdity and cultivating an ongoing state of suspense—just as when I say very little, I may be elucidating an important absence but I am also just saying very little. This is key, since what modernism actually said when it said very little was precisely the substantive question Pumphösl here posed.

On the eighth floor he organized rarely exhibited early- to mid-twentieth-century works taken primarily from MUMOK's holdings into nine categories: "portraits," "figure/dance," "scene," "transitions," "concrete media," "interstices of the representational," "construction/plane/space," "concepts of abstraction," and "alphabets/sign systems." Arranged in a square configuration, these sections corresponded to a grid of nine equally sized rooms interconnected in various ways. These categories produced intersections and connections that revealed Pumphösl's attention to specific moments in modernity's traffic in

abstraction and information. The first half of the twentieth century appeared as a concrete site of tensions in which the formal liberation from art's illustrative function resulted in translations into the political—as demonstrated in the juxtaposition of portraits of writers and composers by Oskar Kokoschka and Richard Gerstl with Ireny Blühovej's documentary photographs of workers and peasants—as well as into communicative design and the development of semiotic systems, as evidenced by a large selection of Soviet magazine designs and pictographic and alphabet sketches by figures ranging from Otto Neurath to Ladislav Sutnar. Moreover, Pumphösl focused on Eastern European avant-garde movements, in particular Czech Surrealism. (It is, incidentally, too little recognized that the central point of departure of the modernisms of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I was not Vienna but, to at least as great an extent, the new Czech industrial regions.)

From a distance, the simple arrangements of black lines on the *verres églomisés* of *Diminution* might have been confused with typical Lucio Fontana slashes, but after visiting the historical show two floors above, you would have made a connection with *Fonction, courbes vertes* (Function, Green Curves), a semidrawn painting by Georges Vantongerloo from 1938 that was displayed there, which itself consists only of three curved, thin lines on a white ground. A diminution in music is the reduction of a motif, but reduction in this case represents an attempt to formulate a problem: What is the minimum condition for a sign? In other words, how much can one reduce the characteristics of a visual sign and have it still qualify for all three of



Florian Pumhösl, *Relief (Expressive Rhythm)*, 2011, display case, opened copy of *USSR im Bau* (USSR in Construction) 12 (1933) mounted on fabric, 47 1/4 x 63 x 4 1/4".



Florian Pumhösl, *Expressive Rhythm*, 2010–11, still from a color film in 35 mm, 28 minutes.

C. S. Peirce's elementary types of signs? To go through them in order: Pumhösl's thin, vertical, and sometimes slightly curved lines are just barely still indexical, in that a vestigial sense of nervous handwriting, of bodily trace, adheres to them. They are just barely still iconic, as scarcely legible abstractions of the human figure. And they are just barely still symbolic: They can pass as letters or elements of letters. But Pumhösl isn't just after a semiotic game here. He is demonstrating in his art the observation that early modernism's abstracting movement was overwhelmingly a unidirectional process of reduction (e.g., from illustration toward the letter rather than toward concretion, gesture, or index).

Diminution reduces the triad of the (symbolic) letter, the (iconic) illustration, and the (indexical) gesture to their limit conditions by converting the strangely distancing and fussily ennobling medium of the *verre églomisé* into something resembling a prepared slide. Using a related approach, the silent film installation *Tract*, 2011—the only work installed on the seventh floor—explores drawing and the line in motion using dance notations, with bare white lines traced out against a monochromatic background. Here it is less a matter of a degree zero of visual notation than an engagement with another basic question: When is a visual representation to be read as something prescriptive, a plan, or as something descriptive, an illustration? It is precisely the registration and recording of a motion, such as that carried out by surveillance systems, radar detectors, etc., that here resembles the notations for movement and their prescriptive function.

In the only other work of Pumhösl's in the show, *Expressive Rhythm*, 2010–11, we could see the full

implications of a collision of contradictory social interpretations of the same conspicuous formal arrangements. Here a dimly lit and very large room achieved the effect of a black box not by being closed in but through the darkness of the walls, ceiling, and floor. Viewers sat down somewhere on the ground. In between sections of pure black film we saw black-and-white images of trees and interwoven twigs and branches, which kept dissolving into abstractions reminiscent of Pollock's all-over fields; at one point we even saw the surface of a body of water—or was it snow? At the same time, between long segments of silence, we heard short phrases from Charles Ives's Piano Sonata No. 2 (the "Concord Sonata," in a recording made for Pumhösl's piece by pianist Marino Formenti), which were so greatly abbreviated as to recall the very process of diminution that gives the *verre églomisé* series its title.

The decision to title this film installation *Expressive Rhythm* is part of what creates a significant context for the work: As several scholars—including Michalka in the show's catalogue—have noted, the eponymous gouache, created by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1943–44, anticipates Pollock's anticompositional strategies by nearly ten years. *Expressive Rhythm*, moreover, marked Rodchenko's return to painting some fifteen years after his style had proved so incompatible with the Party line that critics accused him of being a "bourgeois" formalist. (The accusation itself, of course, indicated the full rejection of revolutionary Russian formalism under Stalin.) Pumhösl evoked this background by installing a wall-mounted glass case containing an issue of the magazine *USSR im Bau* (USSR in Construction) from 1933, open to a two-page spread designed by Rodchenko accompanying a

report on the White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal. (Pumhösl's cameraman, Hannes Böck, shot the images for the film in the exact same landscape through which the canal flows.) The invitation to experience the sublime by looking, in a near-constant silence and in a large, dark room, at the often puzzling constructions on the screen was made still more ambiguous by the dry historical contextualization in the display case. Sorrow and sarcasm seemed implicit, along with an apparently loving presentation or even fanlike sympathy for the historical artist. Here, once more, the catastrophes of modernism were invoked in what went unsaid.

As a result of this exhibition, Pumhösl was accused in some quarters of bourgeois formalism's contemporary equivalents. But the opposite is probably true: By reconstructing the experiments of modernism to expose the essence of design and visuality, Pumhösl refutes bourgeois formalism in a new, more lasting way. He achieves this by contrasting these pictorial elements not with content but with the other formal and structural dimensions of each sign—all of which, however, nevertheless express the formal necessity of content. You cannot construct a canal from the White Sea to the Baltic if you cannot see that treetops look like Pollocks and vice versa. Once you have achieved the purest modernist painting, you have also necessarily become a collaborator in a gigantic project of landscape design. Such a critique of the "old" formalism inescapably appears something like a new one—one whose own limitations and possibilities are still taking shape. □

DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN IS A BERLIN-BASED CRITIC AND A PROFESSOR OF THEORY, PRACTICE, AND COMMUNICATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS VIENNA.

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

Florian Pumhösl

GALERIE DANIEL BUCHHOLZ

Fasanenstraße 30

April 30–June 26

The sparse black lines and curves executed in black acrylic lacquer on the back side of glass panes in Florian Pumhösl's latest exhibition are based on the operation of diminution in music and inspired by the abstract portraiture of early modernism (Marius de Zayas's portraits of his friends, for example). Each group consists of between two and six vertically formatted "portrait" images. The show is erudite, refined, and precise, its pieces united by the compositional principle of the reduction of a motif. What gives the work its heft, however, is the reference from which Pumhösl derived his portrait reductions, and in this we find a twist, a conceptual gambit: The source is Constantin Brancusi's 1929 spiral portrait of James Joyce, which was printed at the time of its making alongside an early section (titled "Tales Told of Shem and Shaun") from what would become *Finnegans Wake*;

the volume was published in Paris by Bostonian expatriate Harry Crosby's Black Sun Press. Two examples of the book, opened to the first page with Brancusi's spiral portrait, are displayed in the gallery. Whereas the show underscores themes of clarity and reduction, the presence of Joyce (who sought to put the whole world and all words into *Finnegans Wake*)—and, secondarily, of the doomed sensualist Crosby—introduces a countervailing current of augmentation and cacophonous excess, adding resonance to the exhibition and increasing its tension.

— David Lewis



Florian Pumhösl, *Diminution Serie 1* (Diminition Series 1), 2010, acrylic lacquer behind glass, 26 x 18" each.

ARTFORUM

Florian Pumhösl

ANDRÉ ROTTMANN

THE EMERGENCE OF POSTCOLONIALISM during the 1960s, which marked the delegitimization of Western modernism's utopian and universalist project, was accompanied by an eclipse of medium-specificity—something that had in the preceding decades been central to both the production and the criticism of American and European art. Rejecting the self-referentiality of the art object, site-specific Conceptual practices and early forms of institutional critique instead put forward the analysis of modern exhibition conventions (and the ideologies sustaining them) as the ineluctable context and precondition of aesthetic experience and as a tool with which to explore the intricate interrelations of artistic and mass-cultural codes. Today, however, such a radical debunking of modernism's claims to autonomy and hegemony is itself the subject of undergraduate textbooks. To use art historian Hal Foster's formulation, the once-solid canon of modern art has become "less a barricade to storm than a ruin to pick through." (As Foster notes, art today exists in the "wake not only of modernist painting and sculpture but of postmodernist deconstructions of these forms as well.") Even so, when considering the specific interrogations of this aftermath in art of the past decade, one can distinguish two opposing approaches to aesthetic modernism and modernity at large. On the one hand, there is a glut of historicist works that appropriate, parody, or *tout court* fetishize inventions and ideas from the modernist canon in order to proffer them as legitimating symbols of taste and elegance (or simply use them to create a retro ambience, as in some installations by figures associated with so-called relational aesthetics). On the other hand, media-reflexive approaches have been developed by neo-Conceptual artists who engage in critical reconstructions of modernism's legacy, choosing not to declare obsolete its formal language and ambitions but rather to address its internal contradictions while attending in particular to its geographically and sociopolitically marginalized manifestations.

Since the early '90s, the Vienna-based artist Florian Pumhösl has emerged as one of the central figures in this latter group. His complex installations not only further our understanding of modernism's lingering influence on art, design, and architecture but also provide insights into modernism's historicization and, specifically, into how the paradigms guiding its critique since the '60s have themselves turned into the conventions of the international infrastructure of contemporary art. The interaction between these two concerns is especially well illustrated by Pumhösl's expansive, room-size installation *Modernology* (*Triangular Atelier*), 2007, which was on view at Documenta 12. Based on the artist's research into multidisciplinary exchanges among the German, Russian, and Japanese historical avant-gardes, the work features adjustable architecture—made of two black buckram-covered partitions, each featuring several hinged sections—intended to evoke the black walls at the exhibition organized in 1914 in Tokyo by the German Expressionist gallery Der Sturm as well as Tomoyoshi Murayama's Triangular Atelier, a two-story studio and exhibition space the Japanese designer built next to his house in 1926. Hanging on Pumhösl's folding screens are three unframed single-color textile works made in 1955 by Atsuko Tanaka, which commingle the decorative concerns of fabric design and the self-referential autonomy of monochromatic painting. Two Lucite display cases mounted nearby contain editions of the magazine *Front* from 1943—one showing parachute jumpers in formation, and the other a white airplane wing whose red circle suggests both the Japanese flag and the motifs of Constructivist painting—reflecting military recordings of the artistic avant-gardes' topoi and rhetorics. More generally, the interpenetration of the fields of graphic design, (exhibition) architecture, and abstract painting in Pumhösl's installation results in what art historian Sabeth Buchmann has described as a revisionist conflation of "'functional' and 'autonomous' object languages": The rigid boundary between applied art and high art, propagated in modernist art historiography—which called for the separation of utility from the notion of the work as an end in itself, and of commerce from aesthetics—is thus indirectly put on display.

The mode of operation here perhaps emerges most clearly, however, in the eight small *verres églomisés* also mounted on the installation's black walls. In Pumhösl's take on this generally forgotten medium (typically associated with Constructivist painter and designer Walter Dexel), lacquer was applied to the backs of panes of glass to create a vocabulary of black lines, occasionally forming narrow triangles, implied circles, and various check marks—made rhythmic and dynamic through repetition—that seem to float over a white glass background, once again condensing, by way of what could be called second-order abstraction, the formal repertoires of the historical avant-gardes. Yet if the artist in this way seems to be citing the avant-gardes' renunciation of traditional European models of aesthetic representation in favor of abstraction as a universal "world language" of modernity, he is also, more significantly, articulating this renunciation in a manner that draws attention to—and asks for some interrogation of—his own installation. After all, the piece is itself conceptually based on a secondary process of translation reiterating the exchange between centers of modernism in the Soviet Union and

WITH ALL THEIR LAYERS of meaning, function, and context, the historical references negotiated by Pumhösl's work are often difficult for audiences to decipher, even verging on the hermetic. But this very difficulty is a central aspect of the way his work addresses the medium of the exhibition and provides critical reflection on the globalized system of contemporary art. In being based on a recombination of sources and their adaptation rather than on an immediately decipherable reconstruction of references and models, Pumhösl's "modernology" proposes a model of intercultural transmission that stands apart from the administrative (and often exploitative) logic of "biennial culture," wherein episodes in the history of modernism are made all too readily legible. Indeed, the very ideological premises of "global" exhibitions, with all their amalgamations of local artistic traditions, are brought into question. As philosopher Juliane Rebentisch remarks in her description of the *Modernology* installation in the Documenta 12 catalogue, Pumhösl's exhibition-as-medium "opposes both the conservative notion of self-contained cultures as well as the neoliberal goal, currently becoming reality, of a single world culture."

In a statement published in the catalogue to "Modernologies," a group show curated by Sabine Breitwieser opening this month at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (where this installation will again be on view), Pumhösl suggests the origins of such concerns:

A few years ago I reached a point where it no longer seemed to make sense to engage with the themes and events of modernism outside the Western canon without addressing the origins and the "grammar" of modern art. I felt that the referential approach, which made sense in the 1990s as part of a critical reconstruction, had ceased to be of use to me. I wanted to get down to the basics: abstraction, autonomy, presence, and implementation.

As the artist indicates, the focus in many of his recent projects is emphatically on the grammatical structures underlying modern art—although a basic recognition of the generative function of the exhibition as a model or even a blue- print for the lasting legacies of modernism can be traced back more than a decade in Pumhösl's practice.

His 1996 exhibition "On and Off Earth" at the Grazer Kunstverein in Austria, for example, addressed the attempts of Victor Papanek, author of the classic study *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971), to adjust the universalist aspirations of modern design to fit local requirements using such principles as recycling and do-it-yourself. To this end, Pumhösl presented realizations of Papanek's designs for mobile "living cubes" made from wooden beams with fabric stretched between them; architectural modules based on hexagonal structures derived from fat cells; and other sculptural reconstructions. Yet as the critic Christian Kravagna remarked at the time, within the institutional model of the contemporary art exhibition the works in the show appeared not only as artifacts of reformist and experimental ideas but also as prototypes for standardized commodity production. In such a context, contrary to Papanek's original intention, these design solutions do not represent an antithesis to the expansionist ambitions of modernism, but actually complement them.

In the related installation *Humanist and Ecological Republic*, shown in 2000 at the Secession in Vienna, Pumhösl again reflected on the medium of the exhibition, this time while charting a history of the design utopias of Western modernism in "underdeveloped" regions, with specific reference to the ruins of International Style buildings in Madagascar. The main space housed modular sections of models for modernist buildings along with a sculpture by Henry Moore. Bringing together such examples of urban design with an icon of mid- century art, in an installation reminiscent of the '50s, the exhibition came to seem paradigmatic of modernism itself. In an adjoining gallery, Pumhösl showed *Lac Mantasoa*, 2000, a silent video montage of architectural plans and models, decaying buildings, and underwater footage documenting the titular industrial city in Madagascar, which was partially flooded in 1936–37 during the construction of a reservoir. This meditative video focuses less on the implications of modernization's failure, however, than on what artist Mathias Poledna describes in the exhibition catalogue as the "double binds of facticity and abstraction, of concrete function and the concomitant economy of desire, of projection and frustration." Artistic and architectural utopias have always been enmeshed in these binds—and, it can be added, artistic reinterpretations of those utopias, such as Pumhösl's own, are structurally implicated in them as well.

INCREASINGLY, THE THEMATIC CONNECTIONS among the components of Pumphösl's exhibition designs have ceded to a stronger emphasis on the act of transmission itself—a process that underscores Pumphösl's general reservations about any expectation of unambiguous legibility from critical art. An exemplary instance is the 16-mm film *OA 1979-3-5-036; after Take Hiratsugi, Gozen Hiinagata (Dress Patterns for Noble Ladies)*, ca. 1690, 2007. In this animated film, cryptic ornamental white lines, lattices, and zigzags appear against a black background. These abstract marks are, as the title states, based on *Gozen Hiinagata*, a catalogue of kimono-tailoring patterns printed as woodcuts by Take Hiratsugi in the late seventeenth century, which feature topographic, floral, and military motifs. “OA 1979-3-5-036,” meanwhile, refers to the catalogue's call number at the British Museum in London and thus evokes the archival amassing of traditional artifacts of foreign cultures by ethnographers— as well as the administrative aesthetic of '60s Conceptual art. By “sampling” the dress patterns and rotating them ninety degrees, Pumphösl's film renders them abstract forms, expunging any reference to their original purpose. Although their functional context as instructions for dressmakers and, more broadly, as social markers “for noble ladies” is no longer apparent, these decorative patterns retain a semiotic potential: Hints of figuration are often discernible in the shorthandlike marks as they flare in the projection. The binding nature of forms—the impossibility of exhausting or exceeding their gestalt in various media and contexts of use and display—is put to the test in this transference of Japanese ornamentation into abstract film. The history of experimental animated film, moreover, establishes a renewed tension in the work between the utilitarian dimension of abstraction (most notably in the Bauhaus and Constructivism), prefigured in Hiratsugi's pattern book, and the high-modernist artwork's claim to autonomy.

This work too, then, circumvents function by aestheticizing it. Yet its vestiges remain implicit, here as elsewhere, in the title of the work, which provides information about the historical contexts of the formal languages Pumphösl appropriates. In exhibition, the film is invariably accompanied by a 2007 series of *verres églomisés*, whose point of origin in '20s and '30s Japanese typography is suggested by their being titled after layout formats used in graphic design, such as *Aushang* (notice), *Plakat* (poster), and *Tabloid*. In a manner that is typical of Pumphösl's recent practice, he thus makes the case that form and content cannot be transmitted without also engaging the media technologies and distribution mechanisms through which this transmission occurs. Against the foil of our globalized culture and modernism's lasting influence on art, design, and the world of commodities, Pumphösl's project of a critical modernology reflects Adorno's notion of “aesthetic form as sedimented content” while also arguing that this content-derived form can never claim universal validity: Rather, it must exhibit the context of its production in spite of itself.

André Rottmann is a Berlin-based art historian and critic, and an editor of Texte zur Kunst.

Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

SVEN LÜTTICKEN
UNDER THE SIGN OF DESIGN



One could observe a paradigmatic shift in post-war design, as far as the functionality of quotidian objects was increasingly supplanted by their symbol meaning in the sense of insignia of good taste and an upscale life style.

