

## WERNER REITERER

### Foray Through A Weightless Wunderkammer

*"An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. (...) ...[M]any of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged, in proportion, to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him.(...) Another great advantage, proposed by this invention, was, that it would serve as an universal language, to be understood in all civilized nations (...). And thus ambassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign princes, or ministers of state, to whose tongues they were utter strangers."*

Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels*, III, 5'

It is as if Jonathan Swift, in this ironic passage, must have had artists in mind. Not only does he consider the broad scope of artistic communication, knowing only too well that it is a difficult while individual undertaking, he also comes up with the idea of a universal language in a manner as immodest, intrepid, and bold as a utopia should be. For although it's assumed that language makes more precise statements than pictures or things do (with them, the viewer's interpretive participation is comparably higher, the content more vague), the sensory-emotional yield of images and objects is thought to be unrivalled. Things and their constellations are ultimately an invitation to see and to marvel. More a Wunderkammer, that is, than a library.

Parallels to Swift's parody are easy to find in art. Artists (most of all, presumably, the scions of the classical category "sculpture") do in fact build up a reservoir of things they want to communicate about, and to which they can readily refer. Encyclopedias and dictionaries—those futile attempts to create order and meaning— they find unnecessary. They simply bring their own things with them. These artists are probably the ones for whom comprehension and grasping are essentially virtually identical. Werner Reiterer, in turn, is a masterful analyst of the free play of meanings, whether of an architectonic or a mental nature—of everything determined in any way by our cognitive framework.

Even if Swift doesn't make it explicit, perhaps the most beautiful side effect of things is that they speak through and about themselves, and their relationships to each other and to persons, space, and time. Can things criticize or insult each other? And also be glad, be consoled, and love? Ascribing anthropotropic<sup>2</sup> qualities to things—the term is a critic's neologism whose peculiarity and capriciousness naturally appealed to Reiterer right from the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1909/1952, pp. 175–76. Swift published *Gulliver's Travels* under a pseudonym in 1726 with the title *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World in Four Parts By Lemuel Gulliver, first a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*. In part III, Gulliver lands on the island of Balnibarbi, over which hovers the floating, circular island Laputa. Gulliver goes to the capital city of Lagado, whose academy is attempting to put all the arts, sciences, languages, and manufactures on a new footing. But, since none of the new rules and methods that the professors dreamed up have borne fruit, the land lays in waste.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Metzger. Trope Sculpture. What actually is site-specificity in Werner Reiterer's site-specific sculpture?, in: Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (Ed.): *Werner Reiterer*, Basel 2003, p. 026.

start—is an extension of the notion of sculpture that Reiterer has been practicing for years in richly nuanced variants imbued with much underlying meaning. His things are not only vehicles for communication, but mirrors of human relationships, conditioning, insights, experiences, and expectations. To a certain extent, Reiterer is always angling for dialogue; often he calls upon the viewer to take a stance, if not to perform an action. At the very least, as he sees it, viewers “replenish” the materiality or the qualities of the things they are presented with. Reiterer wins over viewers’ empathy with ease. However, they themselves often are also the objects of his analysis.

When visitors have to yell as loud as they can, not only must they exert themselves to reach the right noise level, they also have to contend with their upbringing regarding socially acceptable conversational levels and with the idea of acoustic noise pollution. Much more is therefore involved than a simple pushbutton interaction. And the “echo” visitors evoke often doesn’t involve the sort of effect they might generally anticipate. The space might suddenly begin to breathe and rhythmically glow like an organism. Or the visitor activates a black light and can read previously invisible words written on the walls in fluorescent colors. Afterward it’s difficult to forget their message or to ever again encounter this situation as an “innocent naïf.” Not only are the spaces no longer what they once were; most of all, one’s relation to them has been enriched, and thus intensified, by experience.

Under black light a seemingly haphazardly constructed cube (*Brille/Spectacles*, 1997) answers the question “what’s it for?” quite bluntly and self-referentially: NOWYOUSEEMEIOBSTRUCTYOURVIEW. A fundamental quality of sculpture is typically that it occupies a space, thus altering the lines of sight, routes through, or even just the general feeling of a place. However, Reiterer’s central theme is what can be termed the ultimately performative relationship between work and viewer. As Michael Fried has eloquently commented in relation to Minimal Art, it is akin to the way sculptural works are perceived.<sup>3</sup> The spatial contingencies of the arrangement and its referential context inevitably come to the fore.

