

## Afterall

Judith Hopf, *Bambus* (*Bamboo*), 2006/09, tumblers, paper, dimensions variable. Installation view 'Nose Up!', Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2008. Photograph: Remote, Karlsruhe

Previous spread: Atelier Hopfmann (Judith Hopf and Deborah Schamoni), *Hospital Bone Dance*, 2006, video, 7min. Both images courtesy Croy Nielsen, Berlin / Andreas Huber, Vienna

### Vita passiva, or Shards Bring Love: On the Work of Judith Hopf

– Sabeth Buchmann

Judith Hopf's work over nearly twenty years mixes significant genealogies of the 1990s: conceptual/performative, object-like/installation and video and cinematic forms. Her work is shown not only in art venues, but also in the theatre, in the cinema, on the radio and at bookstores, clubs and 'off spaces'. Like others of her generation, Hopf's way of working is characterised by this decentred quality, which may be rooted partially in the gradually expanding institutionalisation

then, and in part still is, located in the 'contact zones' between artistic, pop-cultural, academic, urban and social fields. In this situation, the understanding of art as a result of a continuously accumulating studio production was not very appealing. Artists participated instead in joint activities, such as, for example, Weber's *InnenStadtAktionen* (*InnerCityActions*, 1997–98) and the *A-Clips* videos (1997, 2000 and 2003), involving artists such as Hopf, political activists, authors, musicians and others. The *A-Clips* addressed the privatisation of the city centre, the rampant expansion of consumer zones and the social effects of globalisation, and were shown at numerous cinemas in between the advertisements and the feature attractions.

Such varying mixtures of artistic, political and medial forms of production and cooperation required the participants to enact multiple roles of communication, interaction and teaching. This was also a moment in which a post-Fordist turn can be discerned in Institutional Critique. At that time there was a heightened consciousness of the significance — generally omitted by first-generation Institutional Critique — of processes of social subjectification, as theorised in the 1990s and 2000s by authors including Judith Butler, Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, Donna Haraway, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Avital Ronell, Paolo Virno and others. Their discourses found a broad reception within Berlin's politicised art context, which was informed by the necessity for new critical praxes — praxes that no longer defined themselves through the concept of a stylised counter-public who might lead the way towards greater criticality (readily identifiable types such as the class warrior, the anti-racist, the anti-sexist, etc.). Instead the goal was to reflect back on those norms and regulations contained in (post)modern artistic thinking, particularly vis-à-vis the subject.

I mention this because the influence those discourses had on artists such as

---

### Starting from its origins in the Berlin art scene of the 1990s, Sabeth Buchmann analyses Judith Hopf's idiosyncratic practice of institutional critique and object-making.

of contemporary art. This decentred quality also has to do with the specific circumstances of Berlin in the 1990s — where Hopf began working — when activities that conceived of themselves as art in the broadest sense occurred at a variety of social sites beyond the confines of art institutions. Affordable rents provided a favourable climate for the production and hosting of event spaces of all kinds, where, for a time, despite the rapid pace of the art scene's ongoing commercialisation, self-organised low-budget projects existed alongside simultaneously emerging 'young' galleries.

It was in this mood that the Free Class was founded at the Academy for Fine Arts (the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste, now the Universität der Künste), which Hopf participated in alongside such artists as Klaus Weber and Katja Reichardt (who later co-established the bookstore pro qm), as well as the future gallerist Alexander Schröder (who went on to form Neu Galerie). Amongst the Free Class's guests in those years were Renée Green, Nils Norman, Stephen Prina, Stephan Dillelmuth and others whose work was



Judith Hopf should not be underestimated, and this influence allows for a look at her idiosyncratic relationship to object production, in particular its deviation from institutional critique's repudiation of this kind of object-making.