Artistic strategies have reacted to this shift from the use value to the sign value of design in various ways. Whereas forms of "relational aesthetics" integrated iconic designs in installations that were said to have a social function in terms of interaction and participation following the model of club culture, conceptual practices chose a reconstructing approach to the emancipatory aspects of modern design utopia. But can use and sign values still be distinguished under the production conditions of postfordism?

In a 1956 film about their famous Lounge Chair, Charles and Ray Eames show the chair being assembled, used and then disassembled again by a worker. The film ends and begins with boxes bearing the logo of the company producing the chair, Herman Miller, in which the chair and its accompanying foot stool or ottoman can be easily stored. The entire film consists of high-speed footage, resulting in quick and quasi-mechanical motions of the worker. Ostensibly, the film promotes the chair's proto-IKEA qualities: it comes in separate parts that can be assembled in no time. However, an oneiric dimension is introduced when the worker sits/lies down in the chair, and apparently imagines himself as a businessman

reading a paper. A few moments bit later, the miracle of double exposure conjures up an elegant woman, who gradually appears like a vision on the foot stool, or ottoman, holding an apple. After a few seconds she once more fades into thin air.

The man then turns back into his worker persona and disassembles the chair, putting the parts back into their Herman Miller boxes. At the end, he lies down next to a screwdriver — the sole tool needed to put together and take apart this design icon. The film does not merely make the point that the lounge chair is comfortable, or easy to use. In transforming the manual laborer worker into a white-collar worker, and in making a desirable woman appear at his feet, the Eameses stress that the chair is a signifier that attracts other signifiers. What the film stages and celebrates is the becoming-sign of the object, which around 1970 would lead Jean Baudrillard to diagnose fundamental changes in capitalism by supplementing the categories of use value and exchange value with his concept of sign value.¹ In this way, he effectively theorized an economy in which the circulation of sign value creates exchange value. While Baudrillard noted that exchange value is based on "equivalence" and sign value of "difference", the latter is at the service of the former: the difference between Brand A and Brand B is expressed in prices that are subject to the law of exchange, hence of equivalence.²

In Bik Van der Pol's installation "Past Imperfect" (2005), the Eames Lounge Chair figures in a set-up that seems to exaggerate the oneiric qualities of the Eameses' film, with its dreaming laborer.³ Set on a rotating platform, the chair in Bik Van der Pol's installation allows the viewer place him- or herself in the position of the older Howard Hughes, ensconced in the penthouse of a Las Vegas hotel, seated (naked, so the story goes), in his Eames chair watching videos. A box of tissues next to the chair refers to Hughes' pathological fear of germs. Hughes-related video projections include footage from the last film produced

by the tycoon, one that he watched regularly late in “Life, The Conqueror” (1955).⁴ Hughes’ use of the chair is excessive, unproductive — it is enabled only by the wealth and power he had amassed earlier. No longer the sign of a desirable lifestyle and a tool for relaxation at the service of productivity, it becomes a different kind of mirage altogether, a grotesque double of its official image. The chair’s meaning is tampered at the same time as its use is being détourned from the norm. In this respect, “Past Imperfect” recalls a somewhat earlier Eames appropriation in Barbara Visser’s 2000 photographic series “Detitled” which consists of more or less classic designer chairs and couches in some form of disarray — missing one or more legs, melted, or with ripped upholsterings. Visser shows the Eames chair appears in a neutral, white environment. In this respect it resembles the designer couple’s film more than Bik Van der Pol’s darkened cavern. Like the other design classics in Visser’s series, it is ruined; there is a separate photograph of the ottoman in a similar state.

With its back having been broken off, the chair is at the moment clearly unsuitable for reclining and dreaming of a life of corporate glamour. But this is not just a demolition of the chair as useful object is also an intervention in its meaning and thus, potentially, in its sign value. There is something pathetically comic about seeing the epitome of a certain kind of functional, managerial luxuriousness in this state. Obviously, the sign value and exchange value of the Lounge Chair are not substantially altered by one artistic intervention, but Visser’s — literally — broken allegory suggests that we should go beyond the normalized consumption of stylish signs for functionality. Like Bik Van de Pol’s excessive and perverse use value, Visser’s apparent destruction of use value points beyond the “design art” of recent decades, which often milked stylistic signifiers for their obvious retro associations. Both pieces suggest that the meaning of design does not lie in

such retro chic, but in the exploration of alternative uses, of possible or impossible functions.

DESIGN AND OBJECTHOOD, OR: THE SYMBOL AND THE SCREWDRIVER

Against all attempts to blur the distinction between art and applied arts or industrial production, Barnett Newman maintained that “[the] God image, not pottery, was the first manual act”.⁵ His claims for a lofty art of sublime symbols was threatened by a variety of interwoven practices, all centering around the status of the object, and all calling the distinction between art objects and other — particularly industrial — objects into question. Newman argued that Duchamp’s ready-mades had helped to create a situation in which museums “show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings” without making a fundamental distinction between them. Duchamp’s ready-mades and the designs of “Bauhaus screwdriver designers” both claimed to be art, and they were thus two manifestations of the same fundamental problem.⁶

In the 1940s, Clement Greenberg described a loose group of American artists that included Newman and Mark Rothko as a “new indigenous school of symbolism”.⁷ Newman is at the end of a romantic tradition that seeks to counter the confusion of modernity by seeking salvation in the sensuous revelation of truth in visual symbols — symbols that are themselves confused, but in the positive sense of being mysterious and thus distinct from the profane banality of modern media.⁸ However, in spite of efforts by various symbolist and abstract artists, the twentieth century saw the definitive demise of the dream of the symbol as an anti-idol, an instantaneous form of sensuous knowledge. As Adorno put it, “Art absorbs symbols by no longer having them symbolize anything [...]. Modernity’s ciphers and characters are signs that have forgotten themselves and become absolute.”⁹ This development can already be seen in Newman’s work, in which

the relation between titles such as “Vir Heroicus Sublimis” and Newman’s idiom of color planes and “zips” is so opaque that the forms are often experienced as meaningless.¹⁰

In the 1960s younger artists such as Frank Stella would distance themselves from all symbolic pretensions. Stella permuted forms in a more systematic manner than Newman ever did, systematically working through formal options in one series after another. Leo Steinberg noted the collusion of such art with the rigidity of corporate innovation when he observed “how often recent American painting is defined and described almost exclusively in terms of internal problem-solving. [...] The dominant formalist critics today tend to treat modern painting as an evolving technology wherein at any moment specific tasks require solution—tasks set for the artists as tasks are set for researchers in the big corporations”.¹¹ The results also looked corporate—serially executed in industrial paint, with compositions that recalled nothing so much as post-war logotypes, which are equally centralized and geometric. The logo suggests that it is the apparition of a transcendental logos or idea, but in contrast to the romantic/modernist symbol it is patently arbitrary and differential. Rather than emanation from transcendental ideas, it is generated through the interplay of signifiers. We are thus dealing with a code of *desymbolized signs*; we are moving from romantic symbol theory into semiotics, and into the applied semiotics that is design.

Caroline A. Jones, who compared Stella’s “Sidney Guberman” (1963) to the 1960 logo for the Chase Manhattan Bank, noted that in the post-war years corporate logotypes were increasingly simplified, moving “away from narrative and toward iconicity”, so as “form a visual imprint, as if *branded* on the retina”.¹² But Stella’s paintings are bulky logotypes, hanging on the wall like quasi-reliefs. This made Stella a crucial pawn in the 1960s battles over objecthood, in which the work of art was either contrasted with or assim-

lated to “regular” objects. While Donald Judd saw a logical progression from Stella’s works to the “specific objects” of Minimalism, Michael Fried sought to inscribe Stella in a history of modernist painting that refused to allow paintings to slide into objecthood, into mundane presence.¹³ What makes it inevitable to once more revisit these over-canonized protagonists and debates is the fact that, collectively, they articulate the *transformation of objecthood itself through modern design* in an exemplary way. Clement Greenberg, who contrary to Fried, was not convinced that Stella’s work pulled off the feat of repelling objecthood by absorbing some of its characteristics, once described the threat posed to modernist painting in these terms: the painting, reduced to its bare essentials, to bare canvas, risked becoming an arbitrary object just like a table, a chair, or a sheet of paper.¹⁴ But in the age of hyper-designed Bauhaus screwdrivers, which object can still be termed arbitrary?

In the late 1940s, Greenberg had written about the “period style” constituted by modernist art, design, and architecture. Taking his cues from the Museum of Modern Art’s emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of “International Style” design, Greenberg effectively acknowledged the sign value of design by privileging stylistic over functionalist concerns.¹⁵ In the 1960s, what was framed by Fried and Judd in particular as the threat or promise of the object was in fact the return of what Greenberg has earlier on analyzed as an international style: as Stella’s example shows, the collapse of the distinction between art and objecthood takes place under the sign of design. While phenomenological and other approaches to the rise of the objects and of environments and installations repressed this insight during much of the late 1960s and 1970s, it came to the surface in the art of the last decades.

Certain works by John Armleder are crucial here, in particular the two rooms titled “Ne dites pas non!” (1996/97), which combine furniture and objects on pedestals with a variety of abstract

painting-objects on the walls, including works by Imi Knoebel and Günther Förg. Exhibited in 1997 in an exhibition that also included works by Jorge Pardo and Tobias Rehberger, Armleder's piece can be seen as a desublimation of such relational works, which revive the "theatricality" that Michael Fried decried in much 1960s art with hints at the 1990s club/lounge/networking context. If the promise of sociability or at least of use is an important part of the younger artists' aesthetic, Armleder bluntly puts chairs, beds as well as guitars and artworks on pedestals. The result is a theater of design fetishes that brutally seems to exclude any possibility for human inhabitation.

In the early 1970s, Baudrillard had already come to realize that functionalism leads to the triumph of fashion and this to a play of retro styles, since the reduction of the object to a sign of functionality opens up an endless play of signifiers. In Armleder's work we have, as it were a postmodern version of Greenberg's "period style", a recycling of neo-modernist signs ruled by the eternal returns and permutations of fashion. If pieces by Tobias Rehberger—and particularly their titles—such as "Lying around lazy. Not even moving for TV, sweets, Coke and Vaseline" seem to evoke a private duration that breaks with the time of fashion, they are indeed—in Ina Blom's words—"less design solutions than ephemeral style suggestions imbued with the restless knowledge of being precisely dated, fashion-wise, and so also soon outdated", leading Rehberger to make new versions that "update" the works.¹⁶ What remained dominant in many "relational" practices was the play of signs and thus sign value.

Liam Gillick's work in a sense provides the mythic narrative for this art, with its reduction of theories of post-Fordism to a cartoon-like narrative about closed factories becoming sites for immaterial labor working as the founding myth justifying an endless series of quasi-modernist forms that seem to be almost accidental manifestations of the kind of clean, disembodied

work that we see in Gillick's video "Everything Good Goes" (2008), in which architectural forms appear on a trendy flatscreen in a stylishly minimalist office, the Mac mouse being manipulated by an operator who remains unseen—in spite of the mirror behind the monitor. On the soundtrack, there are some semi-audible phone messages on contemporary labor. What is carefully left out of this video is anything that could complicate the image of disembodied sign production: the production of the machinery being used, the hidden world of server centers and their ecological implications, the potential execution of the design seen on the screen, its implications outside a rarified environment where everything is perceived in terms of fashion, of the right signifier at the right time.

To be sure, there are impulses in some of the "design art" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that point beyond the limitations of "standard" relational discourse and practice. Some relational pieces suggest or stimulate non-orthodox uses, deviant or impossible functions; others even dare to foreground the production process of design, however indirectly, as in the designer chairs that Tobias Rehberger had African craftsmen execute after his sketches. There are seeds, here and there, for a different approach to design—one that perhaps takes the notion of the *aesthetic* rather more seriously precisely in so far as it tries to ask what remains unseen in the stylish signs of design.

THE USE OF VALUE

Taking cues from Baudrillard's exploration of sign value, 1980s theories of postmodernism often diagnosed and criticized an "aestheticization" of capitalism, the economy becoming culturalized as the commodification of art reached new heights. However, it might be more productive to argue the reverse: that what appears as hyper-aestheticization is in fact an *impoverishment* of the aesthetic. There is a chance in proper aestheticization if one

refuses to limit the notion of the aesthetic to the play of commodified signs, instead taking the aesthetic to a wide set of questions pertaining to the sensible—including the (in)visibility of labor conditions and ecological costs. The challenge would be to intervene in the signs' complexity and contradictions, to question the conditions under which their programmed surfaces came into being. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh once linked the "lack of surface aesthetics" in Dan Graham's works of the 1970s and in the designs of Russian constructivism/productivism to the promise of a use value, a potential use value, inherent in such works.¹⁷

The concept of use value is of course notoriously contested. In anchoring exchange value in sign value, Baudrillard broke with what he regarded as a Marxist fetishization of use value, which is just a case of nostalgia for a lost referent, a "real" that was swiped away by capitalism—even while Baudrillard himself nostalgically gloried pre-modern societies of "symbolic exchange".¹⁸ There are passages in Marx that seem to justify such an argument. If exchange value is pure quantity, an abstraction, use value is equated by Marx with the sensuous qualities of the commodity's physical side, which is "realized" in actual use. On the other hand, that every commodity with an exchange value must perforce also have a use value throws another light on the issue: if this is the case, then even "pure" design fetishes and all commodified works of art must have one.¹⁹ This means that use value can be more intangible than Marx's examples suggest. Often, the primary use may be the accruing of social capital from the sign value of, for instance, being a vintage Eames chair, or perhaps a Bauhaus screwdriver. But perhaps the real use is systemic, economical: do not economists constantly remind us that we need to consume in order to keep the economy going?

In the 1930s and 1940s, Georges Bataille opposed the "productivism" and fetishization of

use value by modern industrial capitalism with his concept of excessive expenditure, with the potlatch as its ultimate example; this was one of the ingredients for Baudrillard's later notion of "symbolic exchange", which resuscitated the romantic cult of the symbol by redefining it in social and performative—rather than instantaneous and visual—terms.²⁰ What Bataille by and large failed to perceive was that the distinction he made between premodern *sociétés de consommation* (societies in which value is completely "consumed" by uneconomical excessive rituals and gifts) and modern *sociétés de consommation* (in which "consumption" is at the service of production and economic growth) was eroding. Does capitalist consumption not finally result in a global potlatch that consumes the planet itself?²¹ Thus, while it would be a mistake to equate use value with some simple, everyday, "productive" use of objects, there is an obvious need to go beyond the culture of conspicuous consumption and waste that dominated the last decades.

If use value is far more flexible than minimalist definitions suggest, this means that the determination of what is actually useful and socially desirable under current circumstances is subject to political debate. Use value is not an ontological given. It also suggests that we should not merely look at the individual usefulness of a commodity, but also at its wider ramifications beyond the individual. No wonder that constructivism/productivism, as well as 1960s/70s pioneers in ecological and social design such as Victor Papanek are meeting with renewed interest. This reappraisal started more than ten years ago; in his 1996 exhibition "On or off Earth" at the Grazer Kunstverein, Florian Pumhösl visited design solutions advocated by Papanek. Whereas Pardo and Rehberger use generic and nostalgic readymade signifiers, Pumhösl presents very precise and somewhat arid forms; his neo- or meta-modernism opposes the hypercoded signifiers of the 1990s with forms whose significance

derives, at least in part, from the suggestion of potential uses.

That Pumhösl presented his exhibition as an investigation into a certain formal rhetoric can be seen as an indication that at that moment, when the looming resources and ecological crisis was still largely repressed in public discourse, Papanek's work was not yet read with the new sense of urgency with which we approach it today. If this suggests a return to a certain puritan valorization of simple and elementary uses and a suspicion towards anything smacking of excess and waste, one can also see it as a collective or social version of the motif of excessive and perverse use value in some design-related art from the last twenty years. If the capitalist system is predicated on unlimited growth and expansion, then the introduction of social and ecological considerations into design must appear as an excess, as a dangerous indulgence—a danger that is not so much countered as obfuscated by attempts to present the eco businesses as the economical motor of the future.

In this context, “design” not only refers to shaping the actual products, but also their production processes, distribution, and “afterlife”. Here, design is being redefined in terms of formal interventions in social/economical/political structures.²² Superflex’ “Free Beer” is an “open source” recipe which anyone can brew, even if it is still *branded* in a way that is reminiscent of capitalist brands; the actual design of the brand, with its blithely pop-modernist logo, has no imaginative force and thus contributes to the project’s inability to progress much beyond the “nice idea” stage. By contrast Dan Peterman’s modular constructions out of recycled materials are a more successful model for alternative structures and a different *habitus*, precisely because they manage to stimulate the imagination. It should come as no surprise that contemporary practices that are relevant in this respect do not immediately constitute some quasi-organic group à la the “relational”

peer group of the 1990s. We are not dealing with a new trendy style cobbled together from defunct period styles for trendy chill-out spaces. Neither is it particularly a “generational” matter; after all, an artist like Peterman exhibited throughout the 1990s, sometimes together with Pardo, Rehberger and Co. If anything, it is the coming to the fore of modes of practice and lines of inquiry that were long marginalized.

It is telling that in one recent project at MAMbo in Bologna, Natascha Sadr Haghghian has investigated the productions of artworks by artists who mostly belong to the generation that came to prominence in the 1990s; in a kind of reverse productivism (an investigation into production rather than its glorification), Sadr Haghghian’s project “Solo Show” focuses on the shadowy world of companies that specialize in producing works for the Pardos, Höllers and other art-world bigshots. In Sadr Haghghian’s reversal of values, the process is more interesting than the end result, and what usually remains invisible is brought to light: the works by the fictitious artist Robbie Williams, which were made by one of those specialized firms that execute artists’ designs, are aesthetically void compared to the interviews with which Sadr charts the circumstances under which such contemporary art is produced.²³

Such examples show that the excessive focus on the consumption of exchange value and sign value is now supplemented by a consideration of *production* and its consequences. Some work that is relevant in this respect does not employ any design forms in the narrow sense, for instance video pieces such as Steve McQueen’s “Gravesend” (2007) or Marc Boulos’ two-channel projection “All That Is Solid Melts into Air” (2008), which trace the transformations of a commodity — respectively, the mineral coltan between a commodity between a Congolese mine and a western high-tech environment, and oil between the Nigerian delta and Wall Street. While it may seem abstruse to discuss such works in the context of

design, it becomes a necessity once we realize that under present conditions, it is in political-economic structures that the true design challenges lie. This is the unrecognizable rebirth of design from its own ashes.

