

Daniel Sherer: I'd like to start with a double point of departure: your most recent piece, *The Girls #2*, and the Robert Musil quote, 'Layer by Layer art strips life bare,' that I cited in my recent essay on your work. You said you liked this quote, as it speaks to your work, and the problems it raises, in a particularly apt way. Could you expand on that, perhaps in relation to the *Geister* – the stripped, bare figures made of your own clothes, hardened by airplane resin, that populate your artistic universe?

Tobias Spichtig: The quote is grand and spot on. Even if I can't really explain and to a certain degree don't want to know why. Because to explain why would be like explaining, or being able to explain, to somebody why you love that person. And that's the end of love. This is both abstract and very real. Something like knowing an imagined reality to be real. And also concise. The work you refer to is like an icon with many layers... and that's a painting. A painting is like a snapshot that takes forever (or better, that is outside of time).

I don't have a recipe or a conceptual narrative which explains the works better than they do by their own presence. I even think my heroes, who are conceptual artists, thought like painters or writers.

You wrote an essay about my work which explains trains of thought that animate my work in ways I had never dreamed of. So my focus is not so much in the *why* or the *how*, as is the case with your essay. My work is driven by the *what*.

The *Geister* are simultaneously empty and full. Because they are what they are, clothing and resin. In aeronautics this is called a monocoque structure, as every airliner is built: the structure and the skin are identical. The skin takes all the force. They carry and attract and host perception. They play their role. The material speaks directly by having an inherent meaning. Here language, fashion and aeronautics intersect. Their poses are gestures, much as in portraits. They are both sculptures and actors that blur the line between abstraction and figuration. But that's not the only line they blur. Their titles are a bit like spoken lines or one-liners. These titles might make a script for a screen or stage play some day.

DS: What is the role of installation as a category or set of practices in your work? Does it relate to an idea of interaction between different media or arts?

TS: I think of installing constantly. I always have a space in mind. But I don't think about 'installation' per se. I like empty stages and full rooms. These are where actors (stage) or things (room) act together, each piece on its own terms without being forced to interact. It's kind of like inviting guests to dinner. One specific song might go well with a certain painting; one specific guest might go with another. But even if you have dinner with a poet, an art critic and an actor, doesn't mean you'll be happy to be hung over the next day.

DS: What is the status of self-reflection in your work, in the light of the idea of 'Art Seeing Art'? This idea refers to a condition made visible or present

in your work, in which art folds back on itself, reflecting on its own parameters of production, representation and abstraction. Can one also see the process of self-reflection, or of art reflecting on itself, as a precondition for the work's unfolding dynamics of reception, for the way it engages the spectator?

TS: I like psychoanalysis as a field of inquiry but the work I do is not about self-reflection, and even less about myself. Still, I think the process of reflexivity is some sort of a condition or state of mind that somehow unites the work and the spectator. I like the fact that this condition simply is and is not about anything in particular. I regard the 'about' as a good starting point but never as the ultimate reason why something makes sense. (A work being about something else is only a good pretext to think about something else.) I think this just happens, as for instance when something is both real and fake at the same time, as when one is speaking of that moment when an actress falls out of her role. This comes closest to what I mean. She falls into herself. She falls out of herself as well! Now that is when I like acting. It is the same with painting: a good painting never wants to be a painting because it is already quite real. It already has enough reality.

DS: What is the status of architectural space, or better, of architecture and space, as themes or conditions of representation and abstraction in your work?

TS: I used to think that architecture was not part of my art because no plan I ever made worked out. And also, I would add, since most people spend much of their time indoors. So I thought of it as being pertinent in terms of engineering and interior design. I can only 'do' interiors because I'm bad with numbers. But then I got sick from working in the studio all the time, away from daylight, and it turned out I have several vitamin deficiencies. So I'm horseback riding outside much more often. And yes, in good architecture you always feel as if being protected, even when outside. It's not urban planning that I mean but how to feel at home in the world. So it is extremely pertinent to what I'm doing. Architecture is like a tent that endures. I always want to inhabit its consequential spaces as *Denkraum*, which basically means to make it not feel empty. In and of itself, real estate is nothing. Because it is about currency, and currency is useless without value. My work is about the real, and about states of consciousness. In other words, it's not about, say, listening to or performing music, but how this music sounds in reflection, upon reflection, in the inner memory of how they sound. How they reverberate in a space both imagined and physically present.

DS: How do the questions I've already asked help situate your work (or not) in relation both to the past and the present of current art practices? Is it justified, then, to claim a sense of historicity, or of historical awareness, for your practice, even as it moves forward towards an unknown future?

