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Potentialities of Abstraction

Human existence is inseparable from abstraction, whether we consider language, economic systems, or even desire. We could go so far as to claim that “human being” is an abstraction. Immersed in and created by abstraction, one might think it would be an easy task to write about it. Nevertheless, the opposite is true: One can never be fully certain in decoding this permanently changing reality. What one can do, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is to permit the abstract machine of language to write itself, “to treat language and extract a regime of signs from it.”¹ This machine “does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.”² In a similar manner, the following text will not attempt to represent the exhibition it writes about – in the moment of its conception, the elements of the exhibition machine are still abstractions, artworks yet-to-become, abstract machines that will produce movements for the senses of the visitors only after their materialization in space and time. Therefore, the following lines will be an intuitive abstraction of art yet-to-become, of potentialities rather than actualities.

What we can recognize from the beginning is that the main ideas behind the exhibition entitled “Attractive Abstraction in Art and Architecture” allow us to introduce Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the “abstract machine” as a way to better understand both the exhibition and the concept. As written in the description, abstraction is redefined in this show as the opposite of the non-relational or non-representative as seen by the dominant artistic practices of the last century. Accordingly, abstraction has the power to create narratives and we should not expect to encounter artworks defined by their self-referentiality. The aim of the show is to examine the translation processes and the “interconnections between production, reception and context.”³ For Deleuze and Guattari, everything is a machine, everything is in a permanent state of self-creation and creation of impacts on reality; in this universe, the world is always emerging anew. Within this field of

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 65.

2 *Ibid.*, 142.

3 For more information, see the website of Magazin4:

multiplicities, art is given an important place. As a site of corporeal experimentation, art as abstract machine is a permanent research of its own conditions, because “constructing an abstract machine is to construct construction itself.”⁴ Art is an experience of becoming, of the production of new realities, but above all, it is a sensation. With its potential to restore and remap sensory perception, the essential project of art is to reconnect us to what we see and hear. Precisely here lies its political power, its potential to create an experimentation space that will offer us new sensibilities, introduce us to the experience of new realities. In other words: “Art is a mechanism to increase our power, to liberate ourselves from the limits of representation. [...] Art is the freedom to experiment on our conditions of existence, and is the ethical condition of any revolution.”⁵ Art in this exhibition machine will gain its power to change the experience of lived reality only after it has been installed in the space of Magazin4 to confront the physical bodies of human beings brought by the means of attraction to its web of meanings. At this point, we can only attempt to reflect on the process of translation contained in the works, formulating a fragmented reflection on the ideas and concepts behind them.

Before we proceed, it might be useful to underline one more detail about this exhibition, namely, the fact that it is a group show of three two-person collectives. Rejecting the dominant model of a single artist with a strong ego and phallic gesture of creation, all works presented here are already the result of the act of compromise, negotiation, and dialogue that created them in the first place. Being a meeting point for two different bodies, two different minds, two different experiences of life, these works are born in the space in-between, in the communal space transcending the opposition between subjects and objects. This act of original collaboration can occur only through a process of destruction of the singular, giving birth to an object that stands in a relation of permanent melancholy toward what has been lost. At this point where two meet, where one is being created out of destruction, the abstract machine opens up the space for others to relate to, to participate in, and to experience this possibility of a new community. As we shall see, all three collaborating duos work in different fields and manners. Although their individual practices cross the borders of many disciplines, we can state that the works presented on this occasion refer to three different realms of the abstract machine: the economy, the city, and the language of images.

http://www.bregenzerkunstverein.at/english/m4_Attractive_Abstraction.htm

4 Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

5 *Ibid.*, 9.

