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Planes, Made to Talk

”In 1922 I ordered by telephone from a sign factory five paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory’s color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position. (It was like playing chess by correspondence.)”

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 1)

”Moholy Nagy’s famous gesture of ordering a group of paintings by telephone from a sign painter has now become a matter of fact.”

Lucy R. Lippard 2)

Whether Moholy-Nagy really made this phone call, or whether the version told by his first wife Lucia is closer to the historical truth is not worth worrying too much about. In her version of events he returned from the sign factory saying ”I might even have done it over the phone!”³) Either way it is an appealing anecdote. Moholy-Nagy takes two steps at once: in having his work made by others, and then at the same time (or a little later) in realising that the whole procedure could be rationalised further and he could save himself the effort of going to the workshop in person.

This little anecdote is well-known. Probably because it is well suited to a variety of contexts as a kind of defining moment in the history of art. Anybody who, like the quoted Lucy R. Lippard, writes about Minimal Art and industrially produced artworks is interested in the results of the art ordered over the telephone, i.e. the finished enamel paintings. In conceptual terms the act of making the phone call is really the artwork and the paintings are merely the documentation of this act, whereby for historians writing on media art the telephone is the main attraction as a piece of technical apparatus.

As Moholy-Nagy says, ”I sketched my paintings on graph paper”. So that the man at the other end of the line could carry out the order a set of rules to follow had to be established: presumably the same graph paper, the same (chess?) system of coordinates, the same colour chart and a scale for the drawing, to know what size an instruction like, for instance, ”red on e4” is to be carried out in. The supervisor at the sign maker’s does not need to ‘understand’ the art, he just does something for which there was special equipment a little later. The same principle of painting by numbers on a grid is used even now when images are sent via the internet, for instance.

That the conveyance of art via the tele-phone without any prior communication on paper, system of coordinates, colour charts or scale can function was experienced by

the author of this text only a few weeks before the opening of Lotte Lyon's exhibition 4 Millimeter (4 Millimetres). The telephone conversation went something like this:

"Imagine two small flat tables, square ones with a leg in each corner. They lie back to back and are joined by a strap hinge along one side. That is one of the sculptures. Then picture a thin wall, really just a rec-tangular plane. Because it is free-standing it is supported from behind and leans at a slight angle. There's also going to be an 'impractical shelving unit', the only shelf is merely as narrow as the sides. Then I'm also making a 'weak board' consisting of two parts of the same width but different lengths, joined with hinges. The shorter one leans against the wall, held in place by a nail so that the whole thing looks like a very wobbly 'L'. There's also going to be a 'victory podium' but with the order of the numbers rearranged."

A preview of the planned exhibition was made according to these instructions on the notepad next to the telephone in preparation for the opening speech. In contrast to Moholy-Nagy's instructions conveyed over the telephone, the sculptures could not be built according to these plans. That there was no information about the size, colour scheme and exact construction did not matter. The instructions were precise enough to make small drawings from, showing roughly the same thing as the sketches that Lotte Lyon made to design her sculptures (—> 27, 30-33). These sketches, of which there are significantly more than final pieces of work, show each of the sculptures in a spatial configuration that an engineer would refer to as 'isometric'. In a view from above and at an angle with accurate perspective, Lotte Lyon's designs show the 'character' of the sculptures and some of them even have titles: Tausendfüßler, Schublade, Oktopus, Leiter, Shedhalle, unpraktisches Regal, Staubfänger (Millipede, Drawer, Octopus, Ladder, Shedhalle, Impractical Shelf, Dust Catcher). Others do not have names but one could easily give them the titles 'Pram', 'Irregular Table' or 'Victory Podium'.

No more than a couple of lines are necessary to 'understand' the pieces. And not in a quasi-mechanical sense like Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures. Nor because the sculptures 'represent' anything in particular that can easily be understood and drawn because it is already familiar. On the telephone it was not said that, for example, a table should be drawn or a cube. No, the sculptures are just on the other side of the realm of everyday objects. Each is a shift away from the familiar or a skew-whiff interpretation of it. The pieces are 'self-explanatory' in a way whether they have a title or not, they 'represent' something, but often what is being represented is an invention, a play on form and language. A good example of this is Staubfänger. Everyone has used the word 'dust catcher' at one time or another but there is no single item that bears this name. Lotte Lyon's dust catcher is a box with a slightly sunken lid that can be changed. Seen in terms of art historical categories a comparison with the work of Donald Judd is obvious, but the object is missing in so far as one can judge from the sketches and photographs of models, the uncanny perfection of Judd's boxes, their cool wordlessness. The Staubfänger beats minimalism with humour. Under ideal conditions – a museum space with cleaning staff – it is a self-referential system with a hint of 'participation'. A neutral box with different coloured interchangeable lids, a test

arrangement. If it were not for the title reminding one that sculpture shares the fate of completely normal objects, and that this piece in particular attracts dust.