Activating viewers is central to many of Reiterer’s works. For instance, since 1996 a section of the road maintenance depot courtyard in Weiz, Austria has been covered by a swath of orange paint that documents the movements of machines and vehicles as it wears off. Viewer involvement also functions in interventions that are kept as minimal as possible, yet impact on the space all the more: such as the text, located significantly above visitors’ heads, that indicates the presence of “laughing gas” (*Untitled*, 2001) or a room’s olfactory occupation by perfume (*Untitled*, 2001) — a phenomenon that might evoke negative associations from experiences in elevators. While the former example confronts an attentive exhibition visitor with a piece of information that is difficult to verify without a ladder, and whose potential for generating uncertainty cannot readily be predicted, the latter shows itself perhaps only to those who are ready to “see” something invisible as a component of the visual arts.

The notion of sculpture as a physical entity that attracts attention by virtue of its extraordinary form is a category that strongly engages Reiterer. His doubts about sculpture as a physical entity begin with the attribute of substantiality, which he has a fondness for undermining, overcoming, even negating. Over the years, he has provocatively tested intentionally ethereal or aggregate states of immateriality, liquidity, volatility, incorporeality—in short, things that are formless, placeless or, to the uninitiated viewer, “insubstantial.” But manifestations they are nonetheless: the vapor and the breath, the gas or the scent, light and darkness, or sounds that no one at an exhibition can escape from since they totally pervade the space. Of course, it’s still possible to hold one’s nose. It’s more difficult to avert the ears. Not to breathe is impossible. It is through these sublime kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” first in: *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 12–23; in: *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996

interventions—perhaps less impressive than “objective” events—that Reiterer explicates the diversity of our relationships with our environment. The fact that Reiterer’s sculptures, installations, and arrangements alter perception and foment discussions, in no small measure due to their technically professional execution and perfection, is an inevitable consequence of the symbolic potentialities of art. And, since the irritation of the unexpected shunts thinking into a sensitized mode, reflection suddenly dominates our response to the works. What constitutes perception? What can we rely on? How do we process and evaluate information and situations?

Reiterer’s works not only call for viewer response at exhibitions when they present a simple command such as *Take a Deep Breath and Carry the Air into the Next Room* (1997) or when coins scattered in a public place excite every passer-by (*A Hole in the World Wide Financial System*, 2000). His interventions also invite further questioning because they constantly challenge our powers of imagination: What’s going on with that steaming dresser? Who needs a barrel of laughing gas here and what for? A catalogue title from 1998—*Sachen konkret mit Wirkung ungefähr* [Objects Concrete with Effect Roughly]—points up Reiterer’s metaphorical streak and captures the feel of that hybrid sense of reality and possibility. A smidgeon of deviance, a dash of parasitic anarchy, but also a large dose of normality are all characteristic of his kind of appropriation and reinterpretation of reality. And the decisions to be made are not about whether the great narrative exists, or whether figuration still can be considered a contemporary form of expression, but about how the two mesh as if naturally, only to disintegrate a moment later into absurdity.

This can be seen to greatest effect in Reiterer’s pragmatic decision to use himself as the model for the exemplary figure in many of his recent works, thereby generating the least possible speculation about the socialization, emotional balance, or status of the person depicted. The artist himself is, of course, the closest and most exemplary person—and above all, the most available and compliant one. Any irony, embarrassment, or taboo-breaking must be negotiated solely with the artist himself—so he can expose his most secret thoughts, surrender his last heartbeat to art, or watch his spirit and soul pleasantly go up in smoke. Visualized in this way, transcendental matters seem more than easy to handle—they vanish. Reiterer’s ostensible self-portrait therefore isn’t one at all, or is, only to the extent that all his other works are. Conversely, Reiterer investigates provocative aspects of personalities, even historical figures, who are only too prominent. The *Adolf Hitler Monument and Jesus at Home* (both 2008) test the ways history is currently being appraised and dealt with, from the repressive to the profane.

