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Diederichsen, Diedrich, "Questions from Abstraction Who Reads," Fake Titel (June 2013) pp. 74 – 79

Questions from an Abstraction Who Reads Diedrich Diederichsen

Amy Winehouse died a year before becoming one of the main figures in Rachel Harrison's exhibition *The Help*, taking her place alongside Martin Kippenberger and several classical heroes of modernism, like Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and the absent-present Marcel Duchamp, as part of the cast of the show, its dramatis personae. But as opposed to Harrison's earlier exhibitions, these individuals are portrayed not through sculptures that otherwise do not resemble the portrayed person; instead they appear as drawings along with attributes of their respective art or public presence as points of reference for Harrison's work. Although Winehouse and Kippenberger, both of whom died tragically early deaths, can be considered typical representatives of the dissipate artist, here they are not seen in this role. Nor are they part of the isolated and often grotesque scraps of everyday life and news items that have a fixed place in Rachel Harrison's sculptural syntax, representing typical reality (e.g., a video of a taxi conversation on the political situation) that could also have been represented otherwise (a cartoon from a newspaper). For these fragments can be recognized, not only because of their media support and their placement in the sculptural constellation, as not made, but found; they are also framed as the effect of external reality. Winehouse, in contrast, seems to have been an internal participant, and more a hero on her own account than a witness of an external reality. At best, it could be added that she might have played the role that she — at her disastrous appearance in Belgrade on June 18, 2011 — literally could no longer stand: she herself could have used "the Help."

The more plausible link between Harrison and Winehouse is in a certain way similar to that of Kippenberger to Picasso. What connects them is a detail of the corporeal armor. Kippenberger repeatedly portrayed himself modeled after a photograph of Picasso walking his dog in his underwear, painting himself in a similar pair of shorts and emphasizing his belly. Harrison contextualizes the Winehouse beehive hairdos in the companion guide to *The Help*, both with pictures of her studio assistant's hair and with a tableau of historical beehive hairdos from the early 1960s, photographs of girl groups like the Shangri-Las and the Supremes. Of course, the tower of the beehive hairdo is also a strong image of sculpture as an upright, standing construction. It is an artful, complex vertical construction, made of a material that of its own accord would rather lie flat and spread out horizontally and formlessly. The belly, in contrast, swollen and distended, expanding and sprawling, forms a material of a different kind in Harrison. It is created using Styrofoam as something like pure sculpturality, something that would sprawl uncontrollably if there were no syntax that subjected the nouns to the movement of verbs, by linking subjects and predicates.

Kippenberger did something that Harrison also did several years ago: assigning the names of prominent or historical figures to sculptures that bore no human resemblance. But in Harrison's work, this took place via a set of entirely different aesthetic procedures, a syntax of collage or assemblage, while in *Peter: Die russische Stellung* (*Peter: The Russian Position*), Kippenberger was more interested in the exclamation mark of the readymade and the *objet trouvé* or its dilettantish reconstruction. Nonetheless, by expressly and rather derisively thematizing 'standing' in contrast to hanging, he also was pursuing a parallel project: underscoring the upright, the reconstruction of an old link between standing and the sculptural portrait of an individual, and the expandability of

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Untitled, 2011

similarity, where a proper name and a principle like verticality establish commonalities between a human being and an object. The extension of claims of similarities (that is, metaphor) is so important in Harrison's work because she quite intensely uses objects that serve as attributes of a (real or fictional) person (that is, as metonymies) but evokes them in a very different way. The particular amusement that consists in the truth effect, where an attribute seems to look like the person to whom it is attributed (a dog and its owner), ensues all on its own: it is somehow no longer clear whether this cleaning trolley is an attribute of the cleaners, whose underpaid activity is a requirement for the white in the white cube, or whether the shape of the long thin handle over the flat object equipped with rolls makes us sad, because a sad person looks just that way. A sad figure: what is that precisely?

But Harrison is more radical than (Winehouse and) Kippenberger in simultaneously making a claim and shaking off whatever happens to be claimed in a single gesture. The tower of the hairdo and the proper name, overcome in this exhibition and replaced by pure shape, stand in a larger context to a new formulation on the link between naturalness, natural language, and artistic formats. The standing, in that it consists of several parts, is not natural in Harrison, nor is it uncanny. The assembled and heterogeneous recalls parts of a sentence rather than the quasi-animistic animation of readymades (found cabinets) and their magic transformation to individuals (Kippenberger), or the metonymic animation of objects, transforming them into those related to them, as for example in the "Californian Portraits" (readymade sculpture) by Eleanor Antin.

Language as a *tertium comparationis* between language and non-language is a model that since (and in) classical Conceptual Art has failed and become outmoded; it nevertheless recurrently exudes an attraction. Linguistic and non-linguistic expressions have something in common on a deeper level, a non-media-based organization of content

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almost free of format that can again be presented in a format or the medium of language, as if language were a layer of abstraction higher than the other languages, of which it is only one. Ever since the first collages — indeed if not since the multi-paneled altar-piece — visual art has worked with something that may not be described only as an image, but also as the syntactical linkage of images; toward this end, the terms and images for describing language with sequentially arranged elements of meaning are used.

The idea that images connect to images like parts of sentences corresponds to the notion that objects are linked on pictorial surfaces like grammatical sentences. The concept of the diagram conceives the drawing or painting of pictures as a writing out or through, a writing expanded on the surface and in imagined space. The concept of the proposition, so important for early Conceptual Art, represented content as transportable linkages that could be transferred to different codes. All these notions of linking heterogeneous elements to units share a thinking in linear, flat, sequential, and horizontal objects. Free association in psychoanalysis and surrealism and film montage are no exceptions to the rule. The chord in music is one of the few cultural models conceived as a tower — the bridge, the scale, and other architectural metaphors in music move in the same direction, but as a rule they serve to describe the link between things that are similar or fitting. Collage and montage remain caught in the conceptual cage of successiveness.