That such discursive milieus linked to art scenes are fundamental to an understanding of Hopf's work may be seen, for example, in her salons. Hopf organised several of these in the mid to late 1990s, inviting artists, musicians, authors, costume designers and others. The salon evenings took place at b.books, a bookshop in Berlin where the artist was working at the time. They were feminist in scope, addressing the exclusionary logic of male-dominated institutions. Through these salons Hopf made clear what she thought of the gender politics of the galleries and exhibitions then taking shape in the neighbourhood of Berlin-Mitte; her opinions also applied in no small measure to the politicised off-scene, which, in a self-legitimising critique of institutional power and representational relations, overlooked the contradictions of its own gender politics, ignoring the stereotype of the classic male political activist, as well as its complicity with the market serving its own interests. Hopf opposed this by opening discussions, based on historical examples, about the opaque relationship between desire, power and resistance, which she saw as torn between artistic and political claims. The salons would relate Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas to feminist hip-hop, or slapstick performances to discourse analysis, thereby creating a space, enriched by these heterogeneous practices, for an emancipatory subjectification.

Hopf has endeavoured to make subjectivity and corporeality the objects of critical practices that go beyond existing conventions of speaking, writing and acting. Examples of this include the TV show performance inspired by Gilles Deleuze's and Pierre-André Boutang's *L'Abécédaire* (1988–89), made with the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian, as well as Hopf's filmic adaptations, produced in collaboration with Stephan Geene, of Pierre Klossowski's *La Monnaie vivante* (1970) and Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' (1853).

These performative video works seek to revise existing perspectives on models of social subjectification. 'Bartleby', for instance, opposes the idealism of a strongly resistant subject or group of people, which is usually thought to be the basis for political action. Instead Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' creates a moment of indifference considering his position. The videos also did so in the sense of Slavoj Žižek's term 'parallax': that is, taking into account that observation changes the object under examination. Hopf's works separate existing facts from their (own) interpretations, thus making visible ways of perception that cannot be reconciled with each other because of competing perspectives on the various objects under observation.<sup>1</sup>

Hopf's objects are formally permeated by such 'parallaxes', as in her sculptures made of bamboo, a room full of rain (made by installing a water jet in a corner of a gallery) and jute-and-glass palm trees, as well as in her more recent works, such as the *Waiting Laptops* (2009) and *Exhausted Vases* (2009). In their ambiguity the objects act like subgenres, with a hybridity that mixes site-specificity with homemade art, the art of the cartoon and of caricature. At the same time, a creatively democratic style is unmistakable, particularly in the materials she chooses. Bamboo and jute suggest the aesthetics of the everyday, and more the DIY-culture of the 1990s than the Pop-oriented design of 'relational aesthetics'. Hopf appears to be interested in watering down the genealogies of institutional critique and opening them up to alternative aesthetics — those ever-mocked subcultures that seek to elevate the health-food shop and other choices in the private sphere to arenas for political positions.

The context of socially and ecologically enlightened post-1968ers in which Hopf was raised also made its way into museum education programmes, such as the creative workshops of the 1970s and 80s. These programmes played a part in forming the pro-culture attitude represented in the Germany of the late 1990s by the 'New Centre' of the Social Democrats and Greens. The turn away from the conservative 1980s, breaking on the level of politics with the era of Helmut Kohl and on the level of art with the dominance

---

1 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006. With regard to the parallax, or rather the parallax gap, Žižek speaks of the confrontation between 'two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible'. *Ibid.*, p.4.