Notes

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris 1972, pp. 59–194.
- 2 Ibid., p. 64.
- 3 Oddly, the second hand chair used in this installation, bought online, has four legs instead of five, which is usually the sign of an imitation, but it does have a Herman Miller label.
- 4 This giant flop starred John Wayne, who would later contract cancer, as did a suspiciously high number of other people who had worked on the film.
- 5 Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist" (1947), in: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley/Los Angeles: California Press, 1992), p. 159.
- 6 Barnett Newman, "Open Letter to William A.M. Burden, President of the Museum of Modern Art" (1953) and "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Arts Conference" (1952), in: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1992, pp. 38, 245. Intriguingly, Duchamp's 1918 painting "Tu m'" contains the shadows of a number of known readymades as well as that of a screwdriver.
- 7 Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb" (1947), in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago/London 1986, pp. 188f.
- 8 On Romantic symbol theory see Sven Lütticken, "After the Gods", in: *New Left Review* 30 (November/December 2004), pp. 90–94.
- 9 "Kunst absorbiert die Symbole dadurch, dass sie nichts mehr symbolisieren [...]. Die Chiffren und Charaktere der Moderne sind durchweg absolut gewordene, ihrer selbst vergessene Zeichen". Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, eds. Gretel Adorno/Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M 1972, p. 47.
- 10 This was obviously the case for Erwin Panofsky, whose reactions to the misprinted title *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (instead of *Sublimis*) betrays his anger at the, in his view, misplaced pretensions of Newman, who after all only painted abstract planes devoid of iconological meaning. See Barnett Newman, "Letters to the Editor (Replies to Erwin Panofsky)", *ARTnews*, in: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1990, pp. 216–220.
- 11 Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York 1972, pp. 77f.
- 12 Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the*
- 13 Fried's relevant texts here are of course "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella" (1965) and "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in: *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago/London 1998, pp. 148–172, 213–265.
- 14 In 1960s, Greenberg still argued that the "limiting conditions with which a picture must comply in order to be experienced as a picture" could be "pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object"; a few years later, the work of Stella, Judd and others suggested to Greenberg that this leap into the arbitrary was now a real threat. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago/London 1993, pp. 89f. See also Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, Mass/London 1996, pp. 199–279.
- 15 Clement Greenberg, "Our Period Style" (1949), in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2*, pp. 322–326.
- 16 Ina Blom, *On The Style Site: Art, Sociality, and Media Culture*, Berlin/New York 2007, p. 101.
- 17 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Moments of History in the Work of Dan Graham" [1978], in: *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, London/New York 2000, p. 191.
- 18 During the course of the 1970s, as he increasingly distanced himself from Marxism, it became increasingly obvious that Baudrillard's work was underpinned by a hysterical mourning for a lost reality. In a fine example of the pot calling the kettle black, Baudrillard accused Marxism of a nostalgia for pre-capitalist economies, a nostalgia for an oneiric reality before the universal rule of exchange, before alienation, while his own narrative of an increasing loss of reality certainly went hand in hand with such a nostalgia. Baudrillard's own utopia was premodern economies of "symbolical exchange", in which objects were not exchanged as abstract commodities but as part of a network of symbolical obligations, anchored in a hierarchy that is sustained by the gods (or, in certain tribal societies, the ancestors, who are seen as ever-present). Here the symbolic is not a platonic archetype, but part of enacted social obligations. In the capitalist market, such symbolic obligations are replaced by equivalence; this means that, as this market penetrates societies more and more, reality is lost and simulation takes over.
- 19 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes, London etc. 1990, p. 131.
- 20 The usual French term for the "consumer society" is *société de consommation*. In "Theory of Religion" and "The Accursed Share", Bataille consistently uses *consommation* when sacrifice, waste or excessive consumption are concerned. The counterpart of the *société de consommation* is a *société d'entreprise*, in which consumption is mere *consommation*. See Georges Bataille, "La Part maudite" (1949), in: *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. VII, Paris 1976, pp. 51–54.
- 21 There are, however, moments in Bataille's postwar writings in which Bataille reveals an early insight into this development; See "Théorie de la religion" (1948), in: *Œuvres Complètes*, vol VII, p. 339: "Le développement géant des moyens de production a seul la force de révéler pleinement le sens de la production, qui est la consommation improductive des produits".
- 22 A similar redefinition of design is also evident from the programme of Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory (Utrecht), developed by Emily Pethick and Binna Choi.
- 23 See the exh. cat. "Solo Show", MAMbo – Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, London 2008.

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

SABETH BUCHMANN

ABSTRAKTE CHARAKTERE?

Referenz und Formalismus in den Arbeiten von Florian Pumhösl

Von „Altmeistern“ wie Robert Ryman und Ellsworth Kelly einmal abgesehen, die noch auf der Biennale von Venedig 2007 spätmodernistische Exerzitien in selbstbezüglicher malerischer Abstraktion vorführten, kann für den Bereich der „nicht-gegenständlichen“ Kunst der Gegenwart eine Tendenz konstatiert werden, sowohl traditionelle Medienformate hinter sich zu lassen – oder zumindest deren Integrität und historische Validität zu hinterfragen – als auch die sozio-ökonomischen Prozesse zu adressieren, die in formalistischen Zeichensystemen codiert werden. Damit einhergehend rückt unter dem Einfluss von Konzeptualismus und Institutionskritik das Anliegen in den Mittelpunkt, die vermeintliche universale Gültigkeit einer abstrakten „Weltsprache“ der Kunst, wie sie in der Moderne postuliert wurde, auf ihre ideologischen Implikationen hin zu befragen.

In diesem Zusammenhang setzten die jüngeren Arbeiten des österreichischen Künstlers Florian Pumhösl eine Dialektik zwischen Bezügen auf spezifische Episoden aus der Geschichte des Modernismus und einer bewussten visuellen Reduktion formaler Mittel in Gang – und unternehmen darin den Versuch, eine methodische Kritik sowohl an den Verfahren des (Neo)Formalismus als auch des Referenzialismus zu formulieren.

Was in der traditionellen Kunstgeschichte als Errungenschaft der europäischen Moderne gilt, nämlich die weltweite Verbreitung abstrakter Formsprachen, wurde – vor allem unter dem Eindruck von Dekolonisierungs- und Minderheitenbewegungen der Nachkriegszeit – ab den sechziger Jahren zum Gegenstand des kritischen Diskurses. Das historische, von den Avantgarden im Sinne der Emanzipation vorangetriebene Projekt der Abstraktion habe, so die Argumentation, aufgrund seiner bewussten oder uneingestanden Komplizenschaften mit der Fortschrittsideologie kapitalistischer Herrschaftsformen seine Legitimation verloren. In Gegenbewegung hierzu wurden vom „High Modernism“ verbannte Ausdrucksformen der Figuration und Narration sukzessive von post- und neoavantgardistischen Strömungen wieder aufgegriffen. Diese von Künstler/innen wie von Historiker/innen seither verfolgte Auseinandersetzung mit der Moderne und den mit ihr assoziierten Spielarten des abstrakten Formalismus schlug sich bekanntlich auch in den kuratorischen Programmen der letzten zwei documenta nieder: Auf der documenta 11 mit dem Anspruch, den Formkanon der Moderne als eine heterogene Konstellation lokaler und globaler Phänomene zu begreifen und somit die alleinige Urheberschaft Westeuropas zu relativieren. Hingegen unternahm die documenta 12 eine rehabilitierende, zwischen progressiv-emanzipativen und reaktionär-gewaltförmigen Strömungen unterscheidende Revision des Modernismus und suchte den damit gemeinten Epochenbegriff für die von den Kurator/innen vermuteten



Florian Pumhösl, „Modernologie“, 2007, documenta 12, Kassel, Ausstellungsansicht

Korrespondenzen mit vormodernen und außereuropäischen Formsprachen zu öffnen. Inhaltlich jedoch streiften beide Ausstellungen nur das, was seit geraumer Zeit präzise umrissener Gegenstand modernekritischer künstlerischer Projekte ist, nämlich orts-, kontext- und institutionsspezifische Untersuchungen der Ungereimtheiten, Spannungen und Brüche abstrakter Formsprachen zwischen modernistischem Autonomieanspruch und ihrer systematischen Industrialisierung und Popularisierung, vor allem durch eine globalisierte Museums-, Ausstellungs- und Medienkultur. Im Unterschied zu Künstler/innen, die im Rahmen ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen, kulturellen, sozialen und gesellschaftsideologischen Prämissen formaler Abstraktion die hiermit assoziierten Ästhetiken mittels inhaltlich codierter Referenzen (als Zeichen, als textliche Information oder Dokumentation) in ihre Arbeit einführten, ließ der Fokus auf die ästhetische Form, wie er auf der d 12 durch das Motto einer „Migration der Form“ gegeben war, diese Brechung zuweilen unkenntlich werden. Gleichwohl lässt sich in den vergangenen Jahren eine stärker werdende Affinität zu abstrakten Formsprachen erkennen, die sich nicht so ohne Weiteres auf „Inhalte“ oder „Diskurse“ herunterbrechen lässt und die sich augenscheinlich (post-)modernen Ästhetiken der Figuration und Narration ebenso widersetzt wie spezifischen Rhetoriken der Referenz. In dieser Perspektivierung drängt sich die These auf, dass die kritische Debatte um Modernismus und Formalismus der vergangenen vierzig Jahre zur wieder größer gewordenen und sicherlich nicht marktunabhängigen Anziehungskraft „abstrakter Kunst“ beigetragen hat. Das heißt jedoch nicht, dass ihre zeitgenössischen Versionen sich auf jene unitär-universalistische Programmatik und Erscheinungsweise reduzieren ließen, deren historische Vorläufer verdächtig sind. Wenn von einem Einheitsprinzip die Rede sein kann, dann nur in einem Sinne, wie ihn zeitgenössische Markt- und Ausstellungslogiken suggerieren – nicht aber in dem Sinn, dass sich der Formalismus erster, d. h. selbstreferenzieller Ordnung mit einem Formalismus zweiter, d. h. referenzieller Ordnung ohne Weiteres gleichsetzen ließe.

Aufgrund des sich seit einiger Zeit ausdifferenzierenden Lagers des sogenannten (Neo-)Formalismus, dem so unterschiedliche Künstler/innen wie Tomma Abts, Sergej Jensen, Wade Guyton, Michael Krebber, Florian Pumhösl, Anselm Reyle und Katja Strunz zugeordnet werden, scheint es unnötig, dessen Antithese gegen die Vorstellung einer inhärenten „Politizität“ von Kunst auf das leicht überschaubare Feld der üblichen Verdächtigen zu projizieren: Auf Issue- und Kontextkunst einerseits und – in deren negativer Verkehrung – auf unpolitischen Formalismus andererseits. Denn der kleinste Nenner, der die Formalist/innen zusammenschweißt, scheint eine (je nach Ausstellungskontext spezifisch vermessene) Distanz gegenüber kanonischen Kunst&Politik-Formeln zu sein, die indes auch von denen in Anspruch genommen wird, die mit ihren Arbeiten ein „inhaltliches“ Anliegen verbunden wissen wollen: Denn welche/r Künstler/in (und welche/r Kritiker/in) wollte sich allen Ernstes den Vorwurf eines formblinden Kunst-

begriffs eintragen? Wie der gegenwärtigste, wenn auch im Vergleich mit der 2004/05 im Kunstverein in Hamburg gezeigten Ausstellung „Formalismus. Moderne Kunst, heute“ weniger zugespitzte Versuch der documenta 12, (Neo-)Formalismus selbst als ein kunst- und gesellschaftskritisches Projekt zu apostrophieren, gezeigt hat, überschneiden die unter diesem Label gefassten Positionen sich eben auch mit politisch konnotierten Ästhetiken, definieren sich auch diese doch selten ohne eine begründungslose Beziehung zu einem (vermeintlich) unkritischen Formalismus.

Florian Pumhösl gehört zu einer Ende der achtziger, Anfang der neunziger Jahre unter dem Einfluss von Kontextkunst und Institutionskritik entstandenen verstreuten Gruppierung von Künstler/innen, die sich, wie Fareed Armaly, Julie Ault/Martin Beck, Stan Douglas, Renée Green, Dorit Margreiter, Christian Philipp Müller, Mathias Poledna, Fred Wilson etc., in Abgrenzung von einem transhistorischen und entpolitisierten Formbegriff der Postmoderne den blinden Flecken des Modernismus und seinen Erbschaften zugewandt hat. Insofern das Anliegen dieser Künstler/innen, wie eingangs angedeutet, eine historische wie ästhetische Analyse der für den Hegemonieanspruch der europäischen Moderne konstitutiven Wechselbeziehungen zwischen universalistischen und marginalisierten respektive „kolonisierten“ Formsprachen war und zum Teil nach wie vor ist, ist es sicherlich nicht übertrieben zu behaupten, dass Pumhösl zu den Künstler/innen zählt, die einen entscheidenden Einfluss auf die inhaltliche Ausrichtung der documenta 12 hatten. Seine langjährige Aufmerksamkeit für die Geschichte abstrakter, vor allem geometrischer Formsprachen, deren „Universalismus“ eine Folie seines künstlerischen Projekts bildet, wird auch an seiner zweiten Einzelausstellung erkennbar, die Ende letzten Jahres in der Galerie Daniel Buchholz gezeigt wurde und die man als eine Art Spin-Off seines documenta 12-Beitrags „Modernologie (dreieckiges Atelier)“ bezeichnen könnte.¹ Wie in seinen früheren Werken und Ausstellungen haben die Bezüge auf nichtwestliche Modernen hierbei die Funktion, die Vorstellung von europäischer und US-amerikanischer „Moderne“ als einer soziogeografisch und kulturell kohärenten Entstehungs- und Entwicklungsgeschichte aufzubrechen. Insofern beide Ausstellungen in später dargestellter Form den Ort ihrer Präsentation berücksichtigen, tritt – sichtbar vor allem in „Modernologie“ – die Spannung zwischen Universalismuskritik und der zeitgenössischen Globalisierung solcher Kritik durch ein ubiquitäres „kritisches“ Ausstellungs- und Diskurswesen zu Tage.

Demgegenüber gaben sich der d 12-Beitrag und auch die Ausstellung bei Buchholz mit „Criticality“-Beweisen weitgehend zurückhaltend. Das in beiden Fällen äußerst kondensierte Formenvokabular, das auch Pumhösls aktuellste Ausstellung in der Londoner Lisson Gallery² auszeichnet, scheint seine Zuordnung zum Lager der (Neo-)Formalist/innen insofern zu rechtfertigen, als hierin eine im Vergleich mit seinen früheren, oftmals installativen Werkformen explizite Reduktion auf formal-abstrakte Bildhaftigkeit auffiel. Damit wird thematisch, was das eben doch nicht gänzlich span-

nungsbereinigte Verhältnis von formreflektierten Referentialist/innen und referenzversierten Formalist/innen ausmacht: Nämlich die Frage nach der (Politik der) Sichtbarkeit der Differenzen zwischen formal-abstrakter Ästhetik als historisch-politischem Objekt einerseits und als selbstreferenziellem Mittel der Darstellung andererseits. In „Modernologie“ – ein Titel, der ein gleichlautendes Werk des japanischen Architekten Kon Wajiro zitiert – war es genau diese Spannung zwischen einem (modernen) Formalismus erster, selbstreferenzieller und einem (postmodernen) Formalismus zweiter, referenzieller Ordnung, die der Thematik des grafisch inszenierten Bilderzyklus auf methodischer Ebene abzulesen war: Bewusste und unbewusste Korrespondenzen zwischen japanischen, russischen und deutschen Avantgarden der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre in eine an Pumhösls historischen Referenzen angelehnte Formsprache übertragend, schien „Modernologie“ weniger auf eine dezidiert politische Lesbarkeit historischer Referenzen angelegt als vielmehr auf eine ästhetisch stringente Aktualisierung der in dieser begründeten Präsentationsform. Und genau diese rief die Frage nach den Unterscheidungsmerkmalen hinsichtlich jener postmodernen Revisionen der geometrischen Abstraktion auf, die – wie Gerhard Merz in den achtziger Jahren – Lyotards kantianisches Credo des „ästhetisch Sublimen“ auf ihre „Modernismen“ übertrugen: Auf Mondrian, Malewitsch, Rodtschenko, Rothko und Newman. Der Unterschied ist zweifelsohne gewaltig und liegt – auf den ersten Blick – vor allem in der Verweigerung von monumentaler Form und visueller Opulenz, etwa in Form einer Reauratisierung von Raum und Farbe. So gehören zu Pumhösls bevorzugten Techniken Fotogramme ebenso wie „Kunsthartzlack hinter Glas“, mithin Formsprachen, die eine dezidiert grafische Darstellungsqualität auszeichnet.

Im Kontext der documenta 12 als Inbegriff der zeitgenössischen Kunstausstellung schlechthin, die, wie erwähnt, mit der eigenen künstlerischen Programmatik argumentierte, sah Pumhösls Entscheidung, einige wenige kleinformatige, in schwarz, weiß und grau gehaltene Glasbilder in einer räumlichen Installation zu zeigen, die auf das 1926 entworfene „dreieckige Atelier“ des Künstlers und Gestalters Murayama Tomoyoshi und die 1914 in Tokio gezeigte Sturm-Ausstellung verwies, nicht nach „großem Auftritt“ aus. Ich wunderte mich offen gestanden darüber, dass Pumhösl nur so „wenig“ zeigte und wie ich im Gespräch erfuhr, ging es anderen Besucher/innen, die seine Arbeit mit Interesse verfolgen, ähnlich. Zudem fiel auf, dass Pumhösls Beitrag nicht die Erwartungen erfüllte (oder vielleicht nicht zu erfüllen suchte), die die documenta 12 mit ihren Motti „Ist die Moderne unsere Antike?“ und „Migration der Form“ geschürt hatte. Ob intendiert oder nicht, unterschied sich „Modernologie“ in dieser Hinsicht etwa von jenen vereindeutigenden Lesarten, die wie James Colemans „Retake with Evidence“ auf geradezu programmatische Weise Referenz mit historischer Evidenz gleichsetzen. Von den solcherart im hohen Kunston entleerten Melodien eines neoklassischen Formalismus unterschied sich Pumhösls Arbeit schon alleine dadurch, dass in seiner Arbeit die technisch-

Florian Pumhösl,
„OA 1979-3-5-036“,
2007/2008, Galerie Daniel
Buchholz, Köln,
Ausstellungsansicht



mediale Methodik des Referenzierens nicht nur nicht ausgeblendet, sondern zum Gegenstand seiner Motivwahl wurde.³ Behauptungen historischer Evidenz als Resultat eines notwendigerweise verzerrenden, weil interpretierenden künstlerischen Übersetzungsprozesses kennzeichnend, vollzog „Modernologie“ – neben dem vermutlich gegen einschlägige Geschichtsschreibungen gerichteten Anspruch, (avantgardistischen) Funktionalismus und (modernistische) Ästhetik aufeinander zu beziehen – eine Engführung von „funktionalen“ und „autonomen“ Objektsprachen. So war die an avantgardistische Druckgrafik und Atelierarchitektur angelehnte Ausstellungsgestaltung formal so weitgehend reduziert, dass man sie in einem emphatischen Sinn weder als funktional noch als autonom bezeichnen konnte. Genau das war in „OA 1979-3-5-036“ sichtbar anders, denn auf den Galeriewänden stach der sich zweifelsohne seines Sammlerwerts bewusste Doppelcharakter der nun in wiederholter Auflage produzierten Glasbilder als funktionale und autonome Objekte umso deutlicher hervor. Mit dem ihnen inhärenten Verweis auf das avantgardistische Unterfangen, Malerei und Skulptur in ihrer Rolle als hegemoniale Gattungen durch dynamischere – so durch fotografie- und filmbasierte – Medien den Rang abzulaufen, schienen sie zudem dazu angetan, der mangelnder Medienreflexivität und ästhetischer Reizlosigkeit verdächtigen Konzeptkunst ein distinktes Medienformat entgegensetzen.

