

In a purely formal way, Katja Strunz's works can be described as sculptural objects and collages that use the formal language of constructivism, minimal art, and similar movements of twentieth century abstract, avant-garde art in the broadest sense—even if they are used with minimal diversions, mistakes, and disturbing elements that, as methodical disruptions, unsettle the familiar reading of constructive composition that has long since joined the canon of art and design history. This reveals that the integration and revisitation of historical forms, materials, and concepts in Katja Strunz's work does not merely take up and continue traditions that have been artistically fully formulated, but is also part of a strategy of making time, history, and space visible. This special approach to historical references, which reach the point of direct quotation, can already be seen in the early work *Untitled* (1997) (p. 42), already made while Strunz was still a student at Karlsruhe's Kunstakademie. This piece represents the start of an engagement with sculptural objects and at its core reveals the approaches inherent to all her later works. The basic shape quotes a wall object by Robert Smithson (*Untitled*, 1963/64, p. 40) that consists of two acute-angle triangular shapes turned towards one another. On the front side, mirrors are inserted that reflect the surrounding space, linking it to an illusionistic space at the center. In Katja Strunz's version, not only is one of the triangular shapes missing, but the mirrors included in Smithson's work are also lacking. Instead, the wall on which the object was (mis)placed—in such a way that the left point is placed before a window opening—can be seen directly through the work. While Smithson's object created an utopian space with the help of the mirror, the lack of the mirror and the placement of the object on the wall transform the illusionistic surfaces into gaps where the real space lying behind moves to the center of the work. The object translated in this way becomes a “constructed fragment” defined not only by what it shows, but also by the alteration or lack of qualities from the original. Since the original shape of the objects recalls a mask and the mirror in it looks like the slit for the eyes, Katja Strunz calls this procedure “making constructivism go blind.” If previously

the world had opened toward an utopian dimension, in Strunz's work we look into the depths of a fragmentarily reconstructed, lost utopia. The transposition of historical forms and fragments to new systems of reference takes place on the one hand by removing them from their temporal context, which all the same remains present as a gap, and on the other hand through the methodical overlapping and deferral of imaginary and real space. For example, in her recent work *Memory Wall* (2008, p. 49), Katja Strunz quotes over and over the perhaps most well-known work of abstract art, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. The radicalness with which Malevich defended his concept of total abstraction against comparable constructivist approaches resulted primarily from the fact that the abstraction he intended was not a process of increasingly abstracting elements from the real world, but an existential, almost religious experience of being. It was the experience that behind humanity's previously valid systems of reference to the world a “silent nothingness” is concealed that contradicts all figurative references

and definitions.¹ The black square stood for this nothingness. If Malevich was thus describing a reality beyond the world of objects, the black square in Katja Strunz penetrates the objective world once again: crooked, only partially printed on the sheet of the paper, it slips from the frame, becomes bent metal plate, folds into a cube in the third dimension, and tips over the wall into real space. As already in *Untitled* (1997), in *Memory Wall* the wall is not a neutral surface for hanging objects, but always defines their relationship to one another. In his work, Robert Smithson—who besides creating his own art repeatedly engaged with questions of art theory—distinguished between sites and non-sites. Non-sites like the above described work *Untitled* (1963/64) can be placed in any random place, for example a gallery or a museum, while sites such as the land art projects were created for a particular location. Katja Strunz, who grew up in a small German town, was always fascinated by the expanse of landscapes in which the land artists realized their projects during the 1970s: in her work, the wall of the exhibition

space models the function of the landscape. Just as Smithson's sites relate to their surroundings, Katja Strunz's objects relate to the wall of the exhibition space on which they move like actors on an imaginary stage. The wall becomes a representative of an actual and simultaneously fictional surface of reality on which the objects are no longer just mounted, but behave in relation to them. The individual objects installed can be falling, floating, or crossing the wall. In the work *Zu Fuß zum Piräus* (2005), they can divorce themselves entirely from the wall and take over the space like satellites, yet only to expand their prior relationship to the wall to the surface of the floor. This begins a new thread of works, for example *Yesterday's Echoes* (p. 75), in which small metal objects seem to break through the surface from below, like mushrooms shooting up from the ground. Yet the wall in the work of Katja Strunz is not just a pre-existing, immobile border prescribed by the space. In *Der müde Traum* (2008, p. 33) it takes on a role in the events, collapsing on itself and moving from its former vertical

