

Afterall

On Entering the Room

– Tanja Widmann

On entering the room I was overcome by relief. What was displayed before me was comical and exuded something promptly understandable: four hollow plinths made out of flat white panels elevating four ceramic vases. The vases, covered with a milky white glaze, were each upside down. Faces were outlined on them in a few brushstrokes of black lacquer. One of them had wavy lines that flowed down its cheeks from a pair of empty eyes; some had wrinkles drawn across their foreheads; and most of the mouths were straight or slightly frowning, as if reflecting on a serious situation or feeling of despair. The painted faces turned the vases into elongated, pear-shaped heads, sometimes with handle ears, sometimes without. Two large collages were also displayed in

(both 2009) in the show 'some end of things', at Galerie Andreas Huber in Vienna earlier this year.

These sculptures and collages at once seemed to me like the punch line to my state of mind in light of current or impending work – including the writing of this text. They were pointing at an exhaustion that now appears to me as caricature.¹ Sigmund Freud describes the technique of the joke as one that effects either a relief of an already existing condition, or the omission of a yet to be mobilised psychic effort. He also refers to a direct connection to the release of a compulsion to critique. If understanding the then-upcoming writing of this text as a yet-to-be mobilised psychic effort connected to the challenge of critique, the *Exhausted Vases* and *Waiting Laptops* in fact 'made a joke' in a quite basic way.

In the works' lopsided reflection of my state of mind – not addressing me personally, yet grabbing me immediately – my mood shifted into a sort of cheerfulness. At the same time, the fact that I seemed to have got the joke suggested that it would be easy to write about. And so it was, and then again, it wasn't. Mainly because the joke works as an event: ephemeral, fleeting and in the moment. To write it down and describe it hollows it out, makes it stale. Thus I will not go further into the funny, comic encounter when entering the room, because the momentary understanding, or feeling of alliance rooted in laughing at the joke, has not been easy to pin down. What I will refer to instead is the joke's role in Hopf's aesthetic practice and its structural similarity to the workings of aesthetic experience. But for now I will take another detour and come back to the moment of relief.

The feeling of relief I experienced also stemmed from the work's forthcoming attitude. One may even describe it as

Tanja Widmann trips up and over Judith Hopf's use of the comic in her work, finding similarities between the joke's disruption of commonly held norms and the ruptures of aesthetic experience.

the gallery, each of which depicted a figure made of grey folds with a scribbled-on face. They looked like a pair of anthropomorphised laptops, male and female respectively. The light grey screens were their head and chest, while the dark grey keyboards formed the rest of their bodies. And so we saw this pair, sitting there in the slumped position created by the laptop's half-open angle, with empty gazes, ink-drawn hands in their laps, beige packing-paper legs dangling, thick lacquer curls as hair, ink lines shaping a hat. The colour of the works, and the atmosphere they evoked, were restrained and serious. Such was the evocation but not the effect of *Exhausted Vases* and *Waiting Laptops*

¹ This caricature-like quality is no coincidence. In 'some end of things', Judith Hopf refers to or quotes the Romanian-American cartoonist Saul Steinberg, who is predominantly known for his work for *The New Yorker*.





accessible or inviting, yet, at the same time, or maybe in spite of this attitude, it is surrounded by an air of audacity. The work's attitude not only leads directly to questions of style, but also — following Diederich Diederichsen — to the articulation of a 'social sense'. As he writes in a catalogue essay for Hopf's *Secession* show in Vienna in 2006:

[There is] *an unspoken but discernible concern with the communicative process involved in art reception — concern not with whether one is understood, let alone correctly, but with the styles and personality traits that are activated and encouraged — by a work, by a performance, or by a stand at an art fair. [...]* In this context, style is an *important case of social sense becoming form.*²

Diederichsen continues to elaborate how Hopf's specific style is marked by an interest in sub-cultural forms of commonality, in the sense of a commonly developed aesthetic and common production practices. She develops these in her work without giving away the code, without making it explicit. In working within the frame of this social sense, he argues, Hopf

makes evident not only the 'functionalism of formalism' and the ideological structure of decisions about artistic form, but also the fact that existing grammars — whether formal or pertaining to any form of life — can always be restructured.