The linguistic joke is not a running motif, though, it first appears in the more recent work and, until now, more especially in the sketches that will perhaps never be realised as sculptures but which form a hermetic complex in themselves, a kind of collection of formal possibilities. In an early work, *Papierobjekte* (Paper Objects, 1995), the artist cut and folded an almost unmanageable number of objects as if she wanted to ask the paper what it was actually good for (—> 49). The small sculptures do not form a system, they appear to have arisen from the joy of making them, like doodling while on the phone. A little later, in 1997, a selection of these drawings is shown at the *Kommunikationsbüro* in Vienna. Here the artist resorts to those ex-tremely simple forms from the large vocabulary of the *Papierobjekte*, forms which lose their flatness with very few cuts and folds to become spatial manifestations (—> 10). It looks as if Lotte Lyon wanted to continue working on those of the paper objects that evade description as ‘angle’, ‘accordion’ or ‘surface with incision’, while not having such well-calculated shapes that they could be referred to as compositions. They are, so to speak, what they are: idiosyncratic folded artworks that defy nomenclature. In this they are comparable to the wall objects also on show at the *Kommunikationsbüro*. The wall pieces consist of sheets of brown paper wallpapered edge to edge on the gallery walls. These are pictures in the broadest sense, similar to silhouettes, i.e. showing the outlines of spatial configurations. But these are also simple surfaces that could just as easily represent nothing except perhaps themselves.

In the same year, 1997, Lotte Lyon completed her graduation piece at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts: *Elefant* (Elephant) (—> 51). The sculpture does not really have a title. *Elefant* is an informal name for it that started being used among her circle of friends. Here too the basic material used is the plane. Two doors are cut into a wall, one is slightly ajar facing the front and the other facing the back. However any real functionality is illusory; if one of the doors were shut the wall would lose its balance and topple over. This somewhat threaten-ing scenario is a very pointed one showing the two physical states that come together in Lotte Lyon’s work: They are concrete forms and they have had a certain ironic relationship to the world of mundane objects. And at the same time they are anything but ‘applied’ or ‘indicative’ art. Whether dealing with the sculptures or the photographs, her pieces lead their own lives. In many pieces the material really does seem alive, it alters its form, stretches, splays, folds together, crinkles, rolls away. And the artist gives the things a free reign, using the camera from time to time.

In the case of the sculptures this life of its own is anchored in the material, they come from a world where there are only a few basic elements, usually only two of them: panels and rods. Lotte Lyon makes arrangements from this vocabulary that show a more or less strong similarity to objects. So, for instance, the *Leiter* is to be described as follows: it consists of two narrow panels hinged together on the short sides to stand, as it were, like a ladder (—> 27). This process of making sculptures that have, so to

speak, 'object-affinity' produces a very precise result. But these are more than examples of 'built terminology'. For these sculptures are comprised of different layers that work against one another, like plywood. The different elements, panels and rods, do not lose their autonomy, they appear to resist dissolving into a shape like that of the Tausendfüßler (—> 33). This can be seen in the details of the drawing. The legs of the millipede do not melt with the body, they are stuck on and are even retreating slightly behind the edges of the board. It is obvious that they are made of a different material and have been derived from the realm of rod forms. And the rods refuse to lose their independence in the overall form. To describe the effect of the sculpture one could, as an aid, say 'clastic' instead of 'plastic'. Carl Andre employed this term to describe his work consisting of elements that are not joined to one another:

"My particles are sort of cuts across the mass spectrum in what I call 'clastic' way ('plastic' is flowing of form and 'clastic' means broken or preexisting parts which can be put together or taken apart with-out joining or cementing)."4)

In Lotte Lyon's work the things cannot often be "put together or taken apart", but apparently they have remained individual elements. In this the sculptures block in two ways: in their apparent relationship to the world of everyday experiences and in that the artist insists on their being comprised of abstract basic elements. Their concrete character is then always open to uncertainty: The viewer can see an octopus, but it would be equally appropriate to talk of a box with four rods sticking out (—> 27).