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at Berlinische Galerie

orientation to the horizontal. In the intermediate stage of this transition from wall to floor, in the midst of falling, the collapsing parts create a new space that is maintained for a brief moment like the collapsing prison walls in Heinrich von Kleist's *Earthquake in Chile*, which allow the protagonists incarcerated at the start of the novella to flee.²

Here, two movements encounter one another that Katja Strunz repeatedly brings together, two movements that are formally and thematically played out in her works sometimes as collapsing and folding together, and then again as sinking and folding inward, and developed into main concepts of her works' grammar. In a final step, the interaction of folding and falling is transferred from the wall to the space as a whole. For the work *Einfall der Vier* (pp. 10/11), which emerged as part of the exhibition *Im Geviert* (2010) at Saarbrücken's Saarlandmuseum, Katja Strunz shrunk the exhibition space, 700 square meters in surface area, to around a tenth of its original size. In this newly created space, a metal plate confronts the beholder, which as a condensed remainder refers to the original dimensions of the space.

Alongside the sculptural objects, from the very beginning her oeuvre has also included works on paper that Katja Strunz describes by using the overarching concept of collage, something that initially seems unsettling. There are indeed numerous works among them that consist of cut and pasted elements, corresponding to the classical concept of collage. But the works in the series *Yesterday's Papers* (pp. 78–81), which she has been working on since 2000 and will be shown in part at the Berlinische Galerie exhibition, appear to be untreated pages taken from historical publications. As loose, yellowed pages from a book, they are at best collages in the sense that they were torn from the thematic and historical content of a book and are presented as detached fragments, like stranded testimony to the past subjected to current examination. But even if the context from which the pages were taken can no longer be decoded and the time of the publication's original appearance can only be vaguely guessed at, upon closer introspection it becomes clear that there is something else wrong

about the pages. The printed words in some places no longer follow the classical line pattern of book printing, but are upside down, form geometric formations freed from their context, or are printed directly onto an image. In other sheets, the blind material that in typesetting usually lies beneath the printable layer of the letters—the nothingness that marks the gaps and spaces between the lines—is printed as black lines onto the page. The medium used is described as “letterpress-print on paper,” and in so doing, it becomes clear that the words and shapes printed, albeit created by using a classical book printing technique, were printed after-the-fact by Katja Strunz herself. The newly introduced characters thus intervene with historic means in a sphere of the past that they play according to their own rules. In so doing, the letters fall into the space of history and in so doing cross a historical distance that links the past and present to one another in a new sense as a space of reverberation.

DREHMOMENT (VIEL ZEIT, WENIG RAUM)

For the exhibition at Berlinische Galerie, Katja Strunz has created two spatial compositions entitled *Drehmoment* (*Viel Zeit, wenig Raum*) that take up the notion of collapsing and folding together space and in different ways interact with the site in which they are placed. The first part of the exhibition consists of an irregularly folded metal sheet that occupies the front part of the exhibition space, 40 meters long and 8 meters wide. The entire surface of the sheet would be equivalent to the width of the exhibition space if it were folded out. Unlike the folding works directed at the wall, which transcend from the surface to the third dimension and thus create space, this folding oriented towards the expanse of the space generates the impression of space collapsing or condensing, as if in an implosion retracting toward a point at the center.

The first part thus strikes up a subject that is already alluded to in the title supplement “Viel Zeit, wenig Raum” (Much Time, Little Space). The formulation refers to Heinrich Heine's famous description of his experience of the initial spread of the railroad, written in Paris in 1843: “The changes that

must now occur in our way of looking at things, in our ideas! Even the elementary concepts of time and space have become unstable. Space is killed by the railways, and we are only left with time. (...) Now you can travel to Orléans in four and a half hours, and it takes no longer to get to Rouen. Just imagine what will happen when the lines to Belgium and Germany are completed and connected to the railways there! I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the perfume of German lime trees; the waves of the North Sea are crashing against my door.”³

