

From:

Albrecht Schäfer - Ein Tag, exh. cat. Museum Morsbroich, Bielefeld/Leipzig/Berlin 2010, p. 21-24.

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With the Line, Against the Grain

The Things and Albrecht Schäfer

Despite the persistent claims of innocence and after the academicisation of the end of modernism, it is relatively clear that artistic appropriations of categorical complexes such as “space” or “thing” have become hopelessly out of their depth. In recent productions of contemporary art, especially those faced with the charge of formalism, there has been, on the one hand, contention over the productive use of the semantic leftovers around such terms and, on the other, a largely conscious turning away from virtually all association with ideological constructs – such as “space” or “thing” indeed are. Today, there are few artists who would unequivocally claim, “My work is about space ...” – something we still heard ten years ago. Definition sucks! One reason is probably that such definition sounds naive; another is that a subtler and more complex use of such categories is not only a recent phenomenon. A more discriminating use of language has emerged which recognises that any consideration of “space” or “object” necessarily takes place in an existing and complex system of artistic methodologies in which not only theory and practice, but also artistic and extra-artistic activities overlap. As a result of what has become a rather too close proximity between art and life, whose cause has been taken up (in different ways) by all so-called “creative professions”, terms such as “design” and “creativity” have assumed an interdisciplinary importance.

When it is a matter of a clear understanding of the twisting, the fine-tuning and the crossbreeding of the abovementioned methodologies, one of the artists that first comes to mind is Albrecht Schäfer. Within a spectrum of approaches that attempt, with the aid of a strategic proximity to grand concepts, to give form to a fundamental doubt in relation to the unambiguousness of “space” and “things” – or at least to raise the issue – his approach stands out largely through its interpretation of auctoriality. In relation to this, there appears to be something like a carnivalesque or grotesque variant – in artists such as Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Andreas Slominski, and Stephan Demary – which more or less systematically scrutinises a supposedly given object-world in relation to its surreality, emphasising this through small interventions in the former’s formal integrity, to subsequently produce a form of anecdotal invention. What seems important about these approaches is that they use an authorial perspective of searching, inventing, testing to produce a string of *trouvailles* that are made to “fit” together, and which, based on the loss of innocence, operate with a very particular class of things: that of “everyday objects”. Of course, it can also be said of Schäfer

that, without developing a specific method that can be recognised as a signature or style, he is concerned with the elaboration of a process. And, in addition, that his objects have their origin in the mega-ideological construct of “everyday life” and its object-worlds. That said, he begins less with the commodity as such than with the aspect of construction. And his notion of construction abstains from the psychologising or humorous methodology of the strong authorial approaches mentioned above, in which the “thing in itself” (often for very good reasons) becomes the object of a joke. While looking at objects such as Schäfer’s *Noguchi Splits* or his *Spiral Blinds*, it soon becomes clear that here too there is, in a certain sense, a transformation of the everyday; the difference, however, is that these works are developed solely from the situation and material. The idea of cutting the modernist paper lampshades of the Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi – which might be situated exactly at the threshold between sculpture and everyday commodity – along the given construction lines and supports, is, as a result of the subtle and apparently incidental nature of its transformation, less the deconstruction of an artistic authority (as is the case in Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning* for instance). Schäfer’s approach, so it seems, is to treat them rather as aesthetic objects with a material logic – a logic that, as far as possible, he makes his own. The first step is to trace the objects’ inner laws and tensions. The second more decisive step is, significantly, often a cut which doesn’t resolve and harmonise these tensions, but which does make them visible and intelligible. Only on seeing the spirals hanging or lying on the floor as a result of this continuous cut is it possible to begin with psychological or other interpretive associations. (I thought of a “liberating” intervention, an ad-hoc operation such as a tracheotomy.)

The blinds, standard metal blinds, which are twisted into new helical forms, into sculpture-sized mobiles, are only latterly a joke about the relationship between sculpture and the scientific helix model, or the closeness of a Brancusi sculpture to science. Schäfer’s analytical eye – which quickly discerns that such blinds can easily be twisted, and in just this way – leads him, not to “his” version of the object, but to an extension of what is already given in the material’s properties. In the work titled *Sitzgruppe / Suite*, rattan seating is not only dismantled; the knowledge and appreciation of the material’s intrinsic properties (the malleability of rattan under certain conditions of heat and humidity) lead to a new, deliberately dysfunctional characteristic, in the textbook sense: a transformation of design into art through the removal of the object from its prior context. The governing principle is the preservation of the material in the process of a formal transformation based on the material’s specific physical conditions undertaken by the artist to make this experienceable as the starting object’s implicit potential. The authorial role thus consists in abstaining from overt self expression and, as the poet Francis Ponge has put it, in attempting to “take the part of things” – not to impose an a priori structuring and structured will on a situation, to carry out a material analysis, but to become the subject of the situation as a tentative whole, to