This restructuring often displays itself as something nonsensically meaningful in Hopf's work — as, for example, in the video *Hospital Bone Dance* (2006), made in collaboration with Deborah Schamoni, where patients stuck in a more-or-less permanent state of waiting in a hospital break into an awkward dance. (Caught in evident boredom, a number of those waiting have broken limbs in plaster — making them seem rather like mummies or zombies, that is, becoming sculptural within the video piece.) Or, in the video *Bei mir zu dir (From Me to You)*, 2003), when a medium on a TV chat-show slumps in a chair while intoning about production conditions and instructions from the hereafter. In the sense arising from this nonsense, affective shifts and disruptions of governed, normative settings can be identified. A critically productive mode is revealed in contrast to implicitly accepted orders. And in the course of this process, inherent power structures become visible. My relief also could derive from Hopf's ultimately utopian position — her allegation

2 Diederich Diederichsen, 'Outboard Motor', in *Judith Hopf* (exh. cat.), Vienna: *Secession*, 2007, p.8.



Above and left:
Atelier Hopfmann
(Judith Hopf and
Deborah Schamoni),
Hospital Bone Dance,
2006, video, 7min.
Courtesy Croy
Nielsen, Berlin /
Andreas Huber,
Vienna

that things could be different to how they are — as much as from the entertaining nature of the presentation.

One can also detect a proximity to musicals in video works such as *Hospital Bone Dance*, *Hey Produktion* (2001) or *Held Down* (2003), in the way they link the utopian to the affective.³ In his text ‘Entertainment and Utopia’ (2002), Richard Dyer describes the musical genre’s capability to entertain as one in which a transformative energy, an affective force, takes effect on real life, on things as they are, as shown in film.⁴ This affective power transforms not only space but also the persons and actions within it. In Dyer’s formulation, this movement runs from being extensively representative to extensively non-representative, opening a utopian space by means of qualities specific to film (and art) — colour, texture, movement, rhythm, etc. Society’s (real) shortcomings are thus confronted with the possibility of a different life: abundance instead of shortage; energy instead of exhaustion; intensity instead of blandness; transparency instead of manipulation; community instead of alienation.

The utopia evoked by entertainment, however, is not one that translates into proposals for political restructuring of the real world, but rather it has the potential to enable feelings that things *can* be different, that things *can* change. Dyer explains: ‘the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. [...] It presents, head on as it were, what the utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised.’⁵

The joke appears to me as a constitutive and recurring approach in Hopf’s video works, sculptures, installations and drawings. But what can the joke actually achieve? How does it work as a social sense? And finally, how does it take form? In his book *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (2008), Paolo Virno notes that jokes cannot be made without words.⁶ This brings up the question of how what we see in the room — in this case sculptures and collages — can be dealt with as jokes. But although we are not dealing with language per se, we are dealing with a linguistic form, with an act of expression, with an indicating statement.

The joke, which — as might have become clear in the preceding paragraphs

3 These works, among others, are collaborations with Deborah Schamoni.

4 See Richard Dyer, ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, *Only Entertainment*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp.19–35.

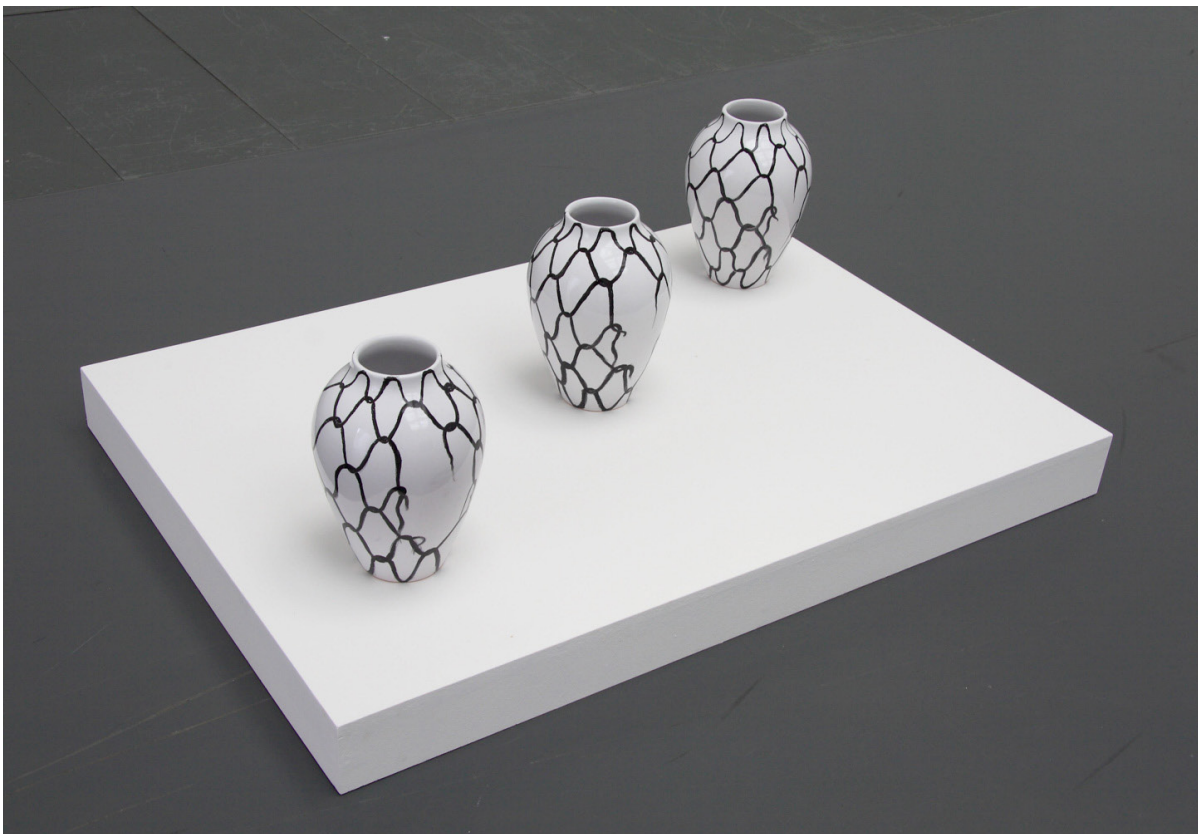
5 *Ibid.*, p.20.