But to Reiterer, neither the treatment of history nor sculpture and space are closed systems. He therefore proposes that the term “site specific” be crossed with the expression “mental compatibility.” Places would in large measure be “human-ideologically” constructed and would gain specificity primarily through their collective political self-understanding. Such ideas of “lifestyle,” of how to conduct life, would increasingly act as “global idents” but would locally be formulated in different ways. Reiterer’s works thus react seismographically to the specific contexts of different places, as shown by a comparison of his chandeliers for *Gerhaus* in Lower Austria (Untitled, 2002) and *Louisville, Kentucky* (Untitled, 2006) or the European and U.S. versions of *Come Closer to Leave!* (2005/08). “Universal” conundrums of art history, those existential questions Reiterer is increasingly focusing on,—questions that every human being has pondered at one time or other—would accordingly encounter different states of political-ideological awareness and, moreover, differing degrees of personal “cultural ballast” (the prejudices we have all internalized to a greater or lesser extent) in each instance. Perfect traps, in other words.

Naturally, Reiterer directs our attention straight to these issues. He enjoys dealing with the question of whether, by minimally shifting the parameters, art is in a position to manipulate

the quiddity of a place or an object (whether in public space or in the sheltered exhibition context, where the anticipation of artifice or contrivance leads us willy-nilly to expect something astonishing) so that viewers actually interpret it differently—whether, for a brief moment, a new “reality” is evoked. Many of Reiterer’s statements in interviews also confirm that, rather than delivering the rudiments of such interpretations himself, he is a collector of such reactions and experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Possibly no one else currently pursues the small-format utopia with as much real(art)politik as Werner Reiterer. On a parallel level, both before and after producing his sculptures, he is a passionate draftsman. One sure signature of his drawings is that they contain notations of ideas. As such, the drawings are concepts. The “sculptures” that accompany them are a kind of realization, or simply another aggregate state that could certainly possess other characteristics. Apparently, Reiterer’s crucial criterion for deciding about realization is precisely this: the object (should a thing be produced at all) must not correspond to a certain aesthetic (which in any case is only an acquired system) but must above all fulfill a desired function. So there are pieces that function best as drawings, others that one thinks could never be fully functional or realized—but then happily surprise—and still others that one immediately wants to playfully investigate.

Reiterer’s drawings are autonomous works. But most trade under a group title such as The Drawn Exhibitions. At the beginning of his career, this might have been a method of presenting his ideal scenarios or a way to more speedily overcome the actual situation of as yet infrequent or insufficiently large exhibitions. Later, especially when there were more site-specific realizations in public space, the meticulousness of the drawn records he had grown to love might have proven to be an exceedingly sensuous and aesthetic strategy for offering something to gallerists and collectors too. Because when a drawing in the project stage devotes such sophisticated attention to form (using a cleverly devised system of 17 different grades of pencil), thereby cultivating an unmistakable style, then when it comes to materialization it is not the form but the content that is paramount. From this perspective, it is the sculptures rather than the drawings that have a conceptual character.

Therefore, (professional) art viewers are fascinated by Reiterer—and interrogate whether reception should proceed from an intellectual standpoint or should instead take the inventiveness of the forms as its starting point. When it comes to Reiterer, perception often struggles with the awareness of actually standing in front of a work of art; this conflict occurs, however, above and beyond any question of whether or not the work is art (which art has already dealt with extensively). Reiterer has nonchalantly resuscitated a core artistic discipline. But in no way does one miss that discipline’s artistically dignified yet frequently boring materials—such as stone, metal or wood—just as one only vaguely recalls the intentionally “emotionless,” supposedly universal works and installations from art’s phase of dematerialization. Reiterer’s manifestations are somehow at odds with both these approaches. As a “*créateur situationiste*” (even if this French isn’t correct), that’s his aim.

Gabriele Mackert

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<sup>4</sup> Instead of assembling critical essays in the catalogue for his solo exhibition at Kunsthau Graz, Reiterer celebrates the artist interview in serial form: Peter Pakesch (Ed.): *Werner Reiterer, Eye Sucks World*, catalogue, Kunsthau Graz, Cologne 2007