

Lang weilen und lichten

Joerg van den Berg, Ausstellungskatalog Shedhalle Zürich, 1989. Translation: Catherine Schelbert

Wo?

Mach den Ort aus, machs Wort aus. Lösch. Miss.

Aschen-Helle, Aschen-Elle - geschluckt.

Vermessen, entmessen, verortet, entwortet,

entwo. . .»

(Paul Celan)

Content- contemplation. Everything has been deleted in the large space at the back of the Shedhalle. There is nothing there. A room without content. The artists have accustomed the viewer's eye to hanging exhibits, to pictures and subject matters that they have brought in from outside and put on temporary view. But in this last compartment, the eye is deprived of concentrated seeing. It wanders about the room in search of the lost artwork until it finally focuses on the space itself, which is ordinarily only a vehicle of display. The emptiness plunges the viewer into a silence that invites contemplation. Place - placement. The space, slightly more rectangular than square, is divided into three compartments lengthwise by two rows each of three thin iron columns - or widthwise into four compartments by three rows of two columns each. The six columns support a roof construction of four parallel shed roofs set at right angles to the main axis of the room and bathing it in even, bright light. I-beams interconnect the columns at a height of about three and a half meters. Soon additions to this basic structural complex - a power box, a ventilating system, electric wiring, a door, electric outlets on the walls, free floating pipes running through the room - intrude upon the viewer's vision, produce disorder and prevent them from feeling at ease in the bright space. They try to come to terms with the restless atmosphere by following the arrangement of the columns, by re-placing themselves in relation to the surrounding space and seeking to integrate themselves.

Paraffin - steel. Integration into the room facilitates a discovery that offers a first point of reference and departure. Under the third section of the shed roof between the two rear and two middle columns, the viewer sees a bright, white beam only a few centimeters thick and about six meters long resting on the light gray ground. The beam is radiant. On moving closer, the viewer discovers that it is of extremely light-absorbent material. A luminous white material that has been poured into a form whose surface shows traces of treatment; soft and pliant, the material now lying before us is cooled off; hardened: it is paraffin wax. Paraffin is obtained by burning organic matter such as coal or petroleum. The beam forms a thermal line in the room. The radiance of the paraffin strip, its auratic impact, dramatically focalizes the space. Its placement in the architectural structure soothes the viewer; its optical presence defines a delicate balance between gently streaming light and molded product of heat - as if the paraffin had absorbed the disorder of the space. But the soothing effect, enhanced by a sense of standstill in a newly found center, fades upon noticing the decentralized placement of the light strip in the space as a whole. Once again the eye restlessly searches the room. What has determined position and length of the strip of paraffin? What has determined its shape? The second discovery - of listening, highly polished steel is an I-beam whose ends have been welded to the I-beams that join the longitudinal row of three columns at a height

of about three and a half meter. In the connecting surfaces are only a few centimeters wide. The glistening girder also runs at right angles to the longitudinal axis of the room, is also centered under one section the shed roof (at the back of the room this time), is also six meters long and only a few centimeters thick. But it is meaningless, its structural function has been deleted.

Self -avoidance. The smoothly polished steel and the white of the paraffin placed on the floor recall the work of Hans-Dirk Hotzel from Essen, which gave this installation decisive impetus. The installation adopts the radical retreat of the artist into an anonymous process which encourages a „special openness, a determined acceptance of given structures,“ which is the consequence of a personal reserve that avoids emphasis on the facets of oneself and seeks to submerge the individual in the neutral givens of matter and space.“ „The artist leaves things as he finds them and what he adds is derived from penetrating these givens. The objective is not a specific, personal interpretation of a reality but submission to what he encounters. . .“ (Heinz Liesbrock *Auflösung des Persönlichen [Dissolution of the Personal], Die Bodenobjekte Hans-Dirk Hotzels*“ in: „Zwischentöne“; Mainz 1988; cf: Frank Fehrenbach's instructive catalogue essay in *artefact*“ (exhibition catalogue), Aarau/ Basel, 1988/89)