Die historische Lektion des „medienreferenziellen Funktionalismus“, den Modus der Präsentation zum Gegenstand einer sich wechselseitig bedingenden Übersetzung von Objekt und räumlicher Umgebung zu machen, war dementsprechend auch in „Modernologie“ spürbar, in augen-

scheinlicher Distanz gegenüber einem Inhalt heischenden Referenzialismus einerseits und einem kontextentleerten Formalismus andererseits. Doch obgleich ein Text mit Werkinformationen zur Verfügung stand, eröffnete sich (mir) die Fülle der formalen Bezüge und Differenzen innerhalb des angeeigneten Materials und seiner Neudeutung nicht in dem Maße, in dem sie sich nun in einer nachträglichen Besprechung erarbeiten und behaupten lässt. Das liegt, wie bereits angedeutet, daran, dass „Modernologie“ auf das verzichtete, was frühere Arbeiten Pumhöls auszeichnete: Eine dezidiert „thematische“ Rückführung der zitierten ästhetischen Objektsprache auf ihre Gebundenheit an spezifische historische Momente und Funktionen. Was an lesbarem „Inhalt“ herausfällt, scheint sich jedoch auf methodischer Ebene herzustellen: Denn im weiten Feld der zeitgenössischen Formsprache von Modernekritik ist Pumhöls einer der wenigen Künstler/innen, der dieses Genre stets mit politisch reflektierter Technologiekritik verbindet – hierfür stehen nicht nur Ausstellungen wie „Humanistische und ökologische Republik“ (Secession, Wien, 2000), seine 2003 gezeigte Ausstellung im Kölnischen Kunstverein und „Animated Map“ in der Kunsthalle St. Gallen, sondern auch seine Herausgeberschaft der in Wien erscheinenden Publikationsserie „montage“ beispielhaft für sein unausgesetztes Interesse an Grafikdesign und Geschichtsschreibung. In der Reihe publizierten bisher er selbst und andere Künstler/innen zu Themen, die wie Design, Architektur und moderne Medienkultur die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen (Avantgarde-)Kunst-Methodiken und Industrietechnologie beleuchten.

Wie die Rezeption von Pumhöls Arbeit durch Kunstkritik und Ausstellungseinladungen zeigt, scheint ihm die Schublade des diskurslastigen und daher schwer verkäuflichen Künstlers weitgehend erspart geblieben zu sein. Das mag, wenn man den Katalog der Hamburger „Formalismus“-Ausstellung als exemplarisch zugrunde legen kann, an kontextbedingten, d.h. unter anderem durch gemeinsame Vertretungen in Galerien entstehende Nachbarschaften mit jenen Künstler/innen liegen, die sicherlich nicht über ein politisches Formalismus-Projekt vermarktet werden, doch von diesem dank wohlwollender Kurator/innen und Katalogautor/innen profitieren können. Vor diesem Hintergrund scheint es sich bei Pumhöls aktuellen Ausstellungen um einen sehr genau überlegten Umgang mit den hier nur skizzierten Positionierungen innerhalb des gegenwärtigen Ausstellungs-, Markt- und Diskursgeschehens zu handeln – ein Umgang, der die keineswegs über jeden Zweifel erhabenen Begehrlichkeiten von „Criticality“ ebenso mitreflektiert wie jene eines auf vermittelbare, verlässliche Qualitätsnachweise pochenden Kunstmarkts. So könnte man es als eine doppelsinnige Entscheidung ansehen, das gemessen am Markterfolg handelsüblicher Formate gescheiterte Projekt der (Post-)Avantgarden im Rahmen einer Großausstellung wie der documenta wieder aufzurufen, die allen kuratorischen Selbstaussagen zum Trotz keine prinzipielle Alternative zum Kunstmarkt darstellte. Die Übersetzung zwischen hegemonialen und lokalen Praktiken der historischen Avantgarden, die das selbst erklärte Anliegen

von „Modernologie“ war, ließe sich demnach – zugespitzt formuliert – auf die strukturell spannungsgeladene künstlerische (Selbst-)Verpflichtung auf kritischen Diskurs einerseits und auf formatierte Marktinteressen andererseits ausweiten.

So stellten die Fragen, die sich mir angesichts des Selbstverständnisses von „Modernologie“ aufgedrängt hatten, eine wesentliche Voraussetzung auch für meine Wahrnehmung seiner Ausstellung bei Buchholz dar. Denn diese bestand ebenfalls aus einer neuen Serie von Glasbildern – somit einem dezidiert medienreflexiven Format, das bereits in Pumhöls erster Einzelausstellung bei Buchholz sowie bei Krobath Wimmer⁴ in Wien und in der Kunsthalle St. Gallen zu sehen war und das die Methode der Übersetzung von funktionellen Formsprachen in die Gegenwart seiner ästhetischen (Re-)Produktion und Rezeption auch durch die Titelgebung thematisierte. Wie aus dem Preetext hervorging, tragen die einzelnen Bilder „Titel aus dem Druck- und Buchwesen, wie etwa ‚Plakat‘, ‚Seite‘, ‚Aushang‘ oder ‚Tabloid‘.“ Weiterhin war zu erfahren, dass „die abgebildeten geometrischen Formen [...] Reduktionen kompositorischer, strukturierender und den Text interpretierender Elemente des modernen Layouts (sind), hier zumeist von Textseiten und Pamphleten der Typografie der japanischen Avantgarde der 20er und 30er Jahre entnommen, deren Flächen allerdings vom Text und die abstrahierten strukturierenden Zeichen damit von ihrer kompositorischen/betonenden Funktion befreit sind. Man kann sich diese Bilder als Medien vorstellen, deren visuelle Sprache Schrift und Funktionalität ausklammert.“

Ich zitierte die Ausstellungsinformation auch deswegen zu ausführlich, weil hierin eine Zuspitzung dessen liegt, was auch schon in „Modernologie“ zur Sprache kam. Denn während die Glasbilder von der (post-)avantgardistischen Ambition zeugen, klassische kompositorische Regeln durch Eintritt des Bildes in die Dimension des Raums zu unterminieren, scheint die hier noch weitergetriebene formale Reduktion vielmehr den Modus des Bildlichen in den Vordergrund zu stellen. Insofern die Glasbilder bei Buchholz mit einigem Abstand auf den Galeriewänden präsentiert wurden, wurde das Verhältnis von Einzelbild und Serienproduktion ebenso thematisch wie der Verzicht auf die Gestaltung eines die Beziehung von Objekt und Umgebung konstituierenden architektonischen Settings. So ging mit der Betonung der Bildlichkeit eine Betonung der Galerie als showroom einher. Der in Kombination mit den Glasbildern gezeigte 16mm-Film „OA 1979-3-5-036“ wendete diese Bedingung gegen sich selbst, indem er der dem klassischen Format der Kunstware entsprechenden Präsentation des gerahmten statischen Bildes die entrahmte Zeitform des „abstrakten“ Films entgegensetzte, auf dessen Technik Pumhöls schon in früheren Arbeiten zurückgegriffen hatte. Dieser Rückgriff implizierte, eingedenk der nicht nur formalen, sondern auch werbeästhetischen Implikationen des abstrakten Avantgardefilms, kein nichtkommerzielles Gegenmodell, insofern der Projektionsstrahl direkt auf die Galeriewand in deren Funktion als einem der wohl wertintensivsten architektonischen Elemente traf: Man schaute also,

während man die projizierten Formen betrachtete, immer auch auf die qualitative medialer Funktionalität ins Licht gesetzte Wand. Die sich in metrisch-rhythmischen Montageabfolgen transformierenden, ornamenthaft-grafischen Weiß-auf-Schwarz-Zeichnungen, die, wie der für die Besucher/innen ausgelegte Presstext informierte, auf das im späten 17. Jahrhundert erschienene japanische Buch „Gozen Hiinagata“ („Dress Patterns for Noble Ladies“) von Take Hiratsugi referierten – ein im Holzschnitt gedruckter Musterkatalog für die Motivgestaltung von Kimonos –, erschienen in Kombination mit den Glasbildern wie kryptifizierte Kürzel geometrischer Formsprachen. Hierin eine Referenz auf Motive traditioneller japanischer Frauenbekleidung zu erkennen, wäre ohne Information nicht denkbar gewesen. Das heißt, dass die Wahrnehmung der sozialen Referenzialität abstrakter Ornamentik, wie sie hier evoziert wurde, offenbar nicht unabdingbar auf eine Dechiffrierung seitens der Besucher/innen spekulierte, auch wenn man sich dies bei konzentrierter Betrachtung zumindest ansatzweise hätte einreden können. So klärte der Presstext darüber auf, dass die dargestellten Formen in „Gozen Hiinagata“ nur als Umrisslinien vorgegeben sind und dass es sich hierbei um abstrahierte florale, topografische und militärische Motive handelt. Die Information, dass diese Schematisierungen „dazu vorgesehen (waren), vom Käufer einfach wiedergegeben zu werden“, ließ sich in einem metaphorischen Sinn auch auf die Ausstellung beziehen – nämlich dahingehend, dass ästhetische Anschauung hier als ein strukturell merkantil und (massen-)kulturell definiertes Verhältnis von Form und Betrachter/in markiert wurde – ein Verhältnis, das, bedenkt man den historischen Kontext des Musterbuchs, auf eine Epoche zurückverweist, in dem die aufklärerische Philosophie das Subjekt und mit ihm die ästhetische Wahrnehmung entdeckte, was sich schließlich in den im Geist der Aufklärung geschaffenen bürgerlichen Museen niederschlagen sollte. Insofern vermag der Umstand, dass sich der auf der Einladungskarte reproduzierte Bibliotheksstempel von „Gozen Hiinagata“ „OA 1979-3-5-036“ auf die Ordnungszahl des im British Museum archivierten Exemplars bezieht, als ein Hinweis auf den von musealen Sammlungen repräsentierten Besitz kultureller Differenz verstanden werden – hier eines Musterbuchs für historische japanische Mode. Mit anderen Worten werden auf formal höchst abstrakter Ebene signifikante Aspekte der europäischen Aufklärung mit einem Zeugnis einer vergangenen, von der europäischen Moderne exotisierten (Medien-)Kultur verbunden – ein Moment, das die Frage nach dem kulturellen Code der Form zugleich als eine Frage ihrer ästhetischen Bewertung exponiert. Somit scheint der Anspruch auf ein sich über Kontextwissen erhebendes Kunsturteil, mithin der Anspruch, eine „unverständliche“ Formsprache lesen zu können, sobald sie im Modus der Kunst auftritt, als obsolet. Doch damit ist die Frage nicht vom Tisch, ob sich in einer solchen Argumentation auch ein „nobler“ Grund für „kryptische“ Formalismen finden lässt – eine Frage, die in direkter Weise auf den Kern des (Neo-)Formalismus führt. Denn Pumphöls (kinematografische) Übersetzung der historischen Motive in nichtgeo-



metrische Linien-, Zacken-, Viertelkreis- und Gittermuster entspricht jener vom Neoformalismus geforderten Reduktion visueller Informationen – ein Unterfangen, das in Abgrenzung zum Anspruch des (Neo-)Realismus auf lesbare Wirklichkeitsbezüge die Konstruktion, mithin die Eigenleistung des Betrachters/der Betrachterin, privilegiert. In diesem Sinne erinnert Pumphöls Formsprache an die phänomenologische Gestalttheorie, der zufolge Menschen grundsätzlich dazu neigen, in Formen „Inhalte“ zu erkennen, die ihrem eigenen soziokulturellen Wahrnehmungshorizont entsprechen. Das heißt aber auch, dass ästhetische Distanz zur Welt das individuell-psychische wie kollektiv-kulturelle Moment der Mimesis nicht aufzuheben vermag. Pumphöls scheint genau auf diese sich in der (inter-)medialen Übersetzung zeigende Form der Differenzialität hinzuweisen, wenn er im Handout darüber informiert, dass die der Vorlage entnommenen und reproduzierten Formen um 90 Grad gedreht wurden. Die ebenso manuelle wie apparative Mechanik, die auf diese Weise thematisiert wird und den möglichen Eindruck von „sophistication“ unterläuft, lässt den Prozess der formalen Abstraktion als einen zwangsläufig mimetischen Prozess medienimmanenter Bedeutungsproduktion in Erscheinung treten: Auf der einen Seite das Medium des Holzschnitts, das den massenkulturellen Medien des 19. Jahrhunderts, der Lithografie und der Fotografie, vorausging und das von damaligen europäischen Künstler/innen in ihrer Affinität für die grafische, Flächen betonende Bildsprache japanischer Kunst „appropriert“ wurde, auf der anderen Seite der 16mm-Film, der offenbar in Anlehnung an die Buchvorlage in vier Kapitel unterteilt war. Insofern kann man daraus ableiten,

dass hier die strukturalistisch-formalistische Doppelfigur des Sehens und Lesens von Formen nahegelegt wurde, so öffnete die um 90 Grad gedrehte Form noch eine weitere Möglichkeit differenzieller Formrezeption: Denn konträr zu der traditionell von links nach rechts weisenden Ordnung der Bilderhängung verlief der Film in einer der japanischen Schriftkultur anverwandten vertikalen Richtung, also von oben nach unten. Diese Gegenbewegung gegen die Beschränkung des Filmbildes auf die viereckige Form erinnert an die Montagetechniken der russischen Avantgarden, hierbei vor allem an jene Sergej Eisensteins, der, wie die Filmwissenschaftler Thomas Elsaesser und Malte Hagener schreiben, das Format des bewegten Bildes mittels dynamischer „Diagonalen“ und „Parallelen“ zu durchbrechen suchte. In diesem Zusammenhang referierte Eisenstein auf die von ihm so genannte „japanische Methode“, die im Gegensatz zur Renaissance-Perspektive „aus dem Ganzen (einer Landschaft oder Szene) einen Ausschnitt wählt, mittels dessen sich die Kamera die Welt quasi erobert.“ „Eisenstein“, so die Autoren weiter, „bezeichnet diese Auswahl des Bildkaders als ‚Herausmeißeln eines Wirklichkeitsausschnitts mit den Mitteln des Objektivs‘ – eine Formulierung, die dem marxistischen Revolutionspathos stärker verpflichtet scheint als den Hokkaido-Malern, insofern die Wirklichkeit als modellierbares Ausgangsmaterial konzeptualisiert wird, das nach Belieben umzuformen ist.“⁵

Diese Problematik eines „linken“ Kolonialismus, wie er sich in den europäischen Avantgarden niederschlug, scheint Pumhösl in seiner Verbindung von japanischem Holzschnitt und avantgardistisch aufgeladenem 16mm-Film „kritisch“ zu zitieren, wenn er nicht „die“ (gegenständliche) Wirklichkeit zur Vorlage nimmt, sondern ein Musterbuch, das den traditionellen Anspruch des Kimonos widerspiegelt, alles, was unter der Sonne existiert, wiederzugeben. Der Eindruck einer beliebigen Beziehung von Referenz und Form, der sich mir in Pumhösls Ausstellung offen gestanden zuerst einstellte, ist eingedenk der Kritik von Elsaesser und Hagener offenbar nicht nur ein Phänomen „postmodernen Formalismus“, sondern ebenso eines des „avantgardistischen Funktionalismus“. Pumhösl, so mein revidiertes Urteil, setzt sein Material dieser Problematik gezielt aus, um genau hierin eine weder über politische Kritik noch über ästhetischen Geschmack erhabene Montage von Referenzen zu bewerkstelligen, die – wie im Fall des japanischen Holzschnitts und des russischen Avantgardefilms – unzeitgenössische Medien durch ein „Fremdwerden“ der Form in einen Diskurs über die Historizität und Politizität ästhetischer Wahrnehmung übersetzt. Dass sich die Mehrdeutigkeit eines solchen Rezeptionsangebots womöglich bei erster Anschauung nicht erschließt, erweist sich demnach entgegen weitverbreiteter Ressentiments gegen die Methoden des Referenzialismus nicht als Kennzeichen einer kommentar- oder diskursbedürftigen modernen Kunst. Diese Mehrdeutigkeit ist, gemäß Pumhösls Projekt, in den wechselseitigen kulturellen und medialen Übersetzungen von Form/Abstraktion und Funktion/Referenz zu suchen. Die Methodik, mit der in „OA 1979-3-5-036“ die grafisch abstrahierten Motive des Musterkatalogs gemäß standar-

disierter Montageprinzipien übersetzt werden, setzt dabei die dem (avantgardistischen) Medium inhärente Tendenz hin zur (Selbst-)Aufhebung als ein dem Anspruch des Formalismus verwandtes Moment frei, eine eigene, lebendige Realität zu schaffen, emanzipiert von jener schlechten Wirklichkeit, zu deren (Produktions-)Bedingungen sie entstand. Auch in dieser Hinsicht scheint Pumhösls Entscheidung, den Film auf die Galeriewand zu projizieren, einen mit historischer Bedeutung aufgeladenen Begriff der Rezeption nicht als ein von der Warenform der Kunst abstrahiertes Verhältnis von Werk und Betrachter/in zu inszenieren. Es ist kein Screen, der hier im Sinne seiner Wortbedeutung eine hinter ihm liegende, materielle Wahrheit durch deren Verdecken entlarvt oder wie auf der documenta 12 durch paraventhafte Stellwände in ein Davor und Dahinter unterteilte.⁶

Die dargestellten Implikationen des 16mm-Films lassen sich auf die Glasbilder insofern rückbeziehen, als in ihnen die in Film und Filmprojektion thematischen Aspekte – Form/Gestalt, grafische Fläche/Raum, Zeit/Bewegungsbild – von einer künstlerischen Strömung zeugen, die wie Eisenstein daran ging, die Tradition der Zentralperspektive durch ein sich durchdringendes Geflecht von Fläche, Raum und Zeit zu verwerfen. Unter dem Eindruck des durch den Ersten Weltkrieg und die russische Revolution ins Wanken geratenen Glaubens an die Ideale der bürgerlichen Kultur trieben Künstler/innen des Bauhauses jene auf die Erschaffung einer progressiven Massenkultur angelegte Industrialisierung der ästhetischen Sprache voran, in der die kolonialistischen Expansionen der Avantgarden des 19. Jahrhunderts nachklingen – eine Massenkultur, die mit Medien wie Büchern und Plakaten, Film und Fotografie dezidiert auch auf (klein-)bürgerliche Konsument/innen als eine neue, am gesellschaftlichen Leben teilhabende Schicht zielte. Das heißt, dass ebenso wie das japanische Musterbuch auch Bauhauskünstler/innen wie etwa Annie Albers, auf deren Arbeiten sich Pumhösl schon mehrfach bezogen hat, nicht nur einer ungebrochen eurozentrischen und modernistischen, sondern auch einer ungebrochen patrilinearen und bourgeois Tradition wie einem heroisierenden Revolutionspathos widersprechen.

