Katja Strunz: A Second Present of the Past

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Maybe this is apocryphal and maybe it's not: On first seeing Robert Smithson's crystalline steel and Perspex *Untitled*, 1964–65, as a student in Karlsruhe, Germany, artist Katja Strunz put away her paintbrushes and began to make her own prism-like wall sculptures with multiple vanishing points. However, she abolished his mirrored panels to deny reflection and the infinite regress of their facings, and thus made what she called a Smithson "with its eyes poked out". Like most origin stories and Oedipal fables, this one is credible in its particulars and freighted in the genealogical implications of its performative blinding. And in relation to the angular cuts and multifaceted surfaces of the Berlin-based Strunz's subsequent works, the account would seem to give the game away, were it not for the fact that, despite all her formalist leanings, Strunz's appropriations—which reach beyond Smithson to Constructivism, Surrealism, and other avantgardes (to say nothing of her references to a broader history of forms)—are less morphological than conceptual. Better, her appropriations are morphological to the extent that they thematize and make concrete the inescapability of precedent. As she pithily explains: "The die has been cast."

In making her borrowings from art history easy to discern, Strunz activates a recursive structure riddled with the fixed temporality of befores and afters. Heinrich Wölfflin famously advised that "not everything is possible at all times", [1] and Strunz's historicism seems just as axiomatic. (To wit: works from 2002 read "Yesterday's Papers".*) It is patent in a text appearing in one of her well-known works on paper, which declaims in no uncertain terms, "Today is not yesterday". Or the inverse if one reads it as "Yesterday is not today". But the point remains. Indeed, the same sentiment obtains in the wall-mounted assisted ready-made, *Time of the Season*, 2003, Strunz's droll nod to Marcel Duchamp in the form of a motorized contraption comprised of three oscillating wheels locked in endless circular revolution, shown at Doggerfisher Gallery in Edinburgh the year it was made. Despite being handless it still implies a fatal clock, with numbers (actually dates from Oswald Spengler's epochs) elaborated on the tape between the spinning disks.

Other projects have been forthright in their utilization of refuse. Ghostly boats, smashed glass panes from greenhouses, and abandoned East Berlin swimming pools all figure prominently in her recent collages and early, more representational photo-based works, including *Untitled*, 1998, *Summer Habitation*, 2001, and *Untitled*, 2000, respectively. In the former *Untitled*, Strunz gives only the foggy outlines of a racing ship (really its effigy), while in *Summer Habitation*, she divulges a great deal more information. Here, a related series shown together in New York in 2001, depicts a greenhouse in Sintra, Portugal. One photograph captures the entropic site from the outside wholesale, with panes broken, a roof falling in on itself,

and so on. (Think Smithson in the Yucatan.) Another view of the interior crops a corner intersection between what is left of the walls and the ceiling armature. In both instances, the weightiness of time is opened out, shattered and catastrophic.

Similarly, in Strunz's work involving the East Berlin pool, a former DDR aquatics training center, she traversed the forlorn, debris-littered, black-water-filled site and came away with numerous photographs and folded metal stairs. The stairs became the ivy-swathed *Brunnen*, 2000, a sculpture as fountain that, with Strunz's addition of a reinforced backside, pumps water up the interior channel so that it can trickle down the stairs, coagulate in a shallow trough, and do it all over again. Attendant photographs show an empty expanse of graffiti-marked concrete, presided over by diving boards, with the stairs in their first location. Yet in *Untitled*, 2000, they have been aggressively displaced, as Strunz took a photograph of the stairs and cut it out, juxtaposed it with abstract rubble, and framed the collage with an appropriately zig-zag frame. Strunz highlighted this series' site-specificity (by virtue of which such temporal and spatial dislocations accrue resonance) by exhibiting the work in 2000 at Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin, some meters from the pool. Finally, in this installation, there is no mistake as to these objects' position within Strunz's operation more generally: They are fragments excavated from prior lives that, through a form of montage, bring the past (even just yesterday's) into the present.