6 Virno makes this observation throughout the text: ‘[W]hile the comical dimension can be completely, or only in part, non-linguistic, the joke is exclusively verbal.’ Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (trans. James Cascaito), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008, p.79.

— is for Hopf the operational mode of her artistic practice, exhibits a surprising proximity to aesthetic experience. Virno repeatedly stresses that the joke is capable of demonstrating a crisis in the production of meaning by separating rules from their application — the opening up of a gap, for instance, between grammar and regular word usage. The joke creates meaning while simultaneously undermining it. In particular, this moment of both production and subversion of meaning shows structural similarities to Juliane Rebentisch's elaborations on the specific moment of aesthetic experience in her book *Ästhetik der Installation* (2003). She describes this moment as one in which

*is equally not given as such. The materiality itself turns out to be heavily fraught with meaning and provokes the formation of new correlations. Thus the production and subversion of meaning — two forces equally opposing and enhancing each other — necessarily refer to each other.*⁷

While aesthetic experience is present throughout the simultaneous separation and potential coincidence of thing and sign — thus opening a space for a different, contingent experience of the given — the joke as a commentary on a crisis of meaning production and as a practice aims



the production of meaning in and through the artwork proves to be essentially contingent:

Any comprehensive identification of significant elements as well as their meaningful connection is ultimately not objectively justified by anything in the artwork [...] The spectator is referred back to the materiality of the artwork, which, however,

at a possible separation of application and rule. It does so by demonstrating in openly fallacious or strange combinations how a rule or convention can be applied in contradiction to what was previously anticipated.⁸

The structurally similar disposition of aesthetic experience and joke also coincides in their need for a disinterested spectator. Drawing on Freud, Virno describes the disinterested spectator as the ‘third person’

Judith Hopf, *Vasen* (Vases), 2008, 3 handpainted vases, ceramic in glass painting. Raw models by Majolica Manufaktur, Karlsruhe. Both images installation view, ‘Nose Up!’, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2008. Photograph: Remote, Karlsruhe. Courtesy Croy Nielsen, Berlin / Andreas Huber, Vienna

7 Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003, p.94. Translation Margarethe Clausen’s.

8 See P. Virno, *Multitude*, op. cit., p.163.

of the joke, the person who ultimately determines the possible success of the act by reaching a judgement about it: “The author of the joke cannot judge whether it has hit its target or if it is, instead, akin to simple nonsense. [...] So then, the disinterested spectator “has the decision passed over to him on whether the joke-work has succeeded in its task”.⁹ The joke (as well as the aesthetic experience) can be understood in the social sense of the word: the third person, the disinterested spectator, is the social marker of the scene of the joke, which depends on a common understanding, some kind of *sensus communis*, in order to be successfully

has to be some kind of common social imaginary of what is talked about, an unspoken yet accepted status quo of rules and their usual applications. And so, Virno writes: “The grammar of a life-form, that is to say “the substratum of all my searching and of all my assertions,” consists, in great measure of opinions and historicosocial beliefs. Or, if we prefer, consists of the *éndoxa* [ethics] ingrained within a determined community. And it is these certainties-*éndoxa* that return to a fluid state in the case of a crisis, thus regaining an empirical tonality.”¹⁰