Was man also Pumhösls Methodik uneingeschränkt zugutehalten kann, ist ihr Potenzial zu einer historisch elaborierten Verschränkung von Form- und Mediendiskurs. Bleibt angesichts solcher Rezeptions- und Deutungsmöglichkeiten die eingangs gestellte Frage, wie die fortschreitende Tendenz zur Reduktion der Form und zur Abstraktion der Referenzen marktstrategisch zu bewerten ist. Sie könnte als ein entschiedenes Understatement gegenüber einem von politisch reflektierten Künstler/innen wie ihm erwarteten Statement verstanden werden. Doch scheint der somit unterstellte Positionswechsel Pumhösls angesichts von Christian Kravagnas Besprechung seiner vor acht Jahren mit großer Aufmerksamkeit wahrgenommenen Ausstellung in der Secession keineswegs zwingend. Der Kunstkritiker gab damals schon zu bedenken, dass „man [...] der Ausstellung vorhalten (könnte), dass die von ihr hergestellten ästhetischen, historischen und

Florian Pumhösl,
„OA 1979-3-5-036“, 2007/2008,
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln,
Ausstellungsansicht



gesellschaftlichen Bezüge hinter der Objektebene allzu schwer lesbar (würden). Dies hieße aber“, so Kravagna weiter, „zu übersehen, dass es Pumhösl wesentlich um die Frage geht, wie sich Ideen und Konzepte räumlich und medial manifestieren, eine Frage, der seine Arbeiten in mimetischen Techniken (nachgingen).“⁷ Dass Pumhösl, wie ich im Zusammenhang mit dessen Zuordnung zu den (Neo-)Formalist/innen bereits erwähnte, zunächst einer Gruppierung von Künstler/innen angehörte, die an einer „kritischen Rekonstruktion von Modernisierungsprozessen“⁸ arbeite, stellte Kravagna bereits in einem zwei Jahre zuvor verfassten Text fest. Was Pumhösls neuere Arbeiten indes zu Recht deutlich machen, ist, dass der Anspruch auf eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion seinerseits in hohem Grade projektiv ist, sprich: eine Frage der Konstruktion und unvermeidlich ideologisch aufgeladener Methodik. Insofern scheint der formale Reduktionismus, der seine neueren Arbeiten kennzeichnet, äußerst gut überlegt, auch wenn eben nicht zwingend lesbar. Wären da nicht Bildtitel und Ausstellungsinformationen, die einer/einem auf die Sprünge helfen, könnte man glauben, dass Hermetik und Kryptik hier als Nebenwiderspruch eines bekämpften Hauptwiderspruchs – die Abstraktion der Referenz von der Form der Methode – billigend in Kauf genommen würden. Doch eben diese Hermetik und Kryptik sind ihrerseits Bestandteile eines Versuchs, die Spannungen zwischen Formalismus und Funktionalismus durch die unvermeidliche Logik des Mimetischen hindurchzulotsen – eine Logik, der manche Versuche der Modernismuskritik im uneingestandenem Wissen um ihre eigene projektive Aktivität verhaftet zu bleiben scheinen.

Florian Pumhösl weiß offenbar um dieses Dilemma, wenn er in einem Gespräch mit Juliane Rebentisch, das in Auszügen im Katalog der Hambur-

ger „Formalismus“-Ausstellung wiederabgedruckt ist, erklärt: „Ich frage mich, ob ich überhaupt etwas erzeugen kann, das einen abstrakten Charakter hat.“⁹ So ließe sich abschließend sagen, dass Pumhösls Abstraktionsbegriff im deutlichen Unterschied zu postmoderner Erhabenheitsrhetorik der achtziger Jahre nicht auf eine angenommene Essenz der Kunst zielt, sondern auf das, was eine solche aufspaltet und in immer wieder neue Bezüge stellt: In „OA 1979-3-5-036“ etwa durch die formale Analogie von Musterkatalogen und Filmmontage, die auf den ersten Blick nicht zusammenzupassen scheinen. Doch gerade weil deren Verbindung als eine arbiträre erscheint, tritt hierin eine „Methodenkritik“ in eigener Sache zutage, in dem Sinne, dass die hier meines Erachtens zitierte „japanische Methode“ selbst zum Gegenstand der medialen Darstellungs- und Präsentationsform wird. Das Verhältnis von abstrakter Form und Referenz bleibt damit, wie auch in seinen früheren Arbeiten, ein gespaltenes, auch oder gerade weil es den Anschein macht, dass diese Spaltung in den neueren Arbeiten ihr Außen stärker zu einer Frage der (ästhetischen und institutionellen) Immanenz macht.

Anmerkungen

- ¹ Florian Pumhösl, „OA 1979-3-5-036“, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln, 30. November 2007 bis 19. Januar 2008.
- ² Florian Pumhösl, Lisson Gallery, London, 6. Februar bis 15. März 2008.
- ³ Die Bedeutung, die die Frage der Methodik in Pumhösls Arbeit einnimmt, lässt sich beispielhaft an seiner Publikation „Animated Map“, erschienen im Rahmen seiner gleichnamigen Ausstellung in Neue Kunst Halle St. Gallen (2005), ablesen.
- ⁴ Siehe Tanja Widmann, „Glanz auf der Nase. Über Florian Pumhösl in der Galerie Krobath Wimmer, Wien“, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Jg. 16, Heft 61, März 2006, S. 184–187.
- ⁵ Thomas Elsässer/Malte Hagener, *Filmtheorie zur Einführung*, Dresden 2007, S. 35.
- ⁶ Vgl. ebd., S. 53.
- ⁷ Christian Kravagna, „Historische Praxis“, in: *Springerin. Hefte zur Gegenwartskunst*, Nr. 3, 2000, S. 44f.
- ⁸ Christian Kravagna, „Die Moderne sehen“, in: Christian Meyer/Mathias Poledna (Hg.), *Shrawadgi*, Ausstellungskatalog Felsenvilla Baden Baden, Köln 1999, S. 240–265, hier: S. 246.
- ⁹ Zitiert nach dem Gespräch mit Florian Pumhösl, in: „Formalismus. Moderne Kunst, heute“, Ausstellungskatalog Kunstverein Hamburg, Ostfildern-Ruit 2004, S. 143–149, hier: S. 143 (Auszug aus „Vielleicht eine Phase der Neuorientierung... Ein Gespräch zwischen Florian Pumhösl und Juliane Rebentisch“, in: „Florian Pumhösl, Wachstum und Entwicklung“, Ausstellungskatalog Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck 2004, S. 19–30).

SABETH BUCHMANN

ABSTRACT CHARACTERS?

**Reference and Formalism in the Works of
Florian Pumhösl**



Leaving out “old masters” such as Robert Ryman and Ellsworth Kelly, which have presented late-modernist exercises in self-referential pictorial abstraction still at the 2007 Venice Biennial, the field of contemporary “non-figurative” art shows a tendency of both abandoning traditional media formats — or at least questioning their integrity and historical validity — as well as addressing the socio-economic processes encoded in formalist sign systems. Accordingly, under the influence of conceptualism and institutional critique, the focus shifts towards the aim of interrogating the alleged universal validity of an abstract “world language” of art, as postulated in modernism, with respect to their ideological implications.

In this context, the more recent works of the Austrian artist Florian Pumhösl actuated a dialectics of references to specific episodes from the history of modernism and a conscious visual reduction of formal means — endeavoring to formulate a methodical critique of the practices both of (neo)formalism and of referentialism.

What the traditional history of art considers an achievement of European modernism, the global dissemination of abstract formal languages, has been an object of critical discourse from the 1960s on, especially in light of the anti-colonial and minority movements of the post-war era. The historical project of abstraction, undertaken by

the avant-gardes as an emancipatory project, had lost — the new argument went — its legitimacy due to its conscious or unavowed complicity with the ideology of progress promulgated by capitalist forms of domination. In a counter-movement, then, post- and neo-avant-gardist schools successively revived expressive forms of figuration and narration that had been banished by “high modernism”. As is well known, this engagement, pursued by artists as well as historians, with modernism and the varieties of abstract formalism associated with it left its mark also on the curatorial programs of the two most recent Documentas: in the case of Documenta 11, in its ambition to understand the formal canon of modernism as a heterogeneous collection of local as well as global phenomena, and hence to relativize the sole authorship of Western Europe. Documenta 12, by contrast, undertook a rehabilitating revision of modernism, distinguishing between its progressive and emancipatory currents on the one hand and reactionary and structurally violent currents on the other, thus seeking to open the conception of the historical phase in question for the correspondences the curators discerned between high-modernist and pre-modern and non-European formal languages. Yet in their substance, both exhibitions barely touched on what has for a considerable period of time been a precisely delineated object of artistic projects toward a critique of modernism: site-, context-, and institution-specific investigations of the incongruences, tensions, and ruptures within abstract formal languages between the modernist claim to autonomy and their systematic industrialization and popularization, as conducted especially by a globalized museum, exhibition, and media culture. In contrast with artists who, within the framework of their engagement of the historical, cultural, social, and ideological premises of formal abstraction, introduced the aesthetics asso-

ciated with the latter into their work by means of references encoded in their thematic substance (as signs, textual information, or documentation), the focus on aesthetic form established in the case of d 12 by the catchphrase “migration of form” at times obscured this refraction. Nonetheless, a growing affinity for abstract formal languages has become recognizable over the past few years that cannot simply be reduced to “themes” or “discourses” and that ostensibly resists (post)modern aesthetic modes of figuration and narration as much as specific modes of a rhetoric of reference. From this vantage on the matter, the hypothesis suggests itself that the past forty years of critical debate over modernism and formalism has contributed to the attractiveness, recently on the rise and surely not independent of the market, of “abstract art”. This is not to say, however, that the contemporary versions of the latter are reducible to the unitary-universalist programmatic aims and manner of presentation of which one suspects its historic predecessors. If one can here speak of a unitary principle, then only in the sort of sense suggested by the contemporary logics of the market and the exhibition business — but not in the sense that would without further ado identify first-order, that is, self-referential formalism with second-order, that is, referential formalism.

Given the internal differentiations within the camp of so-called (neo)formalism, which is said to include artists as different as Tomma Abts, Sergej Jensen, Wade Guyton, Michael Krebber, Florian Pumhösl, Anselm Reyle and Katja Strunz, it seems to be unnecessary to project the antagonism of this camp against the idea of an inherent “politicalness” of art onto the structurally simple field of the usual suspects: of issue art and contextual art here and — in their negative inversion — apolitical formalism there. For the lowest common denominator that unites these formalists seems to be distance (whose specific measure

depends on the exhibition context) from canonical formulae of art-and-politics; yet such distance is claimed also by those who wish to have their works seen as associated with a “substantial” cause: for which artist (and which critic) would seriously want to incur the charge of a formally blind conception of art? As Documenta 12’s most recent attempt — although less sharply defined than that of the exhibition “Formalism. Modern Art, Today”, shown at Hamburg’s Kunstverein in 2004–05 — to address formalism itself as an art-critical and socially critical project demonstrated, the positions subsumed under this label do intersect with aesthetic modes that bear political connotations; for even the latter rarely define themselves without an unfounded reference to a (presumably) uncritical formalism.

Florian Pumhösl is one of a loosely associated group of artists, including Fareed Armary, Julie Ault/ Martin Beck, Stan Douglas, Renée Green, Dorit Margreiter, Christian Philipp Müller, Mathias Poledna and Fred Wilson, that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s under the influence of contextual art and institutional criticism. Distancing themselves from post-modernism’s trans-historical and depoliticized conception of form, they turned their attention to the blind spots of modernism and its heritages. To the extent that the cause pursued by these artists was and in part continues to be, as suggested above, a historical and aesthetic analysis of the interrelations, constitutive of European modernism’s claim to hegemony, between universalist and marginalized or “colonialized” formal language, it is certainly no exaggeration to claim that Pumhösl was one of the artists to exert a decisive influence on fundamental thematic choices that led to Documenta 12. His long-standing attention to the history of abstract, and in particular of geometrical formal languages, whose “universalism” forms part of the background of his artistic project, is

similarly tangible in his second solo exhibition, which was shown late last year at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, a show one might call a sort of spin-off from his contribution to Documenta 12, entitled “Modernology (Triangular Studio)”.¹ Here as in his earlier works and exhibitions, the references to non-Western modernities function in order to break open the conception of European and US-American “modernity” as a socio-geographically and culturally coherent history of genesis and development. Both exhibitions, and especially “Modernology”, by taking into account (in the form in which they were later shown) the site of their presentation, reveal the tension between a critique of universalism and the contemporary globalization of such critique by virtue of a ubiquitous “critical” exhibition and discourse business.

By contrast, the contribution to d12 and even the exhibition at Buchholz demonstrated a reticence to offer proofs of “criticality”. The highly condensed formal vocabulary both shows share with Pumhösl’s most recent exhibition, at London’s Lisson Gallery², seems to justify placing him in the camp of (neo)formalism to the extent that its formal means were conspicuously and explicitly reduced, in comparison with Pumhösl’s earlier works, in many cases installations, to formal-abstract imagery. This renders thematic what constitutes the relationship, one in which not all tensions have been resolved after all, between formally reflected referentialists and reference-savvy formalists: that is, the question of the (politics of) visibility of the differences between formal-abstract aesthetics as, on the one hand, a historical-political object and, on the other hand, a self-referential means of presentation. In “Modernology” — the title quotes an eponymous work by Japanese architect Kon Wajiro — this very tension between a (modern) self-referential first-order formalism and a (post-modern) referential

second-order formalism was legible in the themes of the graphically staged cycle of images on the level of its method: translating conscious and unconscious correspondences between Japanese, Russian, and German avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s into a formal language loosely based on Pumhösl’s historical references, “Modernology” seemed designed to establish not so much a decidedly political legibility of its historical references as an aesthetically stringent actualization of the form of presentation implicit in actualization. And this very form raised the question as to the criteria of distinction that separate its own Pumhösl’s work from those post-modernist revisions of geometric abstraction that — like Gerhard Merz in the 1980s — transposed Lyotard’s Kantian credo of the “aesthetic sublime” to their “modernisms”: to Mondrian, Malevich, Rodtchenko, Rothko, and Newman. The difference is vast, no doubt; it resides — at first glance — primarily in the refusal of monumental form and visual opulence, of, e. g., a re-auratization of space and color. Pumhösl’s preferred techniques thus include the photogram as well as “synthetic resin lacquer behind glass”, formal languages, that is, that are marked by a decidedly graphical presentational quality.

In the context of Documenta 12, the epitome of the contemporary art exhibition and one that, as I have mentioned above, advanced its own artistic program as an argument, Pumhösl’s decision to show a few small-format glass paintings dominated by black, white, and grey in a spatial installation that referenced the “triangular studio” designed by artist and designer Murayama Tomoyoshi in 1926 and the Sturm exhibition shown in Tokyo in 1914, didn’t look like a “grand appearance”. To be frank, I was astonished that Pumhösl showed so “little”, and, as I learned in conversations, other visitors to the exhibition who were following his work attentively felt the

same. Pumhösl's contribution moreover conspicuously failed (or perhaps, did not strive) to meet the expectations Documenta 12 had raised with its mottoes "Is Modernism Our Classical Antiquity?" and "Migration of Form". Whether intentionally or not, "Modernology" differed in this respect e.g. from those disambiguating readings that, like James Coleman's "Retake with Evidence", almost programmatically identified reference with evident historical quality. Pumhösl's work was already distinguished from such vacuous melodies sung by a neo-classical formalism in the tone of high art by the simple fact that his work not only did not mask the technical and media-based method of referencing but made it the object of his choice of motif.³ By marking claims to historical evidence, as the result of an interpretive and hence inevitably distorting artistic process of translation, "Modernology" enacted — besides the ambition, presumably directed against the pertinent historiography, of relating (avant-gardist) functionalism and (modernist) aesthetics — an close dovetailing of "functional" and "autonomous" object languages. For instance, the exhibition design, loosely based on avant-gardist prints and studio architecture, was formally reduced to such an extent that one could not emphatically call it either functional or autonomous. "OA 1979-3-5-036" was different in precisely this respect: for on the walls of a gallery, the double character of the glass paintings, functional and autonomous objects now produced in a numbered edition and surely conscious of their collector value, was only the more conspicuous. With their inherent reference to the avant-gardist enterprise of wresting the role of hegemonic genres from painting and sculpture to more dynamic media — such as media based on photography and film — they moreover seemed capable of positing, against a conceptual art rendered suspect by its lack of reflection on its

media and of aesthetic charm, a distinctly media-conscious format.

Correspondingly, the historical lesson of "media-referential functionalism", making the mode of presentation the object of a mutually interdependent translation of object and spatial environment, was tangible in "Modernology" as well, in its ostensible distance from a referentialism grasping for substantial content on the one hand, and from a contextually empty formalism on the other hand. Yet even though a text with information on his work was available, the wealth of formal references and differences within the materials he appropriated and reinterpreted did not disclose itself (to me) to the same degree that a retrospective discussion can now develop and state. This is because, as I have already suggested, his "Modernology" renounced a characteristic of earlier works by Pumhösl, which decidedly and "thematically" traced the quoted aesthetic object language back to its involvement in specific historical moments and functions. Yet what is thus lost in terms of legible "content" seems to emerge on the methodological level: for in the wide field that is the contemporary formal language of the critique of modernism, Pumhösl is one of the few artists who always fuses the genre with a politically reflected critique of technology — as represented not only by exhibitions such as "Humanistic and Ecological Republic" (Secession, Vienna, 200), his 2003 show at the Cologne Kunstverein, and "Animated Map" at Kunsthalle St. Gallen, but also his editorship of "montage", a series published in Vienna, which exemplifies his ongoing interest in graphic design and historiography. To date, "montage" has published writings by Pumhösl and other artists on subjects such as design, architecture, and modern media culture, that shed light on the interplay between (avant-garde) art methodologies and industrial technology.

As demonstrated by the reception of Pumhösl's work by art critics and the invitations he has received to exhibit, he seems to have been spared the label of the discourse-heavy and hence hard-to-sell artist. This may be due, if one may base an argument on the example of the catalogue of the "Formalism" show in Hamburg, to contextually conditioned proximities — that is, proximities resulting from, among other things, representation by the same galleries — to artists who, while certainly not being marketed via a project of political formalism, can nonetheless profit from the latter thanks to benevolent curators and catalogue authors. Against this backdrop, Pumhösl's recent exhibitions would seem to constitute a very carefully crafted engagement of the positions I have only sketched here within processes in the world of today's exhibitions, the market, and contemporary discourses — an engagement that also reflects both on the desires for "criticality", desires surely not immune to all suspicion, and on those of an art market that insists on communicable and reliable indicators of quality. In this context, one might discern ambivalence in the decision to return to the project of the (post)avant-gardes, a failure when measured against the market success of established trade formats, within the framework of a large-scale exhibition such as Documenta that was, all curatorial self-interpretation notwithstanding, not in its principles an alternative to the art market. To put it strongly, then, one might expand the translation between hegemonic and local practices of the historical avant-gardes, thus the declared enterprise of "Modernology", to include the structural tensions inherent in the (self-imposed) artistic obligation to match the demands of critical discourse on the one hand, and the formats of the market's interests on the other hand.

