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Land, Land!

Object of Desire: Modest Models of Infinity

He said, "The sea is blue or green ...". He said, "*fallacious skies or sunburn, sensation or the anomaly of blue*". He said, "the word *rose*, then after a rest, appeared to say *low* and something which sounded like *perilous tide*". The characters in *Shore Leave*, a story by Gregor Hens which is stated below, utter, at once cautiously, once clearly, once only murmuring, what happens between departure and arrival, between water, sky and land.

In the innocence of a sunny morning, the horizon emerges clear over the water; in the open sky sudden onsets, the common and ordinary intertwine and darken. Trembling in laconic statements. The works of Helen Mirra, Rivane Neuenschwander and Katja Strunz are without frills as well. We encounter mostly black, angular structures: crystalline unfoldings in geometrically-composed eruptive states by Katja Strunz. Numerous seascapes, which Rivane Neuenschwander found at street markets, are strung together, forming a horizon in the room. While we cross the water, the sky is our constant companion. Helen Mirra lays it at our feet with *Sky-wreck* (2001).

We find ourselves on a journey, in a state of transition, of passage, of transfer. Under way, the world continually renews itself. As such, a feeling of incomprehensibility holds sway. Vast is the horizon; unfathomable the movement of the ocean and the depth of the sky. "It is clear that infinity – if it is not singular, but rather boundless – can not be defined as a conceptual standard, so that the project to recognize it through adaptation of finite reason is impractical from the beginning. Less risky is the more modest model, which attempts to construct partial models."¹ Laconic speech and sculptural works without frills as modest models.

Sight and intellect comprehend only partially. Katja Strunz collages fragments to malleable, uniformly color-coated bodies. Found pieces of wood, metal and other paraphernalia from abandoned apartment furnishings and urban refuse, as well as yellowed pages from magazines and books, form the point of departure for her sculptures and works on paper. Nostalgia, yearning and brittle darkness – a *memento mori* – surround her abstract sculptural and graphical works. Symbolically, ships surface repeatedly. An early work, *Assemblage* (1998), refers directly to Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* (1824). Rhomboids and triangles are stacked on one another, wedged together, tumbling over one another. In the newly created whole, fragments gape through: partial sight, kaleidoscopic arrangements, endless returns. The

1 Scacchitano, Antonello (2001). *Wissenschaft als Hysterie. Das Subjekt der Wissenschaft von Descartes bis Freud*

single pieces inherent in the collage spin throughout the exhibition, while the sculptures move within their own compositional field. Similar to the words: *-today-, -is-, -not-, -yesterday-*, which are schematically descriptive of a square and are removed from syntax, new semantic connections are brought to play.

"The subject is finite. The object of desire is infinite. The subject experiences the object only as a finite component and, in fact, only the one which it contains in its own finiteness. In this manner this component repeats itself infinitely; the other component, the infinite rest, remains unconscious, not even suppressed, and is predetermined to never touch consciousness."²

Fragments, small paper scraps are smuggled into an ant city by Rivane Neuenschwander (*World/Word*, 2001, with Cao Guimarães). Some scraps carry the inscription *word*, others, *world*. Terms affiliated to infinity. Which words create which world or, conversely, which world creates which words? We encounter words, at times Portuguese, at others, German, on paper boats placed in front of the seascapes (*Improper Seascape [Coming and Going]*, 2002). We drift between Belo Horizonte, the artist's home, and Basel, the exhibition's location. The flow captured. Witnesses of unconscious actions, the artist elevates to original sculptures: a rubber band wrapped around an empty pack of cigarettes, objects from cork and toothpicks (*Involuntary Sculptures [Speech acts]*, 2001/02). While consciousness guides animated discussions, the unconscious acts and forms ephemeral classification models and worlds. The artist captures the byproducts of active trade, in which presence and absence simultaneously manifest themselves. She allows insects and other small animals to become protagonists in the genesis of her works or finds the alphabet in the cityscape: a "B" in a pot being sold at the market, an "H" on a street sign (*BH [Belo Horizonte]*, 2002).

Dampened shades, blue for water and sky, green and brown for land, describe the area Helen Mirra takes us through in her works. The sky is constructed of triangular forms of indigo cotton. Paul Celan's poem "Breathturn", which speaks of sky wrecks, and Buckminster Fuller's geodesic system, which represents the sphere in constructive geometry, are reference points in this sculpture. Mathematics, geometry and geography, cultural and political models – next to Fuller and Celan, as well as Samuel Beckett (*Becket*³,

2 *ibid*, p. 94.

3 This refers to both Samuel Beckett and a becket, which is a turn in a small river.

2001) or Quaker activists (*Elm/Elias*, 2002) encounter the application of simple craft to textile, sound and film material. Speed and sound quality of the guitar change analogously to topography (*Maps of Parallels 41°N and 49°N [at a scale of ten seconds to one degree]*, 2002, with Ernst Karel). Text and the progression of colors on 16 mm cloth ribbons describe landscape and its story. The artist adopts the fact that we perceive the world through our five senses. These she handles as fragments. The individual sensory elements overlap one another in loops: We walk along social theories and poetry in the room; we hear topography, we read film and feel fugitive natural phenomena.

"The finite subject faces the infinite object. The infinite is the real object of the modern age. Science attempts to grasp it with objective methods (mathematics, physics, biology), psychoanalysis with subjective methods (free associations). The subject experiences the infinite object as the cause of its own desire. It can never truly know the object. Because the finite is never commensurate with infinity ... This discrepancy between knowledge and being, I call the unconscious."⁴

The fascination of nature as symbol of constant variability. Therein, the journey as picture of motion and passage. Observation of the ephemeral, the uncontrollable and infinite. The fragmenting glance that brings forth crystalline forms, splinters and puzzles. The transition towards comprehensive systems, geometry, language, biology or social theory likewise. The tendency towards synesthesia. In their works Helen Mirra, Rivane Neuenschwander and Katja Strunz lean towards the ideas of the Romantics. With Caspar David Friedrich a key figure has already been mentioned. Robert Smithson, Bas Van Ader or Felix Gonzalez Torres can be seen as further reference points. The three artists choose a foothold – whose quality lies with simple methods – laconic language – that bring submerged and hidden, continually present and unknown knowledge to light.

Land, Land is the title of an autobiographical work in which the author, Sándor Márai, pursues memories of his home.⁵ The punctuation in *Land, Land!* signals arrival. Suddenly, on the distant horizon, that which is not yet here or has just vanished, surfaces. Continually recurrent desire.

Translated by Christine Rutt

⁴ *ibid*, p. 158.

⁵ Sándor Márai, *Land, Land, A Memoir*, Budapest 2001.