As Strunz clarifies, this utilization of reflective materials and mediums instantiates a "second present of the past". In the tradition of Walter Benjamin, who indicted the culture of consumption born of nineteenth century Paris, she seeks to loosen the grip of our collective dream-state through a revelation of its only *now* experienced traces, recognized ruins, and knowable forms (i.e., "dialectics at a standstill" [2] or the "congestion of history" [3] as Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen put it). The historical object is primary for Strunz, brought as it is into her—and our—place and time, to be newly apprehended; on arrival, its interruption (or "shock" in Benjamin's lexicon) can be thought through the frame of the delayed recognition of the traumatic event, whereby it is fresher, and even sharper in its significance, in its later eruptions than it had been at its source. In other words, the return of the repressed occasions a "present relevance of the event that is dialectically fixed in the memory [that] is greater than it was at the time it actually happened". [4]

Many objects, such as those discussed above, are consciously sought out to play this role. Then again, like a Benjaminian ragpicker, Strunz is also a collector of outmoded curiosities arrived at by chance. *Nachglanz (vanishing luster),* 1998, is an *objet trouvé* Strunz found and flatly photographed. A piece of costume jewelry, it is wholly discontinuous owing to its union of Art Déco setting and digital watch face, parts which do not necessarily constitute a synthetic whole. More to the point, they foreground their mutual incompatibility, while their forward-looking aesthetics (the heyday of modern design, the fashion of space-age futurism) are drained of their affect—equally.

The ubiquitous living-on of such forms in Strunz's work is not rendered ironic or parodic; it is neither eulogized as so many failed promises nor affirmed as wished-for utopian possibility (themes common enough in contemporary art), but instead is maintained equivocally as the support for a continuing practice. As the title of Strunz's 2006 show in New York at Gavin Brown's enterprise, *Whose Garden Was This*, makes clear, the artist works self-consciously in the condition of an "aftermath", all the while confirming that she's not willing to give up the ghost.

History is inescapably present in the urban detritus, discarded timber, scrap metal, and old, yellow-paged books she mines and in the already failed—or proleptically failed—gardens she tends for a passing season.

This New York installation also underscored the fact that Strunz's sculptures are often meticulously ordered when exhibited together—effectively catalogued, with each thing seemingly put in its proper place, even while sympathies across space predominate, reverberating within and gamely articulating it. (The seventeen metal cubes of *Black Wind, Fire & Steel*, 2006, for example, cascaded and hovered in tight groupings, falling from the ceiling and wandering into corners or coagulating into force fields as if by some unseen magnetism. Such phalanxes are evidence of Strunz's constellation-like "room language", as she calls it, forming "neologistic sentences".) In addition, every element in *Whose Garden Was This* more or less directly referred to its own title, to the other elements around it, and to the business of the site, through which they, complicit, acquired meaning clustered around the garden and the none-too subtly couched moralism of the fall.

In this regard, any institutional analogy may be pat, but one can imagine Strunz taking organizational cues from Marcel Broodthaers's *Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department, Section des Figures (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present)*, 1972, which similarly enlisted various media in a panorama of hegemonic collecting under the banner of an exhibition. Indeed, Strunz's "eagle principle" [5] for her formalist aggregates—to borrow Rosalind Krauss's phrase, coined for Broodthaers's collapsing of the aesthetic and commodified in his ersatz museal juxtapositions—extends to avian forms, her sculptures poised as so many iterations of taxonomic specimens pinned to the gallery walls. Many of Strunz's spatial compositions hint at movement arrested in flight, and her iconography flirts with mimesis, legible as enfolded or spread wings. Lightness is paradoxically achieved with the heft of dense materials, including wheelbarrows and metal doors. Despite their rust and patina, her materials effortlessly assume the look of folded paper in *Whose Garden Was This*, 2005, and *Meadow Saffron*, 2005. (Meadow saffron is a perennial that blooms in the fall, but here it references an object more constructive than vegetative, all wedged angles and tectonic plates.) Juxtaposing obdurate materiality with an implausible levity only to roll them both into organic permanence may be Strunz's most viable conceit and is surely yet another sign of her interest in recurring cycles and productive sublation.