The questions I had thus inevitably come to ask myself regarding "Modernology"'s conception

of itself thus formed a central precondition for my perception of his exhibition at Buchholz as well. For the latter similarly consisted of a new series of glass paintings — a decidedly media-reflective format, that is to say, that had already been on view in Pumhösl's first solo show at Buchholz as well as Krobath Wimmer⁴ in Vienna and at Kunsthalle St. Gallen; a format that thematized the method of translating functional formal languages into the present of its aesthetic (re)production and reception also in the choice of titles. As the press release noted, the individual paintings bear "titles from the realm of printing and book manufacture such as 'poster', 'page', 'flyer,' or 'tabloid'". It further informed the visitor that "the geometrical shapes depicted [...] [are] reductions of compositional elements of modern layout that structure and interpret the text, in this case mostly taken from pages of text and pamphlets in the typography of Japanese 1920s and 1930s avant-garde; their surfaces, however, have been freed from the text, the abstracted structuring signs, from their compositional/emphatic function. One can conceive of these images as media whose visual language brackets writing and functionality".

I quote the exhibition information leaflet at length also because it contains a more sharply delineated version of something that had already been brought up in "Modernology". For whereas the glass paintings attest to the (post)avant-gardist ambition to undermine classical rules of composition by inducing the image into the dimension of space, a formal reduction that has here been driven even further seems to foreground instead the mode of imagery. Insofar as the Buchholz show presented the glass paintings mounted, at some distance, on the gallery's walls, the relationship between the individual image and serial production become thematic, as did the fact that Pumhösl refrained from designing an architectural setting that would have constituted the rela-

tionship between the object and its environment. The emphasis on visual imagery thus went hand in hand with one on the gallery as a showroom. The 16-millimeter film "OA 1979-3-5-036", which was shown in combination with the glass paintings, turned this condition against itself by positing, against the presentation of the framed static image, one that accords with the classical format of the art commodity, the frameless temporal form of "abstract" film, a technique Pumhösl had already resorted to in earlier works. Given the fact that abstract avant-garde film implies not only a formal aesthetic but also that of advertising, this recourse did not imply a non-commercial counter-model, as the projection's rays directly hit the gallery wall, functioning as probably one of the most valuable architectonic elements: while observing the projected forms, the viewer was thus always also looking at a wall shown in the light of the functionality of a medium. In combination with the glass paintings, these ornamental-graphical white-on-black drawings, undergoing transformations in metrical-rhythmical sequences of montage — as the press release made available to the visitors noted, they referred to the late 17th century Japanese book "Gozen Hiinagata" ("Dress Patterns for Noble Ladies") by Take Hiratsugi, a woodcut-printed catalogue of patterns for the motivic design of kimonos — seemed like intentionally cryptic abbreviations from geometrical formal languages. Recognizing in them a reference to motifs on traditional Japanese women's dresses would have been impossible without the supplied information. This means that the perception of the social reference of abstract ornament evoked here obviously did not necessarily rely on the expectation that the viewers would decipher it, even though the focused observer might have persuaded herself otherwise at least to some degree. The press release thus further informed the visitor that "Gozen Hiinagata" defined only

the outlines of the shapes presented here, and that the latter are abstractions of floral, topographical, and military motifs. The statement that these schematized shapes were "intended for simple reproduction by the buyer" can be metaphorically applied to the exhibition as well — as an indication, that is to say, that aesthetic contemplation was here marked as a relationship between shape and observer defined by mercantile structures and (mass) culture: a relationship that refers back, once one considers the historical context of the book of patterns, to an era when the philosophy of the enlightenment discovered the subject and aesthetic perception with it, a discovery that ultimately left its mark on the bourgeois museum, an institution created in the spirit of the enlightenment. The fact that the library stamp "OA 1979-3-5-036", reproduced on the invitation to the show, refers to the call number of the copy of the book held by the archives of the British Museum can thus be understood as an indication toward the possession of cultural difference represented by museum collections — the possession, in this case, of a book of patterns of historical Japanese fashion. In other words, significant aspects of the European enlightenment are fused, at a very high level of formal abstraction, with a witness to a (media) culture of the past that has been exoticized by European modernity — a moment that exposes the question regarding the cultural code of form as being at the same time also one regarding the aesthetic evaluation of this form. The ambition to artistic judgment that rises above contextual knowledge — the ambition, that is, to be able to read an "unintelligible" formal language once it appears in the mode of art — would thus appear to be obsolete. Yet this does not do away with the question whether this line of argument might offer also a "noble" basis for "cryptic" formalisms — a question that leads directly to the core of (neo)formalism. For Pumhösl's

(cinematographic) translation of historical motifs into non-geometric patterns of straight and jagged lines, quarter-circles, and grids meets the neoformalist demand for a reduction of visual information — an enterprise that, in distancing itself from the (neo)realist ambition to legible references to reality, privileges the construction, and with it the beholder's genuine performative contribution. Pumhösl's formal language is in this sense reminiscent of phenomenological Gestalt theory, according to which humans fundamentally tend to recognize in shapes "contents" that correspond to their own socio-cultural horizon of perception. Yet this means also that aesthetic distance from the world is incapable of sublating either the individual-psychological or the collective-cultural components of mimesis. Pumhösl seems to indicate precisely this form of differentiability manifest in (inter)media translation when he informs the visitor, in the handout, that the shapes taken from the source and reproduced here have been rotated by 90 degrees. The mechanics, at once manual and performed by an apparatus, that is thus rendered thematic and undermines the possible impression of sophistication, reveals the process of formal abstraction as an inevitably mimetic process of medium-immanent meaning-production: on the one hand, the medium of the wood-cut, which preceded the mass-cultural media of the 19th century, lithography and photography, and was at the time "appropriated" by European artists who felt an affinity for the graphical language of Japanese art, with its emphasis on surfaces; on the other hand, a 16-millimeter film subdivided, obviously to some extent based the book that served as its source, into four chapters. If one can conclude from this premise that this suggested the structuralist-formalist double figure of seeing and reading forms, the form rotated by 90 degrees opened up yet another avenue of differential reception of forms: for against the traditional order in which the paintings had been

mounted, left to right, the film ran in a vertical direction akin to that of Japanese writing culture, that is, downward. This counter-move against the limitation of the filmic image to its square outline is reminiscent of the techniques of montage developed by the Russian avant-gardes, and here especially by Sergei Eisenstein, who, as film theorists Thomas Elsässer and Malte Hagener write, sought to break through the format of the moving picture by means of dynamic "diagonals" and "parallels". Eisenstein referred in this context to what he called the "Japanese method", which, in contrast with Renaissance perspective "selects from the whole (of a scenery or scene) a detail through which the camera conquers, as it were, the world". "Eisenstein", the authors continue, "calls this selection of the square detail shown in the picture the 'chiseling-out of a detail of reality with the means of the objective' — a phrase that seems indebted primarily to the Marxist pathos of the revolution, not to the painters of Hokkaido, conceptualizing reality as a source material to be modeled, to be freely transformed".⁵

In fusing Japanese wood-cuts and 16-millimeter film with its strong avant-garde connotations, Pumhösl seems to be "critically" quoting this set of problems incurred by a "leftist" colonialism, as it left its mark on the European avant-gardes, by taking for his model not (objective) reality "as such" but rather a book of patterns that, as the artist once explained to me, wooed potential buyers with the kimono's traditional ambition of representing "anything under the sun". My initial impression of Pumhösl's exhibition was, I admit, that of an arbitrary relationship between reference and form; with a view to Elsässer and Hagener's critique, it is obviously not only a phenomenon of "post-modern formalism" but equally one of "avant-gardist functionalism". Pumhösl, this would then be my revised judgment, purposely exposes his materials to this set of problems precisely in order to effect a montage of references

that is immune neither to a political critique nor to aesthetic taste, a montage that — as in the case of Japanese wood-cuts and Russian avant-garde film — translates non-contemporary media, through a “becoming-alien” of form, into a discourse about the historicity and politicalness of aesthetic perception. That the polyvalence of the offer thus made to the recipients may not reveal itself to them upon first inspection, then, turns out, contrary to the widespread prejudice about the methods of referentialism, not to be the mark of a modern art that is in need of commentary or discursive mediation. This polyvalence must be thought, according to Pumhösl’s project, in the interplay of cultural and inter-media translations between form/ abstraction and function/ reference. The methods “OA 1979-3-5-036” employs to translate the graphically abstract motifs of the pattern catalogue in accordance with standardized principles of montage here releases the tendency, inherent to the (avant-gardist) medium, toward (self-)abrogation as an aspect akin to formalism’s ambition to create an autonomous living reality, one emancipated from that bad real world under whose conditions (of production) it was created. In this respect, too, Pumhösl’s decision to project the film onto the gallery wall seems to stage a historically charged concept of reception, and stage it not as a relationship between work and beholder abstracted from art’s submission to the commodity form. There is here no screen which, in the literal sense of the word, would unmask, by concealing it, a material truth located behind it, or would divide such a material truth into a façade and a behind-the-façade, as paravent-like movable walls did at Documenta 12.⁶

The implications of 16-millimeter film discussed here can be related back to the glass paintings insofar as aspects thematic in film and film projection — form/Gestalt, graphical surface/space, time/motion picture — attest in these paintings to an artistic current that, like

Eisenstein, undertook to discard the tradition of central perspective in favor of an interpenetrating fabric of surface, space, and time. In view of the growing disbelief, propelled by World War II and the Russian Revolution, in the ideals of bourgeois culture, artists at the Bauhaus promoted an industrialized aesthetic language that resonated with the echoes of the colonialist expansions of the 19th-century avant-gardes, an aesthetic language that aimed to create a progressive mass culture — one which, with media such as books and posters, film and photography resolutely targeted also (petit-)bourgeois consumers, as a new social stratum and participant in the life of society. This means that Bauhaus artists such as Anni Albers, to whose works Pumhösl has made reference more than once, no less than the Japanese book of patterns establish objections not only to an unbroken Euro-centrist and modernist but also to an unbroken patrilinear and bourgeois tradition as well as a heroicizing revolutionary pathos.

One thing for which Pumhösl’s methods deserve unqualified credit, then, is their ability to effect a historically elaborate interweaving of the discourses of form and media. The question I asked at the beginning remains: what to make of the progressive tendency toward reduced forms and more abstract references in terms of market strategy. It might be understood as a determined understatement, offered against the sort of statement expected from a politically reflective artist such as he is. Yet it would seem that the imputation that Pumhösl changed positions is by no means compelling, given Christian Kravagna’s review of Pumhösl’s widely noted exhibition at the Secession eight years ago. Even then, Kravagna, an art historian, called to attention that “one might level the reproach against this exhibition that the aesthetic, historical, and social references it establishes are rendered virtually illegible behind the objective plane. Yet this would mean”, Kravagna continued, “to overlook

the fact that Pumhösl is centrally concerned with the question how ideas and concepts become manifest in space and media, a question his works pursue with mimetic techniques”.⁷ That Pumhösl, as I remarked above in the context of his classification as a (neo)formalist, was initially a member of a group of artists who worked on a “critical reconstruction of processes of modernization”⁸, is similarly something Kravagna already noted two years earlier. Yet what Pumhösl’s more recent work rightly points out is that the ambition to perform a historical-critical reconstruction is itself highly projective, that is to say, a matter of construction and of a methodology inevitably charged with ideology. If we didn’t have the works’ titles and exhibition information leaflets to get us started, we might come to think that hermeticism and crypticism are here accepted as the secondary contradiction inevitably entailed in attacking the main contradiction — the abstraction of reference from the form of the method. Yet this very hermetic-cryptic presentation is a component in its own right of the attempt to navigate the tensions between formalism and functionalism through the inevitable logic of the mimetic — a logic which some attempts at a critique of modernism, disavowing their awareness of the projective nature of their own activity, do not escape.

Florian Pumhösl is obviously conscious of this dilemma when he explains, in a conversation with Juliane Rebentisch reprinted, in part, in the catalogue for the Hamburg “Formalism” exhibition: “I ask myself whether I can create anything at all that is abstract in character.”⁹

One might say in conclusion, then, that Pumhösl’s concept of abstraction, in marked difference from the post-modern rhetoric of the sublime of the 1980s, aims not at a presumptive essence of art but at what divides such an essence, placing it in ever new contexts: in “OA 1979-

3-5-036”, for instance, by virtue of the formal analogy between the pattern catalogue and filmic montage, two things that do not at first glance seem a good match. Yet precisely because their fusion appears to be arbitrary, it reveals a “critique” of method *pro domo* in the sense that the “Japanese method” that is, if I am not mistaken, being quoted here becomes itself the object of the media-conditioned form of (re)presentation. The relationship between abstract form and reference, then, remains as split as it had been in Pumhösl’s earlier work, even though or precisely because it seems as though this split presents, in the more recent work, its outside more forcefully as a question of (aesthetic and institutional) immanence.

(Translation: Gerrit Jacksson)

Notes

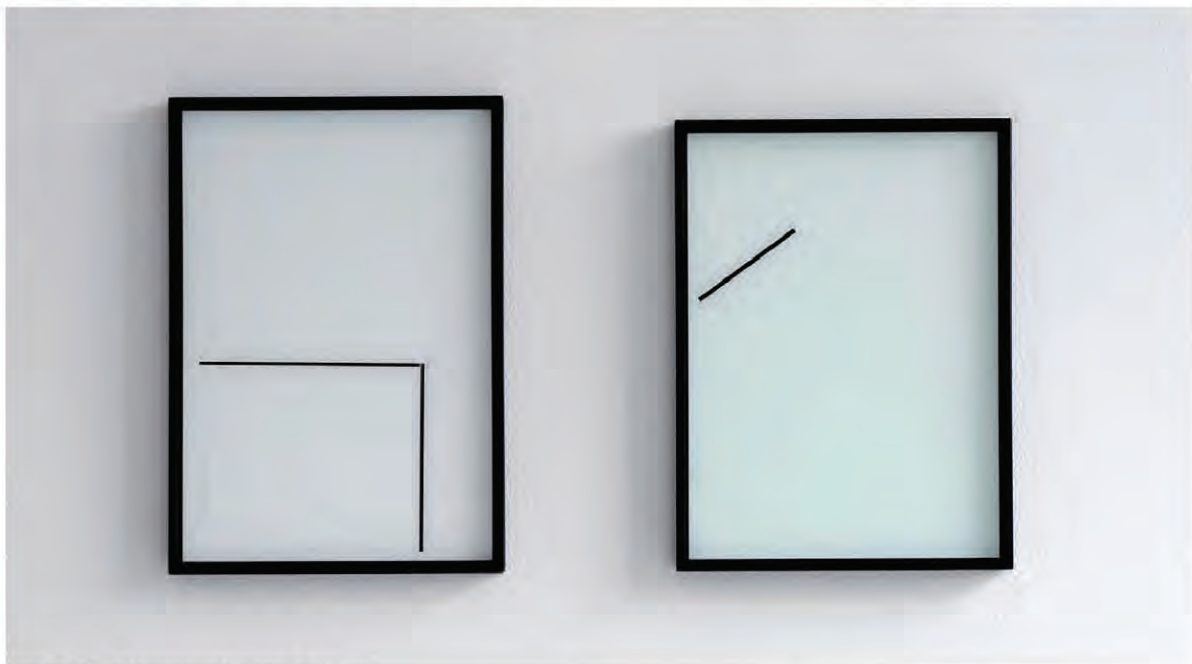
- 1 Florian Pumhösl, “OA 1979-3-5-036”, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln, 11/30/2007-1/19/2008
- 2 Florian Pumhösl, Lisson Gallery, London, 2/6-3/15/2008.
- 3 Exemplary evidence of the importance of the question of methodology to Pumhösl’s work can be found in his “Animated Map”, published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same title at Neue Kunst Halle St. Gallen, 2005.
- 4 See Tanja Widmann, “Glanz auf der Nase. Über Florian Pumhösl in der Galerie Krobath Wimmer, Wien”, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 16 no. 61, March 2006, pp. 184–187.
- 5 Thomas Elsässer/Malte Hagener, *Filmtheorie zur Einführung*, Dresden 2007, p. 35.
- 6 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 7 Christian Kravagna, “Historische Praxis”, in: *Springerin. Hefte zur Gegenwartskunst* 3 (2000), pp. 44–45.
- 8 Christian Kravagna, “Die Moderne sehen”, in: Christian Meyer/Mathias Poledna (eds.), *Sharawadgi, Ausstellungskatalog Felsenvilla Baden Baden, Cologne 1999*, p. 246.
- 9 Quoted from the conversation with Florian Pumhösl in: “Formalismus. Moderne Kunst, heute”, exh. cat. Kunstverein Hamburg, Ostfildern-Ruit 2004, p. 143 (extract from “Vielleicht eine Phase der Neuorientierung ... Ein Gespräch zwischen Florian Pumhösl und Juliane Rebentisch”, in: “Florian Pumhösl, Wachstum und Entwicklung”, exh. cat., Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck 2004, pp. 19–30).

MOUSSE

FLORIAN PUMHÖSL

Andrea Viliani

Florian Pumhösl, viennese, classe 1971, basa il suo lavoro sul rapporto critico con il Modernismo e la sua eredità. E non dite "Oh no, ancora!". Questo fa sul serio. È rigoroso, preparato e puntiglioso come pochi altri, al punto da collocare i suoi interventi, volutamente, al limite fra arte, indagine archivistica e riflessione critica. Lo si è visto per esempio nella sua installazione a Documenta, l'estate scorsa, e ancora di più nella sua mostra appena conclusa da Buchholz, a Colonia, in cui metteva in relazione lo stile tipografico dell'avanguardia giapponese anni Venti con gli ornati dei kimono del XVII secolo. Sarà che siamo dei seccchioni, ma a noi piace. Parecchio. E aspettiamo con trepidazione la sua prima grande personale londinese, che si terrà negli spazi della Lisson Gallery a partire dal 6 febbraio.