The second half of the space is dominated by a monumental black metal ribbon that is held by a bent steel bar at a height of 7.5 meters and whose loose ends are lying on the floor (pp. 90/91). In comparison to the sculpture in the first part of the hall, it shows regular, parallel folds that pull in a balanced rhythm through the entire shape. As an object freely hanging in the space, the ribbon recalls the free-standing white stairwell in the adjacent exhibition space, which as the main staircase connects the ground floor of the Berlinische Galerie with the upper level. As its inaccessible negative-variation, the ribbon reaches the height of the upper level, ending in the nothingness of the space of the hall and sinking back down to the floor, loose and incapable of bearing itself. Similar to the work *Einfall der Vier* the fold appears to be the result of the compression and condensation of space. In a folded out state, the ribbon would be the length of the exhibition space. Unlike the form in the first part of the hall, the ribbon contracts in a linear fashion. The fold appears as if the ribbon had raced at high speed against the wall at the end of the hall, where it was violently compressed and pushed into the space above. The beginning and end of the ribbon are placed in such a way to raise the impression of a connection closing to form a circle — or exactly the opposite: the beginning and the end of the ribbon result from the disruption of an originally closed shape. In the white cube of the exhibition space, the ribbon also recalls elements of Malevich's suprematist design, for in several works he used black diagonal stripes to symbolize dynamic motion.

Like the futurists, Malevich was highly enthusiastic about machines and speed. “The city streets should have long since been liberated for the unhindered development of the automobile,” we read in the *Suprematist Manifesto*, which continues, “Indeed, even automobile belongs on the scrap heap, the cemetery of eclecticism (...). The new housings of the new humanity belong in outer space. The earth becomes an intermediate station, and accordingly launching pads need to be built.”⁴ The shape of the black ribbon, like the *Black Square*, could be read as a fragment of the remains of a utopian machine that was launched by the early avant-gardes of the twentieth century as a future vision of a new and better world, and which Katja Strunz has smash down as bashed, dented, and broken parts in real space. The title *Drehmoment* (Torque) also suggests an association of mechanical parts. Torque refers to the force that sets a vehicle in motion. In this context, the black ribbon seems like the drive belt of a motor, which when torn brings movement to a standstill. But it also recalls torn magnetic tape, forced through the mechanics of the playback

device, as was once used for sound and video recordings and continues to be used today in so-called tape robots for long-term data archiving. According to Paul Virilio, since the 1960s the essential experience of space and time no longer takes place on the traffic paths of geographic territory, but within the electronic ether of telecommunication.⁵ The power of the computer to compute becomes the last kind of motor, a cinematic motor responsible for the accelerated, worldwide transportation of images.⁶ “Automotive, audiovisual, and computer technologies are all moving toward the same restriction or contraction of time. And the telluric contraction calls into question not only the surface area of territories but also the architecture of buildings and apartments.”⁷ The experience of space, expanse, and reality is thus communicated by the images brought into residential space by way of the display, which is why the most important piece of furniture will become the ergonomic chair on which we are moved back and forth without really moving, and on which we dream without really dreaming.⁸

1: See Werner Haftmann’s introduction to the German version of Malevich’s *Suprematismus – Die gegenstandslose Welt* (Cologne, 1962), 8ff.

2: In *Zeitraum #9*, an additional work using walls which was simultaneously a large-scale installation and the exhibition architecture for a show of work by the Polish constructivist Władysław Strzemiński, the wall itself becomes text. For this work, Katja Strunz used movable walls to inscribe the word “Zeitraum” on the exhibition floor, employing a typeface designed by Strzemiński himself, the word thus being legible only by means of the floor plan, but to be walked in physically by the audience.

3: See *Heines Werke in 10 Bänden*, Vol. 6 (Leipzig, 1910), 291 f.

4: Kazimir Malevich, “Suprematistisches Manifest Unowis,” *Suprematismus – Die gegenstandslose Welt* (Cologne, 1962), 285.

5: See Paul Virilio, “The Last Vehicle,” *Polar Inertia* (London, 2000).

6: *Ibid.*, 23–24.

7: *Ibid.*, 25.

8: *Ibid.*, 24.



Untitled, 1999
Collage auf Papier /
collage on paper
30 x 21,5 cm