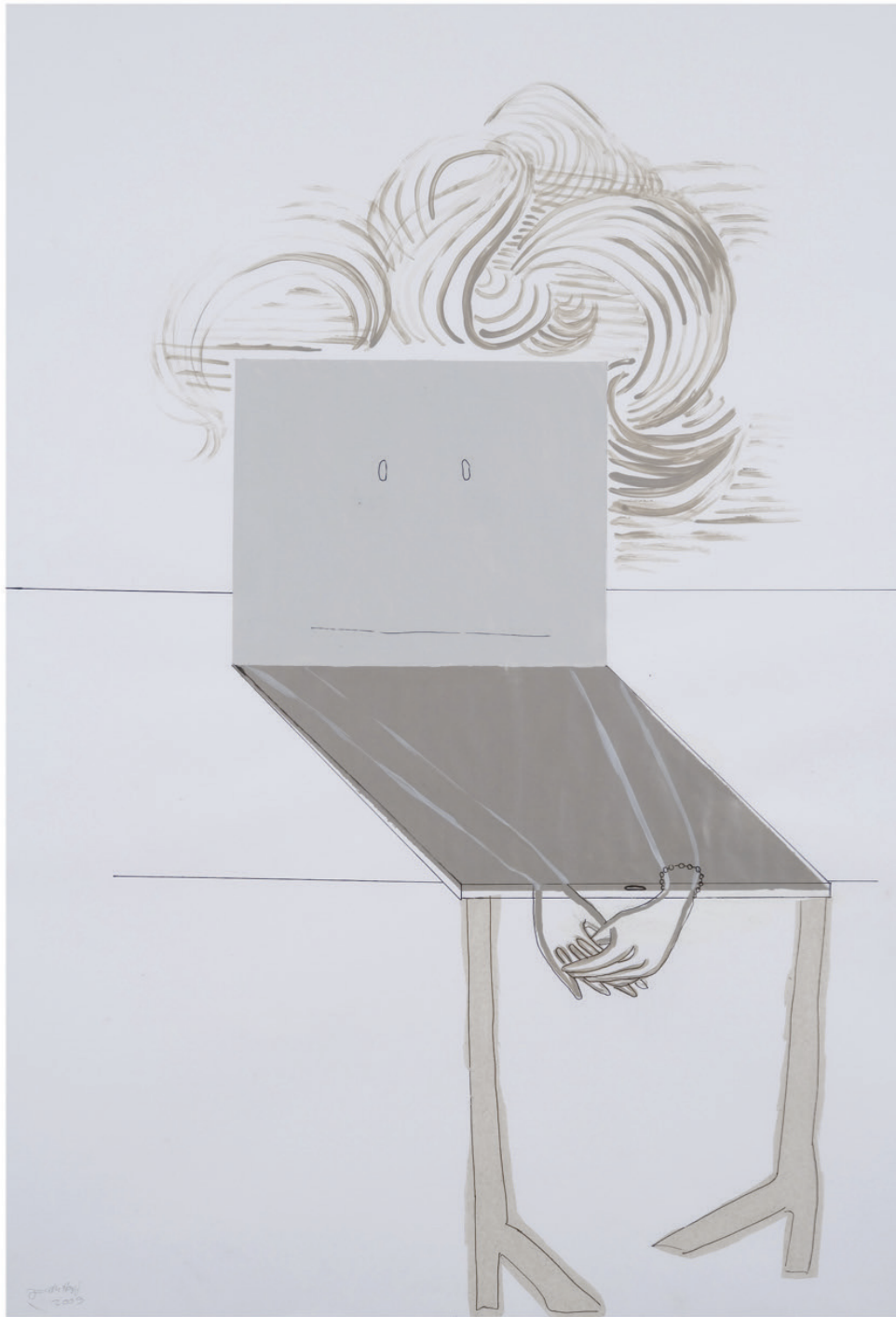


Judith Hopf,  
'Contract entre  
les Hommes et  
l'Ordinateur'.  
Installation view,  
After the Butcher,  
Berlin, 2010.  
Courtesy the artist

of *Junge Wilde* painting and neo-geometric abstraction, brought with it new approaches that were sensitive to more nuanced demands for the subject and his or her precarious identity. Such approaches also were influenced by an accelerated decline, brought on by the Left's drift towards neoliberalism, of that same middle class whose social situation was akin to that of the precarious art milieu that did not

profit from the big deals of the boom in Berlin-Mitte.