Modernology 27 and 29, 2007 - Courtesy: the artist and Lisson Gallery, Londra © Florian Pumhösl, 2007

Partiamo dall'inizio. O meglio, partiamo dalla fine. Puoi dirmi qualcosa della tua ultima personale da Daniel Buchholz?
Ho appena concluso un lavoro intitolato *OA 1979-3-5-056*, che consiste nella conversione in cartone animato di un libro del diciassettesimo secolo del giapponese Take Hiratsugi. Il libro è intitolato *Gazen Hiinagata (Fantasie Per Abiti Da Nobildonne)*, ed è un volume tratto da un catalogo in più volumi che raccoglie esempi delle prime fantasie per kimono. Le forme mostrate nel film sono il risultato di un processo di riduzione volto a giungere ad una selezione degli elementi grafici raffigurati nel libro: temi floreali e paesaggi, oggetti d'uso comune e dettagli architettonici. Nella mostra, il film d'animazione è proiettato negli stessi spazi in cui è appesa una serie di dipinti su vetro, e interrompe la loro disposizione. I dipinti hanno titoli che rimandano all'industria della stampa e dell'editoria, come *Plakat* (poster), *Seite* (pagina), *Aushang* (avviso), o *Toblot*. Le forme geometriche che raffigurano sono riduzioni di elementi compositivi e strutturali utilizzati nella grafica moderna per aiutare l'interpretazione di un testo, e sono tratti per lo più da pamphlet dell'avanguardia giapponese degli anni Venti e Trenta. Qui, comunque, le superfici sono private del testo: i simboli sono quindi liberati dalla loro funzione decorativa/evidenziatrice, e possono essere visti come mezzi espressivi il cui linguaggio visivo esclude la scrittura e la funzionalità.

Quando, un paio di anni fa, ho visto la tua mostra presso la galleria Krobath Wimmer, sono rimasto colpito dalla totale mancanza di connessione fra l'invito, che consisteva nel ritratto di una coppia su sfondo grigio, e le pitture astratte su vetro che erano esposte

negli spazi della galleria. Qual è il rapporto tra il materiale relativo alla promozione e alla documentazione delle tue mostre e le opere che vi sono allestite?

Mi piace il rituale dell'invito. Fornisce uno spazio in cui estendere la mostra, esibendo qualcosa che magari è importante ma non sarà presente nello spazio espositivo. Nel caso di cui parli, si trattava della fotografia di un soldato austriaco della prima guerra mondiale che posava in uniforme con la moglie seduta accanto. Per un altro lavoro, il film *Animated Map*, sull'invito compariva il modello della sua uniforme (ricostruito a partire dalla fotografia). Ho usato l'immagine per contestualizzare il tutto, per associare il linguaggio a cui facevo riferimento con l'orizzonte di disumanizzazione, industrializzazione e tecnologia militare all'inizio del Novecento.

Visitando la tua mostra a Secession a Vienna nel 2000, oppure quella alla Kunstverein di Köln nel 2003, ho avuto invece la sensazione di entrare in una sorta di archivio, piuttosto che nella classica mostra da white cube. Ma si trattava di uno strano tipo di archivio, non necessariamente rivolto al passato e quindi custode di antichi manufatti e atto a ricostruire relazioni e forme espressive ormai decadute. Era più un archivio che guardava allo stesso tempo sia avanti sia indietro, una piattaforma che sembrava segnalare la possibilità di un'esperienza ambigua dello spazio e del tempo. L'approccio archivistico/documentaristico è una parte importante del tuo lavoro o del tuo metodo? Ti è d'aiuto quando lavori con categorie come quelle di tempo e spazio?
Piuttosto che vedere il lavoro come un archivio, preferisco dire

che possiede caratteristiche e attributi storicamente connotati, o comunque basati sul tempo. La questione che sto tentando di sollevare è: fino a che punto è possibile agire all'interno di uno spazio definito dall'artista stesso? All'interno di uno spazio che quindi emerge dalla gerarchia tra la mia paternità sull'opera e le fonti della ricerca, tra i riferimenti storici e le appropriazioni e ciò che io posso rappresentare? Potrei quindi dire che il mio medium d'elezione è lo spazio storico e fisico che produco utilizzando indifferentemente pittura, architettura, film o fotografia.

Nell'installazione intitolata *Modernology* (2007) che hai realizzato per l'ultima Documenta, a fianco di alcuni tuoi dipinti astratti hai esposto una vecchia pubblicazione che raffigurava dei paracaduti bianchi in caduta. Inoltre, hai accettato la proposta della curatrice Ruth Noack di inserire nell'allestimento l'opera di un altro artista presente in mostra, la giapponese Tanaka Atsuko. Mi diresti come e perché tu e Noack avete fatto queste scelte?

La rivista esposta era un numero del 1942 della rivista giapponese di propaganda intitolata *Front*: il numero del paracadutista, in cui ci sono una serie di paracadutisti che si lanciano. Si tratta di materiale molto problematico, che segna l'abuso del linguaggio visivo moderno per le politiche di espansione fasciste. *Modernology* è un lavoro che risulta dalla mia profonda fascinazione nei confronti dell'avanguardia giapponese, e questo aspetto è raccontato nel modo migliore proprio dalla presenza di quella pubblicazione. Poi, quando Ruth Noack mi ha proposto il lavoro di Tanaka Atsuko, non ho potuto davvero resistere: l'adoro. Penso che l'uso del tessuto nei suoi lavori 6, 7 e 8 in relazione

all'aerodinamicità dei paracadutisti desse origine a un percorso di senso piuttosto interessante.

Torniamo ora all'inizio. Potresti dirmi cosa significa per te, ancora, una parola come "modernità"?

Vorrei che si ci fosse stato un profondo dibattito sull'idea di modernità ogni volta che se ne è parlato negli ultimi anni. Ormai sembra solo una parola vuota. Soprattutto nel contesto dell'arte.

The work of Florian Pumhosl, a 1971-born Viennese artist, is founded on a critic relationship with Modernism and its heritage. And please don't say "Oh no, not again!" This one really means it. He's rigorous, qualified, and meticulous like few others, to the point that he considers his works to be set at the edge between art, archival research, and critic thinking. It could be easily seen in his installation piece exhibited at Documenta last summer, and first and foremost in his recently-ended solo show at Buchholz in Cologne, where he connected the typographic style of the 20s Japanese Avant-garde with the kimono designs of the seventeenth century. This is maybe due to our being crammers, but we like him a lot. And we're waiting anxiously for his large solo exhibition in London, which is going to be held at the Lisson Gallery from February 6.

Let's start from the beginning. Or better, let's start from the end. Could you tell me more about your last show at Galerie Daniel Buchholz?

I had just finished *OA 1979-3-5-036*, which is the conversion of a Japanese book by Take Hiratsugi from the late 17th century into a 16mm animated film. The book is called *Gozen Hinogata* (*Dress Patterns For Noble Ladies*), one volume of a multi-volume pattern catalogue with examples of the earliest Japanese kimono designs. The forms shown in the film result from a process of reduction, in order to ultimately arrive at a typology of fragmented graphic elements that are depicted in the book in an abstracted fashion – originally floral and landscape images, everyday objects and architectural details. In the exhibition, the projection of the animated film is integrated in with the hanging of a series of glass paintings, interrupting their arrangement. The paintings bear titles from the printing and publishing industry, such as *Plakat* (poster), *Seite* (page), *Avushang* (notice) or *Tabloid*. The geometric shapes depicted therein are reductions of compositional, structuring elements that are used in modern layout to help interpret a text, in this case mostly taken from pamphlets using the typography of 1920s and 30s Japanese avant-garde. Here, however, the surfaces are devoid of text and the abstract structuring symbols are thus liberated from their decorative/highlighting function. One can picture these images as media whose visual language excludes writing and functionality.

When a couple of years ago I saw your show at Galerie Krobath Wimmer, I was amazed by the lack of connection between the invitation card – showing a portrait of a couple on a grey background – and the abstract paintings on glass shown in the gallery spaces. What is the relationship between press & promotion or documentary material for your shows and the final artworks you do for them?

I like the ritual of the invitation card. It provides an area to extend the space of an exhibition, and to show something which might be important, but absent in the exhibition space. In this case it has been the photograph of an Austrian soldier from WWI posing in uniform, his wife sitting next to him. For another work, the film *Animated Map*, I had the cutting pattern of his uniform reconstructed after this photograph, but in this exhibition I used the image as a contextual marker, to associate the abstract yet figurative language I referred to with the horizon of dehumanization, industrialization and military technology at the beginning of the 20th century.

Entering your show at the Wiener Secession in 2000 or the one at the Kölner Kunstverein in 2003 I felt like I was entering a sort of an archive rather than a normal white cube-show. But it was indeed a very strange kind of archive, not necessarily oriented to the past, storing old artifacts and reconstructing expired relations and forms of expressions. This was more a "look-backward/forward archive", so to say, a platform indicating an ambiguous experience of time and space. Is the archival/documentary approach an important component or method of work for you? Does it help you in working with categories such as the ones of time and space?

I like to speak of historical or time-based characteristics and attributes of a work instead of seeing the work as an archive. I am calling into question to what extent it is possible to act within a space defined by the artist himself – a space that emerges from the hierarchy between my own authorship and its research sources, between historical references or concrete borrowings and what I can depict. My medium is the physical and historical space that I create using painting, architecture, film or photography.

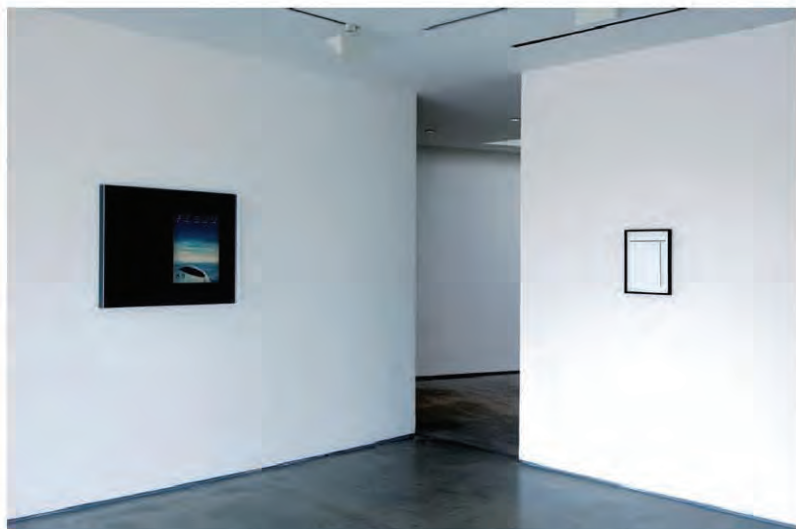
In the installation piece (*Modernology*, 2007) you did for the last Documenta, you showed alongside other abstract paintings you did yourself some old printed materials illustrating white falling parachutes. And you also agreed to the request of Ruth Noack,

the curator, to insert in the layout of your work a single artwork by another artist in the show, the Japanese artist Tanaka Atsuko. Could you tell me how and why these two decisions were made by you, and Noack?

The magazine shown had been an issue of the Japanese propaganda magazine *Front* from 1943, the *Paratrooper*-issue. A sequence of paratroopers landing. Highly problematic material, which marks the abuse of modern visual language for fascist expansionist politics. As *Modernology* had been the result of my fascination with the Japanese Avant-garde, this was an aspect that could best be told by the printed artifact itself. When Ruth Noack proposed the work of Tanaka Atsuko I could not resist as I really adore this artist. And I think the use of fabrics in Tanaka's work 6,7 and 8 from 1955 in relation to the aerodynamics of the paratroopers created quite a complex historical route.

Ok, let's come back now to the beginning... Could you tell me what could a word like "modernity" still mean?

I wish there was a profound debate on Modernity whenever it was came up in the last years. An empty phrase now, as it seems. That is, in the context of art.



Roomtop: Installation view, 2007 - Courtesy: Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Köln // Installation view *Zeigepreis Aktion* - Courtesy: the artist and Lisson Gallery, London © Florian Pumhosl

ARTFORUM

Florian Pumhösl

GALERIE KROBATH WIMMER

What does Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, 1916, have to do with the navigation of warships? Florian Pumhösl has explored this unexpected question in a new group of works. Pumhösl, an artist of great precision, is interested in the relationship between bodies and space, and he studies this relationship by way of superflat surfaces that he ultimately brings into relation with a superexact spatial balance: With just four works, Pumhösl succeeds in lending the small exhibition space of this Vienna gallery an air of breadth and elegance.

Pumhösl's footnotes to modernism seem austere, almost monastic. His examination of the rules and vocabulary of the modernist image-language takes place on a substrate more often associated with rural amateurs than with the crowning achievement of avant-garde art: Pumhösl paints on glass, or better, paints behind it. And yet the *verre églomisé* technique from which Pumhösl's is adapted was used by Josef Albers, among others. The avant-garde filmmaker Oskar Fischinger was a practitioner of the genre, as was the German artist, graphic designer, and leader of the Jena Kunstverein, Walter Dexel. The technique is intimately connected with the aspiration to modernize traditional crafts in the age of industrial production.

Pumhösl's finely differentiated and exactly contoured personal method entails a very close look at abstract and reductionist traditions of modernism while at the same time referring to representation. He allows himself a positively romantic impulse with the use of old glass plates, complete with air pockets, to somewhat counter the tendency to be all too picture-perfect. Lines on monochromatic—black, white, or gray—backgrounds can be associated with Schlemmer's stereometric bodies, whereas in the painting titled *Battle of Manila Bay (Turning Maneuvers)* (all works 2005) the overlapping curves represent the movement of an American battleship.

With a suggestion of unity that is also taken up in the office space of the gallery, Pumhösl continues his aesthetic evaluation of modernism in *Element*, a thoughtful study of the material associations triggered by abstract paintings and of the way extreme formal reductivism can produce powerful content. Pumhösl rigorously concentrates his work down to the founding grammatical principles of the modern image vocabulary and works unwaveringly to connect exemplary moments of the avant-garde—in architecture, design, or experimental film—along their lines of fracture and contradiction.

"Modernity and renewal," wrote the late curator Igor Zabel in his catalogue essay "Individual Systems" for the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, "by their nature are connected to ideas of a rational and ordered mode of thought, of a planned and effective kind of production, with ideas of a thoughtful use of space and resources, with ideas of a well-organized and equitable society." Pumhösl, too, has in mind historical situations, political realities, and concrete social structures when he executes his model studies on the relationship of space and bodies. He carefully combines exacting research into both aesthetic and social formations, translating them into an almost painfully clear language that asserts itself precisely in once-ambiguous areas. When Pumhösl packs his insights into one of his works, it is free from speculation, liberated from every convention; it is poetic and touching, it hits a nerve.

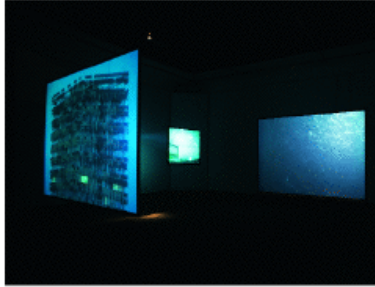
—*Brigitte Huck*

Translated from German by Sara Ogger.

frieze

Under Construction

Florian Pumhösl



Throughout the history of the avant-garde it was a widely held belief that the architect's job, given their alleged ability to think in universal terms, was to find practical solutions to the world's problems during a time of crisis.

This, at least, is the Modernist ethos explored by Florian Pumhösl. Pumhösl traces the origins, contexts and consequences of the peculiar blend of idealism and pragmatism behind the image of the Modern architect as a Renaissance man in a society of technocrats - a generalist who can create designs that not only solve specific problems, but that work for everybody everywhere, and improve every aspect of life.

In his exhibition 'On or Off Earth - Design für die echten Bedürfnisse und die Rhetorik der Alternativbewegung' (Design for the Real Needs and the Rhetoric of the Alternative Movement) at the Grazer Kunstverein in 1996, Pumhösl examined the ways in which this type of Modernist thinking resurfaced in the aesthetics and politics of early 1970s utopian design. He rebuilt pieces of Functionalist furniture from the book *Nomadic Furniture 1*, by Viktor Papanek and James Hennessey, published in 1974: a dwelling consisting of a cubic frame of wooden slats, between which sheets of cloth are stretched out as makeshift walls; square wooden boards with notches that allow them to be assembled as chairs, tables etc.; and an ensemble of crystalline forms derived from the shape of fat cells. This organic construction provided the basis for the design of a variety of objects ranging from oil tanks and space stations to children's toys. The exhibits were complemented by documentation of other ideas that were particularly influential on the alternative design of the time. These ranged from economic theories to ideas borrowed from the Green movement (then in its infancy) to ideas relating to military technology and space travel.

At the beginning of the 1970s the oil crisis, the Cold War and the space race brought about a general awareness that the world's resources were limited, and that the future of mankind itself was in doubt. In the face of such dire prognostications a variety of innovative schemes were devised that flew in the face of the global capitalist economy, and these formed the focus of Pumhösl's 1996 exhibition. Many of the design ideas were based on the concept of the individual as a form of nomad, a traveller and survivor using his resources wisely to lead a free and flexible life with the help of multifunctional modular equipment. However, this philosophy also implied an uncritical belief in expansionism: Pumhösl made it clear that the testing-ground for each of the 'alternative' designs was to be somewhere beyond the Western world: outer space, the deep sea or the Third World. In other words, they embraced the same cruel logic of military and colonialist conquest.

Pumhösl explored the disturbing link between the aesthetics of Modernism and the politics of colonialism in more detail in his exhibition 'Humanist and Ecological Republic', held at the Vienna Secession building in 2000. In the main hall he presented an installation entitled *When He Returned to Power in 1998, the Former Marxist President of Madagascar, Didier Ratsiraka - Having Meanwhile Been Converted to the Market Economy - Announced that He Would Turn Madagascar into the First 'Humanist and Ecological Republic in the World*. In the broad, airy exhibition space a selection of prefabricated architectural elements were displayed like autonomous Modernist sculptures. These included various concrete structures or glass membranes, four concrete pipes cut lengthwise for use as roof components and - on a white board supported by a black steel frame - a small model for a building made of cement. The design of the house was based on a type of urban dwelling found in Madagascar, designed to provide shelter against cyclones and itself based on a French design. Among these exhibits stood a bronze of a crouching female figure by Henry Moore, on loan from the sculpture garden of Vienna's Museum Moderner Kunst.

The exhibition space was intended to reveal a global architectural grammar, based on a modular assembly system. Yet Pumhösl was not only offering an analysis of the Modernist style of the 1950s; he was also confronting the viewer with the physical experience of wandering through this colony of cold concrete structures designed to impose a new order onto the world. You could sense the intimate relationship that exists between the beauty of perfect rationalism and a totalitarian, regimented view of life.