Why is this a problem? The metaphor of successiveness and the corresponding media condition suggests weightlessness, immateriality. The heterogeneity of signs and cultural objects can only be brought to bear when artistic accessibility is limited and weight and gravity are taken into account in order to erect a tower of heterogeneity. Only in the tower does the heterogeneous have a chance of developing beyond the convention that a collage mixes objects from various sources, because it threatens with its specific qualities to crush the other qualities or be crushed by them. That a statement comes about by using various sources entails on a material and semantic level that the relationship of the parts to one another is not neutral, that there is no ceasefire between them, that even if there is a moment of calm, it is at best a snapshot of what is actually a dynamic process.

Large, bulging, distended, colorful Styrofoam masses, everyday objects (devices for cleaning), small buckets and other containers are found assembled, seem to lean against one another, to exert pressure, to support or crush one another. Their meaning and easy recognition can be had only under the threatening impression of its potential weight or its fragility. Thus they serve as allegories of meaning that are much more realistic than any linear metaphor for statements based on heterogeneous material. In a comical sense, this vertical realism is driven into semantic events in engaging with the drawings that recall Picasso. In this context, the awry aspect of Amy Winehouse's face and the others seems due to internal relations of power in the architecture of the singer's head, which itself is also configured under the conditions of gravity.

We can learn from Rachel Harrison that mixing signs so that they rub against one another, allowing the original context and the new context to appear as unreconciled parts of the world, is relevant today only if the semiotic difference of the contexts is distilled in physical qualities: as differences in density, weight, and so on. All the same, it must

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Untitled, 2011

remain clear that they are not only different chemically and physically, but also semiotically, semantically, and culturally. It is artistically relevant to find a technique that makes intellectually perceived differences visible, by, for example, taking such a difference and its classification literally: something is 'relevant', then it has a 'weight'.

Now every good artwork requires not just a technique, but a reflection on this technique that is presented along with the work. It cannot simply repudiate or ironize the technique, but it must invite discussion. For this, it needs to take its methods seriously and validate them, but also to have a means of reflection, humor, and a general expansion of horizons to larger contexts, both to contexts related to the fact that artistic works are at issue and to those that have to do with the world referred to and its laws and events beyond artistic depiction. Especially when so much of the recognizable world beyond artistic production finds its way into the work, as is true of Harrison.

And here, the title of the exhibition I am writing about literally comes to bear. It could be said that the sculpture itself and especially the reference to the genre of sculpture in Rachel Harrison's work refuses art theory's abstraction of a support, at least when this concept indicates a general exchangeability, that is, whatever is necessary to arrange a certain amount of cultural signs. The category of the support is often used to direct attention to the specificities and to the (physical) material of an artistic arrangement. At the same time this category assumes that there is an ontological level shared by all possible supports of artworks: they are material and physical components of the work that sometimes develop semantic qualities (i.e., when the frame takes over the picture).

The content of *The Help* by contrast is the concreteness of the support, which the sculpture, with its comments and jokes on the phenomenon of weight, is especially apt at providing or representing. Here there is something being borne in a concrete and material sense, not just engendered or supported. Alongside the formal demonstration

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of weight or lack of weight (when something that looks heavy seems to be light), this happens above all in the narration of this exhibition. This leads to a different ontological plane of the category of support, from physical support to living labor: *The Help* deals with the staff, in particular the (usually female) cleaning staff that work not so much on sculptural bearing and lifting as on engendering, allowing the support to appear by keeping the spaces white (or clean and indifferent), against the background of which the signs become recognizable. The quasi-secret door, always closed, that leads to the antechamber from which Duchamp's *Étant donnés* in Philadelphia is kept clean, here appears like the proverbial forbidden information in the fairy tale (and the world of Kafka). It's time to open the door.

Harrison brings the constructions of support in both senses close together: the weight of the cultural sign in the sculpture and the human costs of support in cleaning white cube art. She arranges vacuum cleaners, cleaning trolleys, and constellations of cleaning buckets as if they actually supported significant weight, and in a collage of images in the companion guide, which meanders among thematically rich associations, she constantly features photographs of the installation team, the packers, and other gallery workers. And yet the cleaning and installation workers are not just placeholders for the silenced side of art production, they are not even primarily to be seen as the concrete supporters that helped Harrison. For Harrison goes somewhat beyond the famous Brecht poem *Questions from a Worker Who Reads*.

In this poem, a worker looks through history books and discovers the masses that are left out, those who made history and whom nobody remembers when the names of the great men are mentioned. Jörg Immendorff once illustrated several lines of the poem, for example, "Caesar conquered Gaul/Did he not have a cook with him?" by having a chef's hat appear among several Roman helmets. But Harrison does not pose or answer this question alone, but rather the question of the physical and concrete labor that makes it possible for signs to emerge, a fact that is often forgotten in times of supposedly immaterial and bodiless cultural production.

But every form of visibility and recognizability in public space can be achieved only in that public spaces are created, cleaned, designed, organized, divided into stage front and back, and defined accordingly. Even where a cleaning crew has nothing to do, on the digital page that my computer displays before I even set a sign, a plethora of activities have taken place to provide the empty screen, like any other surface of inscription. From the generation and provision of electricity to the favorable and almost tax-free conditions for major electronics companies, to the writers and testers of codes and the establishment of a symbolic order that is characterized by our using present signs to communicate about absent things. It is the advantage of sculpture (these sculptures) that it can present the material orders behind symbolic production in a convincing metaphor: the image of weight.

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Untitled, 2012