Figures Of Speech, or The Dream Machine: KRÜGER & PARDELLER

Doris Krüger and Walter Pardeller have been collaborating since 2004; their artistic practice includes art, design, architecture, philosophy, curating, and exhibiting: “Working predominantly with sculpture, they transcend architecture, design and engineering to question the function and use of space, place and objects.”⁶ Although very precise when it comes to the form in which their ideas are manifested, the works themselves are often the result of experiments. In the same manner, being the initiators of this exhibition, the conception of the show recognizably reflects their own practice. Having accepted the invitation to exhibit at Magazin4, Krüger & Pardeller decided to create the conditions for a larger experiment to take place, inviting two other collectives to present simultaneously, with all reflecting on the topic of abstraction. Rather than delimiting the definition of abstraction, they opened up a new space for the presentation of two other visions as well. Without knowing the final results and potential interconnections, they recognized the power of exhibition – as an abstract machine itself – to reconfigure the sensual and reinstate different realities.

Having this in mind, Krüger & Pardeller's decision to present a machine of sorts as their own work does not come as a surprise. At the opening, the artists and a participating musician perform a piece for which they have constructed a stage, invented a mechanism, and written a script. The machine consists of modular aluminum frames and movable plates that are reassembled in various formations by the artists hidden behind a semitransparent wall. The choreography of the plates produces both a visual manifestation and a rhythmic effect, in keeping with a special code. The code is available to the artists only, giving them a scheme according to which the plates are to be moved. Due to the complexity of its creation, derived from several translations, I present here the description of the process of code creation as formulated by the artists themselves:

The basis for the code is a book by Richard Sennett, “Culture of the New Capitalism.” We however did not use the English original but a German translation. Parts of the text we read out loud and recorded the voice. Then while listening to the recorded text Walter spoke it into a scanner. Before that we had prepared his lips with two reflecting stickers. During the scanning

⁶ From a text on the film-installation *Drawing the Line* (ISCP Open Studios, New York, 2010): Laura Barlow, “Leveling Out” (2010): <http://kruegerpardeller.com/home.php?il=134&l=deu>

process he followed the lamp of the scanner that reflected his moving lips while speaking. Thus the text was transformed into a kind of graphic diagram. We then printed out the results, laid a grid over them according to the panels of the machine and started to interpret the diagram, so that for each vertical section we would allocate a position. After that we read out the code aloud, in the rhythm of 30 beats per minute, recorded it for finally being able to listen to it during the performance and accordingly handling the “machine”.⁷

Parallel to this activity, Nikolaj Hess, an experimental jazz pianist, musician, and composer, plays a twenty-minute composition inspired by his reading of the same book by Sennett. The recorded piece is accompanied by his live improvisation, an agency that also turns him into a conductor whose task is to interrupt the artists' pre-scripted rhythmical manipulation of the plates. Hess is selectively activating the spotlight, making the artists visible to the audience behind the reflecting wall and, in this way, revealing the hidden hands running the machine.

What matters here is not the revelation of a particular paragraph or the exact text written by Sennett. Rather, in this complex narrative of code creation, we should see a metaphor for the multiplicity of individual perception, translation, interpretation, and activation. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that this particular book analyzes the present functioning of the global abstract machine of economy, a topic Krüger & Pardeller are particularly interested in. We should constantly be reminded of the dangers of this process of abstractions and economic speculations, since the smallest mistake of the hands behind the machine might affect millions of real human lives.

On another level, the complex machine created by Krüger & Pardeller offers openings for many different allegorical interpretations, in this way pointing out the existence of a complex abstract machine inside every work of art. Today we hardly remember the mathematical structures behind Bach's compositions, and we can only speculate about the economic roots of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*, but the aesthetic power these works exercise on our senses is still strong due to their abstract character, which exceeds their conceptual structure. In this allegorical space, the invisible machinery creates realms where others can find meaning. After the opening performance, the whole structure remains as an installation, as stated by Krüger & Pardeller: “like some leftovers,

7 The artists in a personal communication to the author.

or a model of possible action.” The visitors see the structure, are able to hear the composition through the speakers, and the lights show or hide the elements behind the stage, but the machine plates remain silent, being simultaneously a trace of past movements and possible elements for some future acti(vati)on.