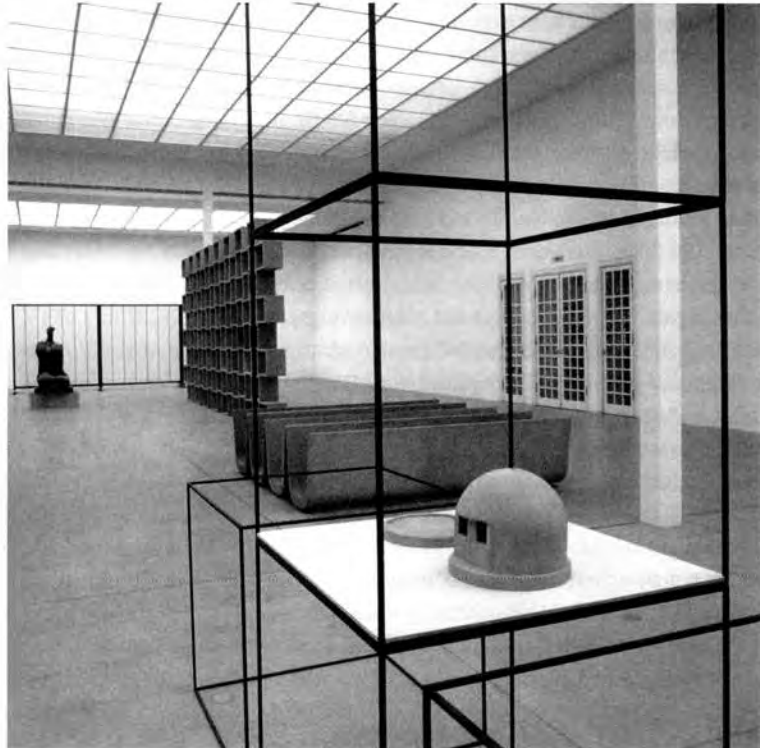
The links between modern industrial architecture and colonial history were explored further in the video installation *Lac Mantasoa* (2000), shown in the graphic art section of the Secession building. The video, also filmed in Madagascar, charts Pumphösl's exploration of the ruins of a factory complex built in the 19th century by the French industrialist Jean-Baptiste Laborde near the capital, Antananarivo. The factory was the first part of what was planned to be an industrial town modelled on European cities. After Laborde was expelled from the country, the forced labourers who had built the complex tore some of it down. Other parts were flooded when the French created a huge reservoir in 1936-7. A folder accompanying the exhibition documents the story, while the video presents only silent images, showing what is left of the building interspersed with views of the interior and some of its vast empty rooms. Some of the submerged parts of the building, filmed with an underwater camera, appear as a ghostly presence among tree stumps in the murky green water. The history of the factory complex reads like a palimpsest, a story constantly overwritten by the (self-)destructive forces of Modernity: industrialization, colonization and social unrest.

In his recent exhibition at Galerie Krobath Wimmer in Vienna, Pumphösl subjected the formal language of Modernism to a more poetic critique. Many Modernist designers have sought to derive universal forms with scientific accuracy directly from nature - Papanek and Hennessey's use of fat cells is just one example. Pumphösl drew on this aspiration to objectivity in his use of the technique of photogrammetry. By simply laying objects such as perforated boards or pages of a book directly onto photosensitive paper he reproduced their outlines. The resulting untitled images are perfectly objective renderings of beautifully empty structures. The exhibition also included several lumps of artificial rock, and the video *You Have Several Times Been Paralleling or Anticipating Some (As Yet Not Fully Appreciated) Recent Developments in Exact Science - of Which You May Not Be Fully Aware (Few Are)* (2001). The video shows black and white images of stick insects, almost indistinguishable from the twigs on which they scurry around; the bugs constitute a living critique of modern universalism's attempts to find the ultimate law of form in nature and suggest - like Pumphösl's photograms - that the highest form of objectivity may be pure contingency. These projects undermine the Modernist ambition to create the best of all possible worlds: the most rational solution for the planet, they seem to argue, is not to order nature but to leave it to its own devices.

Jan Verwoert

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

MARODE MODERNE



Florian Pumhösl, Wiener Secession, 2000, Installationsansicht

Lily Reichs Materialpräsentationen aus den dreißiger Jahren gehörten ebenso zu einer Phase avantgardistischen Ausstellungsdesigns wie sie von der Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus nicht zu trennen sind. Im positiven wie negativen Sinne war und ist Design mit Politik verwoben, wovon nicht zuletzt diverse modernistische Utopien zeugen.

All dies und noch mehr spielte in Florian Pumhösls Ausstellung „Humanistische und ökologische Republik“ eine Rolle. Hier erweiterte er die Verstrickungen von Display, Modernismus und Geschichte um den Aspekt „Madagaskar“.

„Meine Arbeit beschäftigt sich hauptsächlich mit Architektur (nicht mit Skulptur oder Inneneinrichtung).“ – „Ich will niemanden missionieren.“ (Florian Pumhösl)

Mit seiner Ausstellung im Grazer Kunstverein, „On or Off Earth: Design für die echten Bedürfnisse. Die Rhetorik der Alternativbewegung“ aus dem Jahr 1996, nahm Florian Pumhösl direkten Bezug auf Henry Dreyfuss' „Designing for People“ (1951). Gert Selles „Ideologie und Utopie des Design“ (1971), Ernst Friedrich Schumachers „Small is Beautiful. Die Rückkehr zum menschlichen Maß“

(1973) und Victor Papanek's „Design for the Real World – Human Ecology and Social Change“ (1970). Alle diese Arbeiten setzen sich mit sozialen und ökologischen Problemen auseinander. Allerdings, so Pumhösl, beschränkte sich die Debatte dabei in erster Linie darauf, diese Probleme als allgemeine Symptome des Zustands industrialisierter Gesellschaften zu untersuchen, ohne dabei Verbindungen zu politischen Systemen und spezifischen historischen Entwicklungen zu berücksichtigen. Pumhösl's Grazer Ausstellung wollte unter anderem Aufmerksamkeit auf einen „Modellcharakter“ lenken, d.h. auf die Tatsache, dass die Arbeiten, auf die er sich bezog, insbesondere die Entwürfe von Victor Papanek, der als Designer für die UNESCO tätig war, ausdrücklich darauf angelegt waren, konkret anwendbare Modelllösungen für bestimmte Probleme zu entwerfen. Gleichzeitig stellte Pumhösl die Frage, wie man mit denselben Problemstellungen heute umgeht.

In seiner Ausstellung in der Wiener Secession, die unter anderem aus einer Installation im Hauptraum und einem Video im oberen Stockwerk bestand, entwickelte Pumhösl diese Ideen weiter und analysierte modernistische Initiativen in Madagaskar: Er setzte die Geschichte eines im späten 18. Jahrhundert unternommenen Industrialisierungsversuchs in Bezug sowohl zu modernistischen Design-Entwürfen – Collagen und Architekturmodellen – für die „Dritte Welt“ als auch zur Genealogie modernistischen Ausstellungsdesigns. Pumhösl beschäftigte sich mit Madagaskar als konkretem Ort, erkannte jedoch die Unmöglichkeit, diesen mit einem minimalen Formenvokabular darzustellen, wodurch er zugleich jeden Versuch zurückwies, eine alles einbeziehende Erzählung zu schreiben. Stattdessen bot er eine suggestive und fiktive, aber

dennoch reale Republik an, ein lebensgroßes Modell mit beweglichen Elementen. Das Konzept des Ortes gewinnt hier eine vielstimmige Resonanz und ist nicht länger mit simplen „Site“-Konzeptionen vereinbar. Da der Künstler anstelle eines site-spezifischen auf einem systemspezifischen Ansatz besteht – diese Unterscheidung geht auf Stephen Prina zurück –, kann man Pumhösl's Arbeit als Modell verstehen, das an unterschiedlichen Orten bestehen kann. Stellt man sich dieses System an einem anderen Ort als in der Wiener Secession vor, ergäben sich ganz andere Fragestellungen, und ich wäre neugierig zu sehen, welche das z. B. in New York, in Brasilien, Lissabon oder Nantes mit ihren je unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen von Geschichte, Kolonialismus und Moderne sein könnten. Der Kontext ist eine vielschichtige und variable künstlerische Kategorie, die noch immer ein bewegliches Repräsentationssystem beeinflusst.

Die Wiener Installation bezog Pumhösl's Interpretation unterschiedlicher modernistischer Arbeitsansätze ein, so etwa das Ausstellungsdesign von Lily Reich, die Darstellung von Dreidimensionalität in den fotografischen Entwurfs Collagen des Architekten Lino Bo Bardi sowie Robert Smithson's Dia- und Textkonstruktion „Hotel Palenque“. Sie zeigt damit Pumhösl's ungebrochenes Interesse, die Rhetorik der Utopie in formalen Analysen, mit deren Hilfe utopische Ideale konstruiert werden, zu sezieren und vorzuführen.

Der Ausstellungstitel „Humanistische und ökologische Republik“ ist eine Abkürzung. Der volle Titel, wie er dem von Pumhösl als integraler Bestandteil der Ausstellung entworfenen Begleitkatalog zu entnehmen ist, lautet: „Der früher marxistische Präsident Madagaskars, Didier Ratsiraka, hat bei seinem neuerlichen Amtsantritt 1998 – mittler-



1 Privates Feriendomizil des ersten Präsidenten der unabhängigen Republik Madagaskar, aus: Florian Pumhösl, „Lac Mantasoa“, 2000, Videostill

2 Kino- und Theatersaal der Schule in der ehemaligen Munitionsfabrik (nicht in Gebrauch), aus: Florian Pumhösl, „Lac Mantasoa“, 2000, Videostill

weile zur Marktwirtschaft bekehrt – angekündigt, er würde aus Madagaskar die erste ‚humanistische und ökologische Republik der Welt‘ machen.“ Im Hauptraum der Secession waren Formen angeordnet, die eine imaginäre Stadt andeuten. Dieser Entwurf spiegelte einerseits das Thema der Ausstellung wider und nahm andererseits Motive von Lily Reichs modernistischer Beschränkung auf einfachste Präsentationselemente auf, bei der, ähnlich wie im Minimalismus, die Materialien selbst die tragende Designfunktion übernehmen.

Pumhösl hatte in diesem Raum Elemente zusammengestellt, die geläufige Koordinaten für den Raum- und Ortssinn bilden: eine niedrige, unregelmäßig zusammengesetzte Mauer, wannenförmige Betonelemente, ähnlich denen, die man von Straßen und Plätzen kennt, an denen gerade gebaut wird, eine Stellwand aus grünlich gefärbten Glaselementen mit strukturierter Oberfläche. Alle diese Formen bestanden aus Bau- und Industrieelementen, Beton, Holz, Metall und Glas. Strukturen waren grob angedeutet; so war zum Beispiel unter einer Betonoberfläche eine hölzerne Armierung zu erkennen. Gleich hinter diesen Formelementen befand sich ein Bereich, in dem offene schwarze Metallkuben, modernistischen Vitrinen gleich (in einem der Würfel war eine kleine Betonhütte auf einem Einschub aus Holz ausgestellt), an das Innere des Freilichtbereichs im Museum denken ließen. Die hier präsentierten Elemente stellten weniger einen Eingriff in den Raum der Secession dar, vielmehr fungierten sie als Bestandteile eines in sich geschlossenen Referenzsystems. Man befand sich inmitten eines 1:1-Modells, das durch die Einbeziehung einer mit Grünspan überzogenen Henry-Moore-Skulptur wie der Überrest eines typischen UNESCO-Baus der späten fünfziger und frühen

sechziger Jahre wirkte. Die Installation hatte etwas beunruhigend Vertrautes: Mich zum Beispiel erinnerte sie an die UN-Plaza in Manhattan; bei anderen Betrachter/innen weckte sie Assoziationen an Museumsplätze oder öffentliche Räume in Brasília oder in Israel.

Repräsentationsformen bildeten Pumbösls Hauptinteresse: Wie sehen – in der Wahrnehmung von Architekten – Repräsentationen des Modernismus in Afrika aus? Warum gilt Madagaskar trotz seiner komplexen Geschichte für gewöhnlich als ein Land, das durch seine Naturschönheit und seine geografische Lage bestimmt ist? Das politische Moment in dieser Ausstellung wurde aus den Aporien und peripheren Aspekten dessen ersichtlich, was von den Unabhängigkeitsbestrebungen der Bevölkerung geblieben ist: die Reste von Gebäuden, ihr Verfall, ihre Wiederbenutzung und Instandsetzung. Die Möglichkeit zu einer Neuinterpretation dieser Spuren des Kolonialismus tat sich an jenen phänomenologischen Schnittstellen zwischen den verschiedenen Teilen der Ausstellung auf, durch die Pumbösl einerseits die Aufmerksamkeit auf neuere, als Freizeitstätten entworfene Gebäude lenkte und andererseits den Blick auf die Geschichte der Bauformen in Madagaskar richtete, die, wie etwa die architektonischen Überreste auf dem Grund des Lac Mantsoa, heute nur noch Ruinen sind.

In der stummen Videoprojektion „Lac Mantsoa“ verfolgten die Betrachter/innen, die auf einer mit schwarzem Filz verkleideten Plattform in einem dunklen Raum saßen, die Bewegungen einer Unterwasserkamera, die in langsamen, traumähnlichen Kamerafahrten den Grund des Sees abzusuchen schien. Schnitt zu schwarzer Leinwand, gefolgt von einer Splitscreen-Sequenz: Links das 3-D-Modell eines Gebäudekomplexes auf dem Boden;

rechts zeichnete eine braune Hand ein Diagramm nach, das zu erklären schien, was die Betrachter/innen nicht hören konnten. Die Einstellungen wechselten zwischen Ausblicken auf die Seeoberfläche und Unterwasseraufnahmen. In einem anderen Splitscreen-Bild nahm die Kamera die Wände eines immer gleichen, verfallenden, weiß und grau gestrichenen Raums gleichzeitig aus verschiedenen Richtungen in den Blick. Die dreizehn Minuten lange Videoschleife endet mit einer langen Unterwassereinstellung, in der die Kamera an Hügeln und verstreuten, baumstammähnlichen Formationen vorbeizieht, die hinter einem Schleier von schlammig grünem Wasser verschwimmen und scheinbar in Vergessenheit versinken.

Welche Erkenntnisse kann man bei diesem Interesse an Aporien und provokativen Assoziationen gewinnen, wenn man sich weder an einer Videospur noch an einem Text zur Ausstellung orientieren kann und sich die Ausstellung selbst einer leicht zugänglichen ästhetischen Darstellungsweise verweigert? Solche Fragen stellen sich immer wieder dann, wenn es um Arbeiten geht, in denen Recherche eine zentrale Rolle spielt. Möglicherweise benötigen wir einen anderen, einen schärferen Blick für die einzelnen Bestandteile, aus denen sich eine solche Arbeit zusammensetzt. Die hier besprochene Ausstellung bemühte sich nicht darum, etwaigen Erwartungen an eine leicht und schnell zu durchschauende, unterhaltsame Präsentation gerecht zu werden. Sämtliche Bestandteile der Ausstellung, ihr Titel, der Katalog, das Video und die Installation, ergänzen sich zu einer einzigen Arbeit, und wer neugierig war, erhielt viele Ansatzpunkte für weitergehende Betrachtungen.

Auf subtile und dennoch provokante Weise wirft Pumbösl Fragen zum Modernismus, zu For-

men der Präsentation und den inzwischen historischen Modi der Institutionskritik auf. Als grundlegender Vorläufer dieser Vorgehensweise könnte man Hans Haackes „Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Immobilienbesitz, ein gesellschaftliches Realzeitsystem, Stand 1. Mai 1971“ (1971) betrachten, und diesen Bezug merkt man Pumhösls Interesse an Verweisen, Systemen und Modellen an. Bei Haacke gab es einen als Teil der präsentierten Arbeit lesbaren Text, der den Betrachter/innen Informationen an die Hand gab; doch waren es seine Positionierung innerhalb des Museums und vor allem die Reaktionen des Direktors und des Vorstands des Guggenheim Museums, die die Arbeit bekannt gemacht haben. Pumhösl geht es nicht darum, Aufmerksamkeit zu erregen; Schockeffekte werden vermieden, obwohl er auf wenig bekannte Sachverhalte hinweist und sich auf die Wahl seiner Gegenüberstellungen verlässt, um neue Reflexionsprozesse in Gang zu setzen. In diesem Sinne deutet seine Arbeit auf einen Zeitzusammenhang, der sich von dem des Jahres 1971 stark unterscheidet. Ich empfinde diesen Abstand, diese Differenz als sehr provozierend. An seiner Vorgehensweise erscheint mir sehr spannend, dass er zwischen den Zeilen von völlig durchschaubar erscheinenden Geschichten liest, anstatt sich nur auf das ohnehin Sichtbare zu beziehen. Für manche Besucher/innen könnten diese Subtilitäten vielleicht noch provokativer sein (falls das nicht ein Widerspruch in sich ist), aber dann würde es sich auch um eine andere Arbeit handeln. Meine Neugier war jedenfalls geweckt.

Pumhösls Auseinandersetzung mit Repräsentationsweisen schien mir dabei am interessantesten. Dieser Ansatz forderte mich dazu heraus darüber nachzudenken, wie solche Orte, Menschen und Zeiten dargestellt werden können, die über vorangehende Identitätsfragen hinausgehen. Einige Reaktionen, die ich in der Ausstellung beobachtete, konnte, beispielsweise von Leuten, die sich eine genauere Erklärung der Beziehungen zwischen der kolonialen Vergangenheit und der gegenwärtigen politischen Situation in Madagaskar wünschten,

brachten mich dazu, mich noch einmal auf Texte zu besinnen, die sich mit Fragen der Repräsentation auseinander setzen, denn hier schien der Schwerpunkt der Ausstellung zu liegen. Außerdem wollte ich mir über ein gewisses Gefühl des Unwohlseins klar werden, das sich bei einigen Besucher/innen angesichts der Präsentation und ihres Inhalts einstellte.

Was trennt eine spekulative oder spekulativ-fiktionale Vorgehensweise von den Fiktionen in dieser Ausstellung? Im Bereich des Fiktionalen sind prinzipiell alle Formen der Spekulation denkbar. Der suggestive Titel „Humanistische und ökologische Republik“ gibt Anlass zu einer ganzen Reihe von Spekulationen. Es scheint, als wolle Pumhösl den Kontext, dem er den Ausstellungstitel entnommen hat (Didier Ratsirakas Erklärung und ihre Begleitumstände), respektieren und zusätzliche Informationen über eine Zeit geben: eine vormalige Orientierung am Marxismus, die sich jetzt zu einer Orientierung an der Marktwirtschaft gewandelt hat. Dies bedeutet, dass eine gewisse Selektion – oder Repräsentation – bereits wirksam geworden ist, und dem können wir nun durch die Aussage des ganzen Ausstellungstitels Rechnung tragen. Nachdem ich die zuvor beschriebene „imaginäre Stadt“ gesehen hatte, blieb mir immer noch die Frage danach, was, abgesehen von einer Gegenüberstellung der Elemente und dem provozierenden Titel, die Kraft des Spekulativen in dieser Ausstellung ausmacht? Was könnte eine humanistische und ökologische Republik sein? Ich denke zum Beispiel an die fiktionalen Welten Samuel R. Delanys, in denen erfundene Details, die wiedererkennbaren gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen entstammen, ebenso existieren wie solche, die zur Zeit keiner nachprüfbaren Wirklichkeit entsprechen, die aber den suggestiven Formen und Querweisen Überzeugungskraft verleihen. Es scheint, als habe Pumhösl in diesem Fall erreicht, was er sich vorgenommen hat: Aufmerksamkeit auf verschiedene Felder zu lenken, die vorher noch nicht zusammengedacht worden sind.

RENÉE GREEN

Florian Pumhösl, „Humanistische und ökologische Republik“ und „Lac Mantasoa“, Secession, Wien, 1. Juni bis 23. Juli 2000.

*More information available
upon request*