Virno’s analysis of the joke’s being embedded in the collective, and its political



Judith Hopf,
What do you look like?
A Crypto Demonic
Mystery, 2006,
bamboo sticks,
glove, lining

understood. The social dimension, moreover, also implies both a negotiation of the given as well as the possibility of dissent. In both cases – in that of the joke’s belonging to the public discourse and the subject position of a disinterested subject who witnesses the gap between application and rule – certainties collapse and fixed structures are ‘liquefied’, as Virno puts it. In order for the joke – or the artwork – to be successful there

consequences, is also helpful in looking at Rebentisch’s approach to aesthetic experience. Rebentisch claims that the specific moment of aesthetic experience, or more specifically its political dimensions, lies in the disruption of our conventional knowledge and certainties, something which takes place in a moment of distancing. This creation of distance from ourselves – that simultaneously throws us back at ourselves – refers

9 *Ibid.*, p.81. Virno is quoting Freud from *Jokes and Their Relation to the Subconscious* (1905).
10 *Ibid.*, pp.155–56.

to our social stratification — as the conventional knowledge and certainties can never be a merely subjective, private matter but always imply a broader intersubjective strata, a set of unspoken and implicitly accepted rules, norms and values.¹¹ Aesthetic experience in this understanding thus shows itself as always already pervaded by mundane realms of life, and as such, basically impure.

But Virno does not focus on aesthetic experience and Rebenitsch does not focus on the joke. It is also clear that the joke does not function as a constitutive moment of aesthetic experience, nor vice versa — that aesthetic experience essentially comes into play in the form of a joke. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the capacity of the joke in the field of aesthetic experience lies in its ability to point out the conventions of the art field itself, and, by relying on them, can even bring them ‘down to a base level’. The *éndoxxa* that Virno speaks of refers to opinions, points of view, styles, knowledge and attitudes that are presupposed in the (linguistic) practice shared by a community. This is not meant in the sense of facts, but rather refers to unspoken, implicitly assumed codes, conventions and rules. Rendering these visible and re-converting them into a fluid state is the crucial intent of the joke — presuming it is successful. It is then that the joke is able — provisionally and temporarily — to re-negotiate the value of art itself, its symbolic and real capital value as well as the potential inclusions and exclusions that come with it. The joke as an everyday or ‘culturally low’ practice not only plays a role in the (essentially) impure form of aesthetic experience, it actually pushes this impurity to the foreground. While the subject is ‘potentially confronted with its social strata’ in aesthetic experience, the joke also brings into play the social aspect of art.¹² In all its structural similarities, the joke thus not only makes the impure status of ‘aesthetic experience’ visible, it also scratches and even contaminates the

serious surface that the term aesthetic experience already brings with it.

But how is the technique of the joke used here, in these specific works? What form does it take?

Hopf’s *Exhausted Vases* are particularly witty in the way that they play with the dominant narrative of art history, which has privileged the abstract over the representational, the nondescript over the expressive, and fracture over narrative. For the critics who backed Modernist abstraction in painting and sculpture — such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried — much was at stake in their choice: the autonomy of art, achieved via a path of severe self-reflexivity, and the capacity to counter the commodification of art and, especially with Minimalism, the banal, fallen objects of mass culture. This meant not only turning away from the figurative, but also opposing everything representative, narrative or expressive.¹³ The problematic reached a crisis point in Minimalism, which was understood as the simultaneous execution, completion and disruption of the Modernist programme.¹⁴ While the double presence laid out in the objective quality of Minimalist objects — neither thing nor sign, but both at the same time — was cause for the advocates of Modernism to exclude Minimalism on the base of its ‘incurable theatricality’, critics of Greenberg, Fried et al. understood this moment of theatricality as the constitutive element of a self-reflective performative distance in aesthetic experience and thus as a characteristic of *all* art.¹⁵

The established here is rooted in an implicit exclusion, which from the outset fixes figurative modern sculpture outside of the relevant discourse of (post)modernity because of its representative and potentially expressive and/or narrative aspects. The *Exhausted Vases* deal with this ambivalent history, exploring new possibilities and shifting fixed orders. The figurative is called upon while simultaneously being stripped of its representative function, remaining

11 See J. Rebenitsch, ‘Zur Aktualität ästhetischer Autonomie: Juliane Rebenitsch im Gespräch’, in *Inaesthetik: Theses on Contemporary Art*, no.0, 2008, p.116.