StadtSzenario als MetaModell (featured by departure): PAUHOF

In keeping with the concept of the abstract machine, the twenty-four years of collaborative work of two architects Michael Hofstätter and Wolfgang Pauzenberger exist primarily in the realm of potentialities. During this time, they have been actively developing scenarios of new urban models, which have rarely been executed in reality; in this way, they initiated a permanent polemic in the public discourse as to whether their work belongs more to the field of art or architecture. Their answer to this is the open exploration of both fields; hence the ideas in their sketches became materialized within the walls of many exhibition spaces. Essentially, their polemic works reveal a particular discontent with current developments in urban environments, a space they see as being turned into a pure representation of the permanently fluctuating interests of capital. The danger of this process, according to PAUHOF, lies in the creation of “hermetic elitism”, which leads to authoritarian tendencies and brings back any unresolved hidden social conflict in its most destructive form.

Seeing urban development as another abstract machine with the power to regulate the everyday lives of millions of people, theoretical insertions made by PAUHOF are there to create new social frameworks and new constellations to make permanent flux possible. For them, the traditional definition of architecture as a readable sign of space, scale, and construction should also include reduction, imagination, and abstraction. In other words: As one of the most powerful abstract machines, architecture – as an element of urban transformation – gives us “the instruments of reality which let us build a real world.”⁸ They are interested in the possibilities of structuring empty spaces, as well as playing with vacuums and interstices as fields of abstraction that leave much open, a permanent possibility for change and exchange.

8 PAUHOF in: *PAUHOF architekten, Pavilion Austria, Venice Synchron, Architecture/City Scenarios* (Venice, 2010), 77.

In their works for exhibition spaces, PAUHOF carry out the transposition of ideas from urban planning in the form of miniature models in art spaces. Many years of successful collaboration with a wide range of artists and curators reveal works with the power to provide the most suitable atmosphere and context for the works of others to be experienced. Nevertheless, by creating structures as interventions in exhibition spaces, PAUHOF also reveal the power of spatial structures over the interpretation of individual artworks through the particular direction and the effects on human bodies of those seemingly neutral spaces.

As their contribution to this exhibition, PAUHOF present two works: a previously produced video at the entrance of the exhibition and a newly developed urban structure for the space of Magazin4. The video, entitled “PAUHOF – Architektur ist nicht Kunst” (“Architecture isn't Art”), presents abstracted details of several installations they had previously built in Bolzano and Brussels. By presenting this, PAUHOF offer their own polemical position on the discussion accompanying their collaboration from the beginning: in their case, the distinction and borders between art and architecture become unnecessary and superficial. Their second work – a large urban structure built into the exhibition space as an overlay over the normally not clearly noticeable city ground below – is perhaps one of the best examples of their consistent practice of interventions in exhibition spaces to point out the potential of open spaces by changing the parameters of their visual perception.

What might have been is an abstraction: PUBLIC SPACE WITH A ROOF

Adi Hollander and Tamuna Chabashvili have collaborated since 2003, their projects as “Public Space With a Roof” (PSWAR) always play with the borders between various disciplines, questioning the position and assumed function of contemporary artists. These borders are consciously blurred with every new project, every new intervention, by creating architectural installations as platforms for other people's thoughts and ideas to meet. Constantly integrating the visual and conceptual ideas of others, the “abstract machine” created by PSWAR is permanently fueled with new energy allowing new reconfigurations and combinations to occur. In a similar manner, the installation presented at Magazin4 is an abstraction and reworking of their last project, “Endless Installation: A Ghost Story for

Adults”, which took place in Amsterdam in 2009. In this project, three major persons that inspired them were invoked – the architect Frederick Kiesler, the art historian Aby Warburg, and the writer and artist Meir Agassi. For this new installation, the artists took one of the rooms from the previous project as a starting point. The original room followed the structure of a labyrinth and the works and thoughts of all three inspiring predecessors were presented, turning the space into an arena for the discussion of their different positions, but also offering an opportunity to discover their potential intersections.