work with what is given, to become porous, to become a medium for what is at hand. Nor should this initial methodological attitude be considered an idealistic form of abstinence; despite all porosity to the “things”, it is still a matter of artistic appropriation, which doesn’t take place in a vacuum but within a complex set of conditions. And once again, although the results, shown in the context of an exhibition, are completely involved with a contemporary aesthetic, they are not relaxed to death, as “good form” can be, since their appropriation is simultaneously a process of defamiliarisation, the transformation into an apparently alien condition, a new perspective onto the object that diverges from the typical goal-oriented, one-dimensional view – a view which in certain cases can be thought of as the perspective of the “object-as-thing”. Of course, it is never possible to make something like “the thing itself” speak, as psychoanalysis or Surrealism wanted to make the unconscious speak; this “searching for the object” occurs within an experimental space, and Schäfer is clearly less interested in a mystifying “only listen!” than in the possibilities that such a listening can open up.

“Space” in the works discussed above and in relation to Schäfer’s other works is revealed to be above all a conceptual space between an existing and a potential state. A particular attention for this intermediate space, which is not only concerned with a play of dimensions and hierarchies, is also revealed in his projects relating to architecture. The balancing act between a great intimacy of detail and an interest in social relationships as expressed in architecture, appears on first encounter with Schäfer’s works as a striking, almost dramatic, discrepancy. When in the *Cuttings*, he dissects, with a filigree cutting technique, the pages of newspapers, makes formal and thematic breakthroughs in the print medium, and lays bare the textual architecture of sense and nonsense, he turns to what has been, up to now, one of his most complex starting “things”. In the current exhibition with the work *Ein Tag / One Day*, he takes up the inseparable entanglement of these two categories (the newspaper as medium and the newspaper as object) in what is more than just a calculated play on the aesthetic dials of space and time. The dissolution of the text elements – usually ordered into type area, column, paragraph, and line – of a daily newspaper into a single, linear wall montage not only leads to a heightened awareness of the newspaper’s formal, structural, and thematic complexity (precedent to the work and mostly subsumed under the heading “everyday culture”). The rather fragmentary perceptual leaps from page to page, section to section, headline to headline, article to article, and picture to picture that typically make up the act of reading a newspaper are abandoned in favour of an order that is one of the basic, if latent, conditions of a newspaper: the linear process of reading the text from the first to the last letter. This possibility is implicit in the newspaper but almost never put into practice. And Schäfer’s new montage – the following of the text, spliced together into a continuous line, through a number of rooms – is certainly not a realisation of the “actual” principle. Nevertheless, it offers something totally different: it creates a situation in which it is possible to compare the fragmentary reading of a newspaper with the conditions of looking,

reading, and deciphering in a museum space, whose walls, outside of this installation, operate less clearly as part of a semantic text. The newspaper's frame of reference is largely that of "actualité", that of the museum, traditionally what is past, even if, as in the case of this exhibition, it exhibits "contemporary art", and thereby positions itself in the margins of its own institutional principle, shifting from the museum context to the semantic field of the gallery. The parallelisation of printed page and museum wall, in which the text abandons its conventional layout and accommodates itself to the linear law of its new spatial frame, does not in fact provide us with a precise discourse analysis in the sense of institutional critique, but reveals the suggestive force of the extremely simple gesture of "making linear" in such a skilful way that a breakthrough to earlier memory strata is achieved, one in which the reading of a newspaper and a visit to the museum merge together and a series of consonances and dissonances are produced. This merging of two "things" is a deliberate play with their inherent idealism. Through the unfolding of the otherwise compressed text, another type of "actuality" is created: one verging on an action. A situation emerges that is experienced through movement, successfully evoking the possibility not only of imagining a merging of "newspaper" and "museum", but of transforming such a montage operation into material reality. The tension between the universal concept and its accidental realisation that is thus put into play in Albrecht Schäfer's work is a result of the artist's tendency to restrict his influence – as far as this is possible in an artistic and exhibition practice – to a minimum. This gesture of abstinence, however, should not be seen as a form of (naive) hope; the greatest possible stylisation is not achieved through the avoidance of style. What seems important is the precise mixture, the fine adjustment on the great dials of the temporal, spatial, and experiential relation to the world so that the focus is not on the turned, but always on the turning.