Yet it is evident that Hopf's work does not aim at such trite concepts of an 'enemy', but instead at that social milieu in which her work participates — a milieu that seeks to legitimise its claims to representation and market share through an ever-critical subjectivity, or the non-objectifiable, perception-based process through which



Judith Hopf,  
*Waiting Laptop 2*,  
2009, paint, ink,  
collage on paper,  
103 × 78cm (framed).  
Courtesy Croy  
Nielsen, Berlin /  
Andreas Huber,  
Vienna

a subject connects him or herself and is connected to certain contexts. The beliefs of that art milieu — or the willingness to call ‘beautiful’ exactly those things that are not ‘beautiful’ in an ideal sense but ‘useful’ — nonetheless did not hinder the art market from putting ‘immaterial’ values (communication, interaction) and ‘critical’ approaches (the repudiation of products) on the table for so many tens of thousands of dollars. The avant-garde credo that art must have a meaning beyond itself, and one which cannot be measured in money, easily built a coalition with neoliberal ideology: creative labour was good because its producers would also be ready to do it without reasonable compensation.

When Hopf foregoes market-oriented ‘production values’ under these conditions, she does so not in order to question object production as such, but instead to undermine it from within: her jute-and-glass palm trees, her branching bamboo creations, waiting laptops and exhausted vases parade that ridiculous sublime that has historically had the function of striking art with the weapons of its own orthodoxy. Hopf applies this strategy to the ‘critical subjectivity’ that makes itself both the resource and object of an exploitative production imperative. Her exhausted vases bring up to date W.J.T. Mitchell’s comment about the drawing *The Spiral* (1964) by Saul Steinberg, a contemporary of the Abstract Expressionists (Hopf’s vases are reminiscent, not coincidentally, of the style of the New York caricaturist):

*Saul Steinberg has described this as ‘a frightening drawing, one which ‘gets narrower and narrower’, like ‘the life of the artist who lives by his own essence. He becomes the line itself and finally, when the spiral is closed, he becomes nature’. Steinberg gives us an artist’s reading of the drawing, a reading from inside. He sees this as a terrifying, sublime image of the danger in self-reflexive art. But there is another view of the drawing which comes from the outside. From this angle, the drawing is not ‘art,’ but a New Yorker cartoon; it is not sublime but ridiculous.*<sup>2</sup>

Hopf’s vases thus are not messages of cultural pessimism in a bottle, but rather humorously faulty interventions into the blind spot that prevents us from distinguishing between meanings of the ‘is’ and the ‘is possible’. It is precisely this distinction that comprises the works’ crucial fluctuation between facticity and virtuality, between the ‘real thing’ and the fiction of a ‘real thing’: the ‘vases’ are literally empty vessels that are connoted with artisanal creativity, yet they appear to abolish that ideal ‘weight’ of the sublime that wishes to be ascribed to works of substance.

Those who want to interpret such objects in light of Hopf’s background in the politicised post-Conceptualism of the 1990s must be given pause, however, by her obvious idiosyncrasy with regards to aesthetically dystopian objects. In her works, we encounter things and facts with a reality that appears to be abolished in the perishable fiction of an existence outside of our relationship to them. The form of the objects corresponds to the (self-)formation of a subjectivity over which we can hardly be confident of our powers. It presumably is no coincidence that conditions of passivity linger in the ‘waiting’ and ‘exhausted’ objects — as in her film *Bartleby* (1996), in which the famous ‘I would prefer not to’ is voiced by an employee of an advertising agency, that is, in a ‘creative industry’.

Titles of works such as *Exhausted Vases* and *Waiting Laptops* display an indivisibility between the world of objects and the world of subjects that brings to mind the concept, following Thierry de Duve, of ‘performative appearance’. This concept should be understood in correspondence with ‘allegorical appearance’, the term Marcel Duchamp coined in relation to his ready-mades. Performative appearance takes into account the fact that inherent in an art object’s existence is a principal alterity of its appearance and meaning. The parallaxic gaze is thus a means of regulation anchored in the object, dependant on that physically experienced but at the same time non-objectifiable boundary between the economies of (immaterial) meaning and (material) evaluation. Upon this boundary, decisive for the art system’s stability, Hopf’s

---

2 W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Metapictures’, *Picture Theory*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp.40—41. Steinberg’s quote within the text comes from Harold Rosenberg’s text for the Whitney Museum catalogue, *Saul Steinberg*, New York: Knopf, 1978, p.19.

