

Sculpting Stage Fright

a conversation with Lisa Robertson

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Kairos Time



Micha Zweifel



I know you hate the talk. And even more the personal address. Proximity is not what you strive for; it's rather something like mutual disagreement. We both know that the romantic idyll is an idea of the past, pitiful and embarrassing. But it was romantic, the scenery there by the gravel pit and how we trespassed the fences to take walks along the conveyor of Alsatian pebbles. If the last time we met we split in mutual embarrassment, to make you feel inferior wasn't my intent. It came over me like a blur, a lack of a clear outline. If anything, what I love about this friendship is our ability to meet beyond representation.

Installation
2013–2014



Sculpting Stage Fright

Micha Zweifel [MZ] with Lisa Robertson [LR]

Setting: Micha Zweifel's installation in Kairos Time.

In place of a title this short paragraph accompanied the work—> p.65

LR In this installation you have three sculptures made of very thin plywood. They are standing, rather tenuous in their uprightness. We could say the plywood sculptures are teetering, they could move at any time. And you have two seated sculptures made from woven strips of foam, the kind used for cheap mattresses. They are seated on plastic lawn chairs and wear shoes. If thinking about a gesture, associated with the two seated sculptures it's more like flopping, a gesture of exhaustion. So you set up a gestural tension in between these groups right away, between a teetering and a flopping.

MZ The wooden sculptures could be described as being close to exhaustion too. They are made from two thin sheets inserted into one another. They hold each other upright, but only under great precariousness, a possibility to fold into each other, to flop at any moment. The foam pieces are more relaxed in gesture—a seated-ness for the time it takes. Speaking about gestures, I like to think of a sculptural



practice in terms of *contrapposto*, and the shifting of weight from one leg to another. Ease and tension, shifts between visceral material and speculative thought. The concept of gesture is fleeting, momentary itself. How would you describe gesture?

LR My relationship to the work is the one of a viewer. In a viewer's relationship to figural sculpture there is always a kind of mimetic projection. Some of this has to do with the kind of stance that you described as alert, yet resting contrapposto, which is also the typical stance you take as viewer in a gallery space. This is a doubling and an extra receptiveness, which happens mimetically and is gestural. My bodily movement is projected into the work, is intuited into it.

MZ Gesture then could be that mimetically social relationship between the subjectivities that enter the work, a bodily and communicative way of experiencing gesture.

LR In that sense is sculptural gesture almost moving into theatrical movement and communication?

MZ Sculptural work stages suggestions and possibilities for experience. Gestures are slippery, hard to pin down in terms



of beginning or end. In contrapposto, the flexible leg is gestural in its crucial relation to the fixed weight-bearing one. It is a bodily movement that marks and suggests a particular kind of relation.

LR Before you said that I had never heard of the relation between suggestion and gesture. I think another trait of gesture is its situatedness, it happens somewhere, from a particular position. So just as it has a relation to a site, it has a relation to a potential other. Which is why I perhaps brought in the idea of theater.

MZ Connected to situatedness, what interests me about gesture and theater is that gesture can be repeated, re-enacted and re-interpreted. I have always been interested in the idea of repertoire, which I understand as given scores, movements, and motifs. The gesture then, the way these concepts are activated, gives them their momentary and qualitative particularity. For this work, I took most concepts and aesthetic languages directly from the cultural context of the site and landscape where my process originated: an idealistic summer camp in Alsace I co-organized last year. Characters from local popular media, but also architectural features like the architectural trusses and the color palettes of the



houses, play a role in the installation. This repertoire helps to address the questions of the fabrication or authenticity of a local scenery and image.

LR Here, let's address the relation of this work and its making to the living experience at Hégenheim. In deciding to stay with this resistant texture of the summer—problems of a kind of frustrated collectivity—you ran inevitably into the problem of duration. You also said that it was the same duration that presented representational and conceptual problems, which you address through the in-between spaces of translation and metaphor.

MZ Over the course of the process that led to this work I observed the pace at which I was working. A lot of things are produced quickly, provisionally. And after that, it takes time to get to know each other. The process of making stuff is a way of letting things fall out of their natural flux, form is de-familiarized and becomes tangible. Not unlike the process of shifting one's attention from what one is doing to how one is doing it. Michael Polanyi mentions stage fright as an example of this shift of attention. Losing focus on what one wants to express and observing too closely how one is doing it renders a tool (voice, medium, gesture) into



an uncontrollable object, a stutter, for instance. Metaphors are uncontrollable too. I understand making objects not as a smooth prolongation of a thought process or concept but as a series of interruptions, resistances and the resulting distortion. In that sense my work is this sort of metaphorical process, which eventually finds a place in a text or sculptural assemblage. Working with those resistant objects really is a social process. Relations of meaning are exposed through continuous tension and reconstitution, and implicate an ethics of precariousness and vulnerability. It's my hope that these dynamics can gain the necessary momentum to spin them out of a two-way representational passivity.

LR This notion of precariousness also comes into the way Roland Barthes uses Benveniste's *rhuthmos* in speaking of communities. The book that was structured around Barthes' first course at the Collège de France 'How to Live Together', I know played a strong role in the organization of your summer camp. Barthes uses this word *idiorhythmy* in order to talk about forms of collectivity, forms of community that occur outside of any rule or law and nevertheless maintain a character of collectivity. This is very much to do with the form of social experiment that you've set up in Hégenheim and has probably quite a lot to do with your



frustration and your results of that, because of collectivity's overwhelming tendency to not adhere to law, to express itself otherwise.

MZ An enduring emotion of the last summer has been one of endlessness, and a difficulty and confusion about what it means to give form and shape to social space and practices. How do I recognize or defer form? What are ethical implications of shaping the social processes that Barthes talks about in terms of customs, rules and laws? Can form in social processes be experienced and thought through sculpture and material means? Can sculptural work be permeated by or even exchanged with the questions that motivate experiments in living together? It makes sense to me that using metaphors – to take an example from one realm and to move it into another – can be a way of understanding the transformation of social environs. A language proper to a particular topos might, paradoxically, be metaphorical. The metaphorical transportations and suspense allow for doubt, relationality, and subjectivity. Maybe form can only be looked at relationally.

LR To come back to what you've just said, that form can only be looked at as relational, seems to me a good moment to



quote my favorite writer: Emile Benveniste. I know you've read his essay on rhythm. One of the things that his contextualization of *rhuthmos* in early Greek culture characterized is that *rhuthmos* is the form taken in the instant by something that is moving. Not only is form durational or in movement but it is form that really expresses the individual character of that movement. This older meaning of *rhuthmos* or rhythm added back into your thinking really seems to come through in your installation and also in the thinking around gesture and ethics, as well as the question of duration.

MZ My questions and my fascination with sculpture's immobility led me to working with exactly that. I see this resistance in time as a potentially productive force to work with. How can movement or a narrative sense be formulated through sculptural tension? To come back to your question: time, timing, and tact, I think, trigger interruption and change, and both are fundamental to how I understand form. The concept of *rhuthmos* comes close to what we've talked about earlier – the question of gesture. For me a gesture is this formulation over time, like an eyeliner of an ethics. In terms of rhythm and tact, repertoire and ethics, I really learn a lot from music, for instance the work of musician Howe Gelb. He has a strong ethics in the way he continues



to re-interpret his own musical material beyond borders of genres. Each time, playing a song is re-inventing it, and this can fail. It is this place of preparation, not specifically but as an attitude of risk, the 'perhaps', and hospitality that I want to propose and maintain in the work I am making. Form at the edge of disfiguration can present itself as such. That is why I think precariousness and vulnerability matter.