Ur-image- replica. The sheen of the steel, its release from the white colour-continuum of structural elements, turns it into an aesthetic con-figuration. The focus of interest is not its functional context but its external appearance. The viewer first sees the beam as counterpart to the floor-level paraffin strip, a consciously designed addition to the space. This interpretation loses ground upon discovering, on closer inspection, three small plates protruding from underneath the beam on either side with holes drilled into them. The plates jar the viewer's aesthetic response since they signalize function: the beam must once have served some unknown purpose and obviously originally belonged to this very space. The three small plates undermine the binary system of steel and paraffin. The extraction of the steel girder from the architectural context drives it the appearance of an ur-image within the system, which is duplicated by the strip of paraffin. The floor-level paraffin echoes the suspended girder, which is in itself a project. But the suspended girder also repeats the floor-level paraffin. The repetition of shape in both elements invites visual comparison, while the sensual experience of both parts disintegrates in the process of perception. The properties of the material overshadow its shape, tone down its semantic impact. The steel becomes a mere light reflex; the paraffin an autonomous source of light. Image and replica interact but their relationship does not endure. Again and again they are separated in the act of seeing, the proportions of their mutual dependence value, they lose sight of each other only to be reunited. In separation, the paraffin strip acquires sensual significance, while the steel girder negates itself in the harmony of the system as a whole, however, the scales tip in favour of the extroverted steel girder which then becomes the target of simultaneous vision. Memory- repetition. . . because repetition is a decisive expression of that which was ,memory ,for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all cognition is a remembering, new philosophy will teach that all of life is a repetition. . . Repetition and memory are the same movement, only in opposite directions; because what one remembers of what has been is repeated backwards; whereas actual repetition remembers things forwards. Therefore, repetition, in as much as it is possible, makes man happy while memory makes him unhappy, provided namely that he takes time to live and does not strive, the moment he is born, to sneak out of life because he has, for instance, forgotten something.“

(Sören Kierkegaard, „Die Wiederholung“; Düsseldorf 1955, p. 3)

Estrangement of origin. The treatment of the steel girder's surface lends it a strange appearance. Its light-reflecting surface transports it into a remote sphere which is unattainable to the eye. The origin of the installation is estranged. Yet, its duplicate in approximate repetition of its ur-shape (of the steel girder) manages to bridge the sense of estrangement. Repetition creates nearness; it reminds

the viewer of something that is already familiar. Furthermore, the object of repetition rests on the very ground upon which we ourselves move. The recovered object is subject to the same laws of gravity that determine our movement, while its origin negates these same laws.

Earthbound, heavenwards. The lightweight paraffin, obtained from the earth's fossil fuels, rests on the floor of the exhibition space. Basically receptive to its surroundings, it absorbs the light, on one hand, and assimilates the colour of the floor, on the other. The paraffin thus mediates between heaven and earth. Initially it appears to yield unconditionally to the surface of the floor, to lie there, to weight upon it. But then it begins to lift off gently at both ends, timidly straining toward the light. This timid tendency to rise takes the shape of a trapezoid that unfolds before one's eyes upon mentally extending and connecting the endpoints of the two beams. In this way, the floating or suspended steel girder acquired an inherent dynamics of potential movement upwards. As the trapezoid tapers off into space, the once superfluous steel girder becomes a central structural element that is vital to the architecture of the room. The light follows suit and is transformed from a purely spiritual element into a physically tangible impulse, an impulse that unites the interior with the intangible exterior from which the light emanates. The sequential order of the sculpture is significant in this context. The origin, the seminal given and thus the beginning was a found object, a steel girder, that secured the discovery of a given trail by being transformed into a work. The strip of paraffin followed in memory of the steel girder. In the exhibition, however, the relationship is reversed; it is the strip of paraffin that first attracts the viewer's attention and is then repeated in the floating steel girder.

Window to the room. The trapezoid, visible only head on generates another phenomenon, which is not synthesizing. The shape circumscribes a section of the spatial continuum, delimits it and makes it accessible to a two-dimensional reading. A picture is created in the room. As if looking through a window, the beholder sees parts of the floor and the wall, whose right angle flattens out into a surface that seems to tip over backwards. This two-dimensional section of the room resembles a free-floating plane that has a destabilizing effect on the rest of the space. Once again tendencies emerge that subvert the rigid spatial order and deprive the viewer of safe three-dimensionality. The viewer, who started out in a single room, now stands in one room in front of a picture of another room.

Lighting and concealment. Light falls into the room. The sun draws lines on floor and wall. Diagonal bands of light on the wall cut through the spatial order while four bands of light on the floor run parallel to each other, to the shedroofs, and above all to the strip of paraffin. Like the paraffin, the bands of light have also entered the room from outside. Both elements, light and paraffin, are united in the renewed radiance of the room. The eyes, now seeking only the light, disregard the physical facility of the surrounding space, which is submerged in sedimented memory. But Andrea Wolfensberger tampers with this phenomenon as well; she subverts the ideal by incorporating the memory of the space and the shadow cast by the steel beam into the freely flowing light, whose rays gradually, very slowly traverse the installation, until they fade out entirely, only to rally their resources and start all over again tomorrow. . .