---

objects, drawings, performances and texts summon up modes of the subjective that at the same time thematise the reciprocal interfolding of artistic and social conditions of production.

Hopf's objects, like the 'queer' spatial installations of Henrik Olesen, produce corporeal relationships that we enter into and which mark off room for us to physically manoeuvre within. We must look up to the jute-and-glass palm trees, always caricaturing the human measure of things, to comprehend their abnormal, outsized perspective. One must bend down — as I did recently at the small, non-commercial Berlin gallery *After the Butcher* — to look at the *Waiting Laptops*, fanned out like ten-pack postcards, encouraging us to grasp our fragmented physicality: they bring to mind the body of the round-the-clock laptop user, or, with her towers of glasses, the body of the time-waster and drinker. Or it is the physicality of the artist who now only communicates in networks in which friends are constituted by mutual likes — a Facebook economy. It must rain from the ceiling to the floor in order for the exhibition space to be closely examined as a place in which very not matter-of-fact things (have to) happen; we must think introspectively about the exhausted vases in order to recognise in them those designs that have grown up in ourselves. Art, aware of its complicity with the dominant economy of signs and meanings, has made us into objects of productive reception, objects in which we recognise the source code for our '(self-)critical' subjectivity.

The nimble and trenchant humour served up by Hopf's works, with their testimonials of visibly exaggerated everyday meaning, demonstrates the readiness of producers and recipients to overlook the fact that economy of production is the expression of an overambitious belief in art. Perhaps it is the (self-)recognition in this irrational belief in productivity that prompts laughter on seeing Hopf's works — a laughter that could also be a defensive reaction to the conflicts summoned up by her object scenarios, which prompt questions about how art (today) is produced, received and distributed, and directly address the problem of recognising the bad and often irrational condition of artistic production and functioning as a producing artist. In this way, Hopf's caricature-like secularisation

of art objects sheds light on their logic of utilising human capital for spectatorship and production, allowing us as mere passive participants to perceive our role as active users.

Against this background, Hopf's material aesthetics also takes on the function of literally objective (self-)reflection. Palm trees can thrive even under adverse conditions, and bamboo, though it bends, does not easily break. And the water tumblers, should they be shattered into shards by bibulous party guests, will bring good luck according to German superstition. The aesthetic form signifies its economy: Hopf's objects short-circuit themselves with those economies of signs and meanings within which they are (re-)produced and consumed. The 'added value' is in the surplus of perspectives that we gain on art as a potential opportunity for winning back the public beyond the dictates of 'sensible production'. This may be the basis for Hopf's interest, typical of institutional-analytical forms of production, in multiple enactments of roles. Thus most of her performances and films mime characters who display a structural affinity to the role of the artist: an advertising director, a female master of ceremonies, a nurse, a *flâneuse*, a zombie, a female horse trainer, a female curator.

Reminiscent of Andrea Fraser's performances is the fact that Hopf uses appropriated roles to highlight those 'non-visible' institutional formalities that comprise artistic producers' existence — an existence structured by gender, class, milieu, age, habit, appearance and degrees of being informed and networked — in relation to how art is ideologically constituted. Conceptual art concerned with institutional critique in the 1990s was characterised by a shift from author-centred object production towards performative forms of production. In Hopf's case, this is made into the object of reflection on those economies that claim the artistic subjectivity's most personal terrain as something that must be consumable.