12 See J. Rebenitsch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, op. cit., p.289.

13 That the Minimalist practices (industrialised materials and objects, reproducibility, serial and additive logic, the simplicity of geometric forms) aimed at creating distance are also always ambivalent — unable to rid themselves of the shadow of commodified production and the future logo-culture of corporations — has been extensively discussed. See, for example, Hal Foster, ‘The Crux of Minimalism’, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996; Rosalind Krauss ‘The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum’, *October*, vol.54, Fall 1990, pp.3–17.

14 See H. Foster, ‘The Crux of Minimalism’, op. cit.

15 See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996; and J. Rebenitsch’s elaborate analysis in the chapter ‘Theatralität und die Autonomie der Kunst’, *Ästhetik der Installation*, op. cit., pp.40–78.

in a limbo of similarity: the vases *appear* to be heads while remaining objects devoid of their original function and purpose. It is a joining of unrelated and at the same time obviously similar things, a marking of the vases with an immediate comicality, a joke: the vases are like empty heads and the moment we — in our exhaustion — see them as such, we become similar to them. If the joke follows a logic, then, in Virno's words, 'erroneous modes of reasoning', 'semantic ambiguities' and 'defective correlations' are at work. It is through this erroneous mode of correspondence that the relation between subject and object becomes permeable. Seemingly fixed positions are contaminated as the status of both object and subject becomes uncertain. By positioning the inverted vases as heads atop them, the pedestals' simple geometric cubic form, reminiscent of constructivist-

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formalist design, is irretrievably twinned with the association of physicality. The cubes carry the vase, retaining the convention of a functional museum accessory, a pedestal, while at the same time becoming part of the sculpture, the abstraction of a body in variable sizes.

While production via industrial methods and the use of the series were supposed to assure distance from originality and expressivity in both Minimalist and post-Minimalist sculpture, here this 'danger' of originality and expressivity is averted in the moment of the work's affirmation. For the faces painted on the vases can also be read as the gesture of a singular marking, as they do not shy away from expressivity. Moreover, the individualisation of each piece in form and face sets them apart from the notion of a multiple. The individuality of each vase presents itself like an inventory of possible vases — any vase whatsoever, perhaps. The faces are both expressive and abstractions of a general state in modulation. Hopf continually refers to the order of making art while she has already changed it, restructuring the grammar and exploring new possibilities.

This small sculptural group, loosely filling the room, is theatrical in a straightforward sense. Like a Greek choir, the sculptures inhabit the room and together bring a subject to the stage: fatigue has taken hold of the vases and cubes, freezing them into immobile figures, making them the sheer expression of exhaustion. The function of the Greek choir was to simplify and clarify the events on stage for the audience, at times resorting to means of exaggeration. *Exhausted Vases* perform exactly this task. They appear like a reflex to current conditions, polyphonic voices of everyday life, which leave us hanging in a quite exhausted state — so many things exhausting us and all possible means seemingly exhausted. In a comedic gesture, *Exhausted Vases* reflect the fringes of a constantly sought after or requested realisation — whether of ourselves, a piece

of work or our life. The *Waiting Laptops* embed themselves in this scenario, referring to all those things

not yet switched on at our desks, already burdening us with exhaustion before we start. It is in exhaustion that the infinite scope of possibilities is revealed.

The text accompanying the exhibition relates the artwork to Gilles Deleuze's remarks on exhaustion. 'One no longer realises, even though one accomplishes something [...] one remains active, but for nothing', writes Deleuze about Samuel Beckett's plays.¹⁶ In current forms of production, in which efficiency and the mobilisation of all skills, including affect, communication and knowledge, play a central role, the call for taking a closer look at the nonsensical and aimless drifting of exhaustion, the possibility to execute something while not realising anything — neither ourselves, nor a piece of work, nor life — is made quite laconically. The joke, lastly, is the moment that deauthorises seriousness, interrupts relations of power and order while rendering them visible. It allows one to feel safe in a short-term alliance with kindred spirits. This may be one or another explanation for why the *Exhausted Vases* and *Waiting Laptops* made me feel so radically cheery.

16 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', *Essays Critical and Clinical* (trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p.153.

Translated by Margarethe Clausen.