TS: Any attempt to situate my own work would drive me crazy. We work now and my work is not about art or art history. The only constant in the past and

future is the unknown. Of course I have my heroes and heroines but no junkie makes art about drugs. Still I take historical awareness as a compliment because I am drawn to the disciplines of art history and history in general. But the really great thing is that this way of thinking collapses once one stands in front of a so-called historical work, because it is there in the now. I wish I were a collector and could spend all my time owning works of art or wanting to own such works. I could spend all my time in museums leafing through catalogues, and with certain carefully chosen books--books that really speak to me and that I return to again and again (one of my favourite books, in some absolute sense, is Georges Bataille's study of Lascaux.)

The unknown is neither in the past nor in the future. It is radically present and hard to deal with or accept. Maybe that's why dealers sell paintings, because once something is a painting the unknown has a place. It's a bit like dealing with the unknown. It's an incredible thing that we can look at the unknown.

DS: What is the role of the medium in your work? I'm asking this because you once said that photography is a mere medium in your work, unlike painting? Is there a hierarchy of media in your view?

TS: In the end it all comes down to painting. Art is painting. Photography is painting, to put it bluntly. I don't see the difference in pigment derived from a stone or from some other source and a chemical reaction that has produced the same color. The use of the lens became fashionable in Renaissance painting but had already been known long before. The fascination of instant fixation is magic. Both in the laboratory, on canvas, paper or in a stone wall. This is due to the fact that the image itself is real material, and regardless of the process of making, that is what I would consider to be painting. Material is both physically present and signifies something else, making that which is materially present abstract. This process enables thinking, or whatever it is that one does in the moment, to become concrete and present.

Heiner Müller speaks about a certain state of being in the material. The phrase he used, *Aufenthalt im Material*, is almost impossible to translate into English. It is more like being *with* the material. It is also like going to a bar or simply hanging out at home or taking a shower in the right spot to soak up the right materials to work with. Language and physical material have an inherent meaning and history. Epistemology in relation to language is like going to the scrap yard and finding the old discarded parts that once belonged to a certain car. Not that I'm a fetishist, but there's always a wider spectrum of meaning that fits the intuitively chosen word or material. So I went to the scrap yard because I wanted to weld a sculpture. Funny enough welding the sculpture kind of felt like an act of writing.

Also I find it true that writers and painters always talk about the same feelings and behave in similar ways. I tried to weld a dragon, because I wanted it to be something, in order to not get lost in such concepts as abstraction and modernism. I called the dragon Heiner Müller because his writing is in all likelihood my main source of inspiration, as far as writers go. And then Henry Miller's essay "To Paint is to Love Again", that is an essay I return to very often. The best jokes come from serious intentions and attitudes. (Strangely enough people often perceive

my work as funny when I really did it with serious intention.) So it makes sense as a bad idea to take a joke seriously and make a sister dragon called Henry Miller.

DS: What is the relation of art and architecture at present, in your view, not necessarily as this is manifested in your work as a spur to practice, but within a more theoretical perspective?

TS: Architecture is concrete. At the same time it can't be abstract. Art can be both but never simply concrete. Good architecture is a good host and good art is a good guest. They look so good together. The only problem arises when they want to be the other. Then they lose all attraction. Over the last twenty years each of them have really tried hard to become the other. And they did in theory become attracted to and attractive to each other, approximating the other in the process, because in theory they're very hard to tell apart.

I'm drawn to the mental process that goes under the name of theory but I'm also glad that there's not really any current theoretical breakthrough (like post-modernism) which both architects and artist can easily identify with.

I don't mean that these two sisters are lost, but surely they are confused and therefore interested in the other, while again trying to find their own path. The really great thing about this is that both are becoming closer again to their little slutty sister, Fashion.

Fashion resists theory in a strange way, as in the end, it's more philosophical. In times like these I find fashion much more interesting than any current philosophical discourse. Maybe because it is somehow more radically feminine or even better, androgynous.

DS: What is the link between the use of clothing, and the ideas of disembodiment and embodiment in your practice? How did you come across the idea of using clothing as a central trope?

TS: I felt lonely and thought of making figurative sculpture to populate the space. But the figures had to look good and somehow real. The only material that is already cut to human size and representing a good-looking appearance is clothing. I started to work with found material because I was broke and didn't want to get a job. Strangely it made a lot more sense to work with material that meant something to me. I don't have a lot of clothes but every cheap piece I have I really like. I didn't have enough clothes to work with so I asked friends to give me their cast-off clothes. There's a certain energy and precision in material that was previously owned or has been used. It's not recycling but working with that certain inherent substance. Clothes lying around always have a certain ghostly presence of their own. And what's more I'm fascinated with fashion.

Clothes are the human habitat par excellence. They protect the body and express the mindset. Clothes always fail to perform, but they do have the merit of supporting gestures. So clothes without a body, like the *Geister*, are radical distillations of gesture. ♥



DUE is a publication by the Architectural Association.
due.aaschool.ac.uk

For submissions,
due@aaschool.ac.uk

Editors, Sofia Pia Belenky
Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard
Hunter O'Brien Doyle

Design, technofle.sh
Print, hatopress.net