This is the background against which Hopf's negation of both the neoliberal commandment to produce and the neoconservative return to the individual artwork could be understood — two positions that, as strategies of post-institutional critique and neo-institutional critique have shown, can easily merge with one another.

Instead of this, what I have termed ‘performative appearance’ suggests a rift between precarious conditions of production and the expectations of an art scene long since returned to its core business. The intensifying pressures of career and success that burdened by the mid-1990s a generation born in the late 1960s — a generation then in the process of taking leave of its youth — caused the already fragile alliances between art and discourse, art and politics, and art and partying to decay into more-or-less segregated micro-scenes. Also contributing to this was the loss in stature of still-hyped forms of social praxis, the resonance of which can be heard not only in Judith Hopf’s salons, but also in her sculptures, drawings, objects, performances and films. For the critique of the topos of ‘context’<sup>3</sup> that Juliane Rebentisch presented on the occasion of ‘Messe20k’<sup>4</sup> in 1996, for example, Hopf created a drawing of folding chairs set up in a circle — a laconic

**Waiting Laptops, fanned out like ten-pack postcards, encourages us to grasp our fragmented physicality: they bring to mind the body of the round-the-clock laptop user.**

image for the design of a scene characterised by a fundamentally dystopian relationship to the new, camp aesthetic then beginning to infiltrate the art world.

I well remember the cleavage that Hopf often thematised at that time. On the one side were the artist friends who, after a phase of collective projects, had moved onto studio practices and proceeded to profit from the art scene that they had sought to distinguish themselves from not long before. On the other side were the collective projects that allowed only limited space for artistic forms of production that did not commit themselves to decidedly political content. Hopf’s works participated then, as they participate now, in both worlds — they are shown with equal frequency in the institutional art context

and in self-organised spaces — and they appear to derive their idiosyncratic position from just this basic conflict. It is the ‘campness’ celebrated in the latter half of the 1990s that Hopf’s objects carry with them, like the sometimes visible, sometimes invisible trace of a counter-normalising politics of the body — a trace that manifests itself in her drawings’ organic, crystalline ornaments, made up out of growing, floating and meandering patterns, and which also permits aesthetic preferences and subjective taste to be read as an expression of a demarcation of her always institutional critique-inflected negation.

Hopf’s fundamental idea of art is as Other to prevailing discourse, as she remarked at a series of short films organised by film curator Ian White for this year’s Berlinale film festival. There she took on the role of a speaker giving a talk. Mimicking the avant-garde *gestus* of one proclaiming a new movement, she read out her manifesto ‘Contract entre les hommes et l’ordinateur’:

*1: An urgent situation has arisen through the evolution of my body and spirit in relation to the use of instruments — specifically of the electronic data-processing machine — which compels me, in the full tradition of earlier revolutions, to socially revive the philosophy of emancipation.*

Yet then — as at her salons that inspired us all in Berlin at that time — and as now, Hopf has always made corporeal experience, which the dominant norm holds to be irregular, the point of departure for her relationship to the world of objects. She does not reclaim sublime consciousness. Her message tells us that what is comprised by this dimension of our subjectivity is rather ridiculous, for, as her manifesto concludes:

*WE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING  
YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING  
[...]  
I AM NOTHING  
OHO  
WITHOUT LOVE.<sup>5</sup>*

3 See by Rita Baukrowitz and Karin Günther (ed.), in collaboration with Gunter Reski, Stephan Dilleuth and Thaddäus Hüppi, *Team Compendium: Selfmade Matches. Selbstorganisation im Bereich Kunst*, Hamburg: Kellner Verlag, 1994, p.179.

4 A counter-fair organised in 1996 by Alice Creischer, Stefan Dilleuth, Dierk Schmidt, Andreas Siekmann and others that took place in parallel with ‘Unfair’, a fair organised by the then-successful young Cologne gallery scene, and which sought to differentiate itself from the Art Cologne fair.

5 Quoted from The Magnetic Fields, ‘The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure’, *69 Love Songs*, 1999.