In the work completed to date the scepticism regarding the whole, completed and dormant becomes even more clear. The Schollen (Clods), the Unpraktisches Regal (Impractical Shelf) and the Abgestützte Wand (Propped Wall) have each been painted on one side (—> 20, 28, 29). The paint highlights one element strongly, the flatness of the sculptures. Somewhat more un-obtrusively in the case of the Unpraktisches Regal than in the others because the side facing the wall has been painted. The gesture in these pieces is any-thing but minimal chic. The painted surfaces are almost perfect, but not quite. And what one might consider to be support for the paint, the wooden panels complete with rod frame, presents itself fairly self-confidently as carpenter's panels and deal with knots. Even though the painted surfaces are the clearly dominant element the level behind it, that of the structural forms, is also very present. These are not monochrome paintings sailing through the space, they are robust stable sculptures with a strong leaning towards an emphasis on surface.

They also have a strong tendency towards extremity: Many of the sculptures are very large. The plane provides the dominant dimension. There are several ways to accommodate surfaces in a space, and Lotte Lyon used all of them at her exhibition in Salzburg: leaning against the wall (Unpraktisches Regal, Schwaches Brett – Weak Board), free-standing (Abgestützte Wand), lying on the floor (Schollen). There was a relationship to the size of the exhibition space, the pieces could not have been any bigger but they are still not necessarily site-specific. A large orange sculpture made for a very high exhibition space lay on the floor in a subsequent show (—> 45). There are photographs of models of planned sculptures which show Lotte Lyon as a two-

dimensional model alongside her work (—> 64). This indicates the relative scale of the work: The pieces are the right size for the artist to still be able to carry, paint and work on them. If they were any bigger they would have to come apart.

This form of ‘studio economy’ is also to be found elsewhere. While in Paris on a grant she produced sculpture made of gossamer-thin fabric purely for the camera. Anything else would have been difficult to ship back to Vienna. Lotte Lyon used plastic carrier bags and then photographed herself carrying these bags (—> 36-41).

In contrast to the sculptures she built, these photographed sculptures are difficult to sum-up in a word, and not constructions as such, nor could they be reconstructed over the telephone. The colours, the light reflections and the lie of the fabric cannot be described with exactitude or preordained. In the photographs the ‘thin fabric’ leads a life of its own, something which is heightened by the fact that they are all self-portraits. The photographs have been taken without having any control over the focus and composition of the shot; they are really just the product of a fluke.

Although the series is anything but ‘conceptual’. The end result is what counts, not the process of taking the shot. Only a few images have been developed, i.e. enlarged and exposed on thin wooden panels that are set away themselves from the wall, with a seam of shadow creating the effect of volume.

Other series of photographs show a blanket (—> 54) or two cushions (—> 6). The view taken of the materials is far more analytical. She arranges the fabric very deliberately, showing possibilities for the folds, and she seems fascinated by how ‘abstract’ these images could be when the eye loses itself in the lie of the cloth. There is also a tendency towards ‘unsubstantiality’ (which is a more appropriate thing to call it than ‘abstraction’). The images have no significance even though they do ‘show’ something. What they address are problems specific to images: blur against clarity, the choice of composition, contrasts between light and dark, hue, texture. Sometimes Lotte Lyon makes it difficult for the viewer to focus on the above because a carrier bag is so prominent. The author looks at the image of one bag with the words ‘L’ÉQUIPE’ printed on it every day. However this ploy of not having everything visible at once, of something that can be discovered here, is an indispensable part of Lotte Lyon’s artwork.

1) Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*; New York 1947, p. 79. Quoted here from Eduardo Kac in: ‘Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunications’, in: Steirische Kulturinitiative (Ed.): *Zero*; catalogue, Graz 1993, p.63

2) Lucy R. Lippard: ‘10 Structurists in 20 Paragraphs’, in: *Minimal Art*; catalogue, Den Haag 1968, p.27

3) The three versions of the story are discussed by Eduardo Kac in: ‘Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunications’ (see note 1)

4) Phyllis Tuchman: 'Interview mit Carl Andre', in: Eva Meyer-Hermann (Ed.): Carl Andre, Sculptor 1996; catalogue, Stuttgart 1996, p.47. First published in: Artforum, Vol. 8, No. 6, June 1970, Pp 55-61