Poetic and complex in this vein is her *Visionary Fragment (für Antoine Augustin Cournot)*, 2003, a bronze cast of three mutually propped and counterbalanced slivers of an abandoned honeycomb placed on an unassuming plinth. Because the bronze directly replaces the wax in the course of its production, it makes of the first thin-walled hexagons a thick, clumsy, irregular approximation—a cast without an extant original that nonetheless refers back to it. At once an ossified memorial to the long-dead colony, a cenotaph for a French philosopher, mathematician, and economist, and a sly art-historical gesture toward Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969, *Visionary Fragment* bespeaks its relation to its many simultaneous and necessarily contradictory histories.

It is worth noting as well that these histories manage to include Strunz's own past production, with earlier pieces returning—however obliquely—in newer works like the Mannheim-exhibited *Zeittraum*, 2004. The Portuguese greenhouse explored in *Summer Habitation* becomes an actual window positioned perpendicular to the wall. Shattered glass amasses on the floor below, as triangular wooden

forms grow out from it to cross the swell of blankness alongside it. Precisely edged "cuts" in space—the result of these dark, architectonic items placed upon the gallery's white wall plane—are solid and unforgiving. The work thus reverses the terms of *Summer Habitation*: Shards of transparent glass are rendered materially dense and convex, assuming a tangible presence that evokes and, like *Visionary Fragment*'s relation to the superceded honeycomb, mimetically references the real glass panes that gave rise to the sculptural forms.

Moreover, the mimetic structure demonstrated in *Zeittraum* (and the other pieces under this rubric) expands beyond the form of the material, beyond the culled representation of, say, the glass. This is because the word "Zeittraum" does not exist in the German language, but is the result of stolen and repurposed words, conjoined to make new meaning apart from but related to the closely allied "Zeitraum" (period of time). For contained within "Zeittraum" are "Zeit" (time), "Raum" (space), and "Traum" (dream). "Zeittraum" thereby does the philosophical work only a neologism can, once willfully nominated into being. In this usage, "Zeittraum," first proposed by Bolz and van Reijen, stands in for Benjamin's conception of the somnolence of the nineteenth century and its managing of desires through the "dream language of fashion, advertising, and architecture" [6] as a dream-time from which we must awake.

For all its rigor, semantic and otherwise, Strunz's stark work can also be mordantly humorous, as is evident in *Yesterday's Echoes*, 2006. A mock MTV-style music video cued to an admixture of brass Hiroshi Nawa and a musical version of Joseph von Eichendorff's poem *Wer hat dich du schöner Wald* composed by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, the piece was conceived by Strunz as a sarcastic celebration of her 2006 New York show. It stars a makeshift garden party (campy, faux-profound, and not a little silly) featuring odd amalgams of candle-sticks and Turkish ashtrays. These figurines, in fact, comprised a sculpture, also called *Yesterday's Echoes*, made the previous year; appearing in Strunz's New York installation, they made a central floor-bound clique of little umbrella-like squatters. Needless to say, without the music and wry editing, they are decidedly reliquary, even forlorn, in their displacement.

In 1968, Smithson wrote *A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites*, which sought less to define than to destabilize terms, rendering them conditional, and at the moment of their emergence, instantly obsolete. Smithson harbored no illusion that either his work or its critical articulation would be conclusive; neither did he wish for permanence or static, uneroded meaning. In the spirit of perverse generosity or possibly cannily entropic self-defense, he concluded his makeshift as if in anticipation of future-anterior irrelevance: "This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time", he wrote. "Theories like things are also abandoned. That theories are eternal is doubtful. Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books." [7] For Strunz, all this is a given, even if its effects are nowhere a forgone conclusion. She reformulates the idea of mnemonic resonance as a question of physical ownership, asking, again and again, without really expecting an answer: Whose paradise were these vanished theories and the objects in which they contingently reside, and whose property do they become in their derelict afterlife? Which is to pose, what are they doing—what can they do—in our present?

Notes

[1] See Heinrich Wölfflin: Principles of Art History. New York 1950, p. ix.
[2] Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project. Cambridge 2002, p. 463.
[3] Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen: Walter Benjamin. New Jersey 1996, p. 49.
[4] Ibid., p. 50.
[5] See Rosalind Krauss: A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition. New York 1999, p. 20.
[6] Bolz 1996, p. 46.
[7] Robert Smithson: A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites. In: Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley 1996, p. 364.

* Index of Illustrations / Abbildungsindex