Taken out of its initial context, the material presented in the previous project created an abstract machine of its own, giving a new direction to the process that followed. Furthermore, this new position made a different reading of the same material possible: if the previous installation facilitated the questions coming from these three individuals, the new one has brought in the artists' own questions and investigations. Or, in the words of PSWAR:

By emptying it from the characters' historical, social and biographical background, we discovered smaller, more fragile and personal networks of lines that we decided to follow. Our main questions were the following: How can we convey all that we managed to comprehend and learn through the previous installation and bring it into the present discourse through our personal voice? How can we bring the material, ideas and experience of the past installation to the present moment through extracting one tiny bit out of the bigger whole? How can we abstract the existing material in such a way so that we extend and expand its boundaries? How can we maintain the form of a labyrinth? ⁹

The answers came in the form of seventeen transparent fabric columns, multiplied replications of existing columns from Magazin4, carrying on their surface collages of images and texts. By creating a fragile structure and playing with the light and shadow of the past, the columns invite visitors to walk around, look at details, and find their own position from which to view the totality of the picture. PSWAR have chosen to use different printing techniques (ranging from silk-screen print and liquid light exposure to solvent transfer), one printed over another, and with each mode of print carrying different elements and dimensions of a newly constructed image. Hence, a silk printing line of photographic

9 The artists in a personal communication to the author.

material is there to question the subject and form of the installation, as well as to distort the information carried. The line of printed sentences of texts of inspiration functions as a subtitle of the image while the third layer shows a photo-documentation of the old installation with the intention of creating a movement in space, "traveling" from one column to the other.

This self-reflecting mode of reexamination of the past installation and its material brings to mind the thoughts Warburg formulated regarding the essence of European culture – a great inspiration of PSWAR's work in general. According to Warburg, our culture functions through the polarization of inherited elements, by their transmission and their *Nachleben*, or afterlife. Each next generation receives a set of elements to question, play with, accept, or reject. In this way, Western culture can be defined as a unitary whole, being inspired by its own past as a way to create future. PSWAR's decision to include fading images of a previous installation does not hide the truth about its origin, but rather attains that melancholic position which defines any examination of the past. These fading images of potentialities from the past in the form of "*What might have been...*" simultaneously open a space in which new inspirations and ideas can be inserted and developed. Therefore, a new structure is also an abstraction of new influences: Integrating Akira Kurosawa's concept of space, in which characters get lost in a familiar environment, PSWAR invite visitors to walk around the columns, where each walk creates the experience of being lost and finding one's way again, where Paul Klee's ideas on different surfaces are joined together by differences in colour gradation, and where new thoughts of Meir Agassi, Frederick Kiesler, and Juhani Pallasmaa on space, light, mind, and memory are inserted into the visual material. Thus we are offered another insight into the aforementioned complexity of artistic creation as a conglomeration of centuries of tradition and concepts. The power of art as abstract machine is to present us with common information from a new perspective, offering us a "new eye" with which to perceive it. In this way, PSWAR's work shows a strong belief in the activating power on the part of a new beholder, in her or his agency to revive the poetic potential of silent images and words from the past within a new context.

Conclusion as an Abstraction

Many authors of the past have warned us about the dangers of abstraction as a logical procedure. Due to its discriminating essence, numerous elements will become obscured and even excluded. In a similar manner, the abstraction of ideas behind the artworks produced by this text will bracket many aspects, hopefully stimulating future writers – through the abstract language machine – to see other levels of potentialities in the same works. Only through active participation in the process of decoding the abstraction produced by those in power can we shed light on the invisible hands behind the machine of capitalism working on the other side of this equation. In this show, visitors have a chance to participate in three approaches to this project: artists creating and then abandoning a machine, architects inserting possibilities for future abstractions, and artists deconstructing the past as a way to reorganize and reorient for the future. The power of art as an abstract machine is a necessary part of our abstract human existence. Without it, the automatized reality of identical human copies desired by the ruling elite would remain unquestioned, and there would be no alternatives left for us to even think about. The ultimate attraction of art lies in its power to offer multiplicity, to instill that desire for change without which human beings would be turned into something we would not be able to recognize anymore.