

HUMANITY'S LAST HOPF

Mikael Brkic on Judith Hopf at Kunst-Werke Berlin



"Judith Hopf: Stepping Stairs," KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2018, installation view

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote in his final book, "The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century": "In retrospect it is clear that the project of avant-garde revolution was doomed to failure from the outset, both by virtue of its intellectual arbitrariness and by the nature of the mode of production the creative arts represented in a liberal bourgeois society."¹ In Judith Hopf's exhibition "Stepping Stairs" at Kunst-Werke (KW) Berlin, both intellectual arbitrariness and creative art's modes of production are once again being put to the test. Whether this amounts to sinking or swimming only time will tell, but these very same means might ultimately point to another end, one which previous, failed attempts were unable to realize.

The core of Hobsbawm's critique of the avant-garde rests in what he sees as the failure of their proclamations to result in actually changing the world. Although there are no such bombastic claims directly associated with Hopf's exhibition, there are subtle and not-so-subtle cues throughout, which hint at taking up a legacy of avant-gardism. If so, where does this project originate in Hopf's practice? One possible point of departure for "Stepping Stairs" is provided by an eponymously titled text authored by Hopf for a reader accompanying the exhibition. In the text, Hopf recalls one of those grayest of gray Berlin days, where what one witnesses of the heavens barely qualifies as weather. The dreadful conditions of the skies are described by Hopf as

directly contributing to a situation on the ground, a first hint at how Hopf understands the complex relationship between urban space, memory, and the body. A similar complexity is suggested by the works in the exhibition as well.

Walking into the show, after passing through a couple of LED strips hanging from the ceiling, "Untitled (Email Lines)" (2016), we encounter the video work "Lily's Laptop" (2013), a remake of Roméo Bosetti's "Le Bateau de Léontine" (Betty's Boat). For Hobsbawm, film did far more in terms of changing how reality is perceived and interpreted than frame- and pedestal-work, and Hopf's videos acknowledge and celebrate the revolutionary and emancipatory accomplishments of film in their own peculiar fashion. In "Lily's Laptop," a short narrative film about an au pair flooding a modernist home to determine if her laptop can swim, we are confronted with a filmic logic that makes sense on the screen or cutting board, but which translates into real-world absurdities or impossibilities when acted out. This is true of several of Hopf's video works. Highlighting early special effects, for instance, is a small but effective gesture that demonstrates how audiences themselves are participants in the collective suspension of disbelief. With Žižekian bravura, it pinpoints how ideology, deceit, and belief all work together to create a consensus reality.

The utopian potential demonstrated in film – making impossibilities possible – is carried over in a work of sculpture as well. "Ball in Remembrance of Annette Wehrmann" (2016) is a ball of bricks: the literal building blocks of walls, houses, separation, and isolation transformed into the most geometrically perfect movable object, mobilization par excellence. "Ich arbeite mit Situationen," said Annette Wehrmann in one of

the videos documenting her practice presented at KW in conjunction with the exhibition, placing herself firmly within the genealogy of a neo-avant-gardist tradition. While explicitly referring to the Situationist techniques of *détournement* and *dérive*, Wehrmann's practice also emphasizes the creation of new situations to discover and uncover potential realities hidden in the cracks of everyday life. To that end, a Situationist-style approach is also clearly encapsulated in Wehrmann's original version of the brick balls, which – by the looks of it – acquired their less than perfectly round shape from actually being pushed around, whereas Hopf's remakes of the balls are industrially cut, hewed, and perfectly produced. The difference in the production methods perhaps suggests a willingness to enter into a global supply chain, acknowledging the current situation, no longer beating around the bush with regard to contemporary modes of production.

With the series "Untitled (Laptop Men)" (2018), Hopf has also reproduced a work of her own, again to industrial perfection. Whereas the original was made of wood, the current incarnation contains sheets of metal welded together, forming human stick-figure silhouettes – sitting, lying, standing, leaning, and huddling with laptops – highlighting the device as an extension of both being and body. These newer versions of prior works seem in an odd way to be poking fun at the liberal dogma of self-optimization and self-realization, including the ways in which we cope with their logic of production, including coming to terms with the notion that those tools are most likely operating us, and not vice versa. In the reader one can also find a previously published manifesto of Hopf's where she proposes to use love as protection in the face of possible future



Judith Hopf, "Lily's Laptop," 2013, film still

struggles against machines. We can only summarize that it's still yet to be determined if artificial intelligences can develop a sense of humor.

Ha-ha-ha.

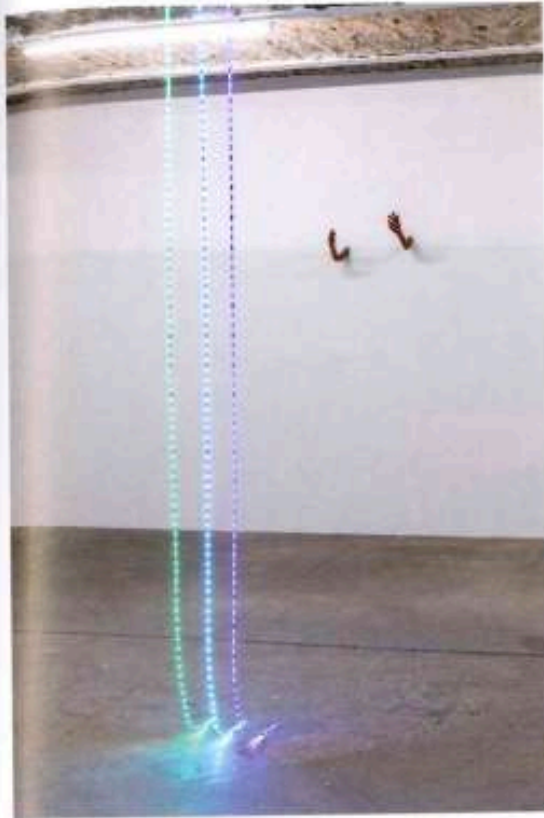
Now, situations, both in general and the one we find ourselves in at the moment, are fragile things. In another of the videos documenting Wehrmann's practice, a bewildered spectator-accomplice asks, "Wie hat ein Mensch so eine Idee?" during the assembly of the titular *Fakirtüte*: an object/situation in which a plastic bag is filled with water and has needles inserted into it, while still holding the fluid. Poking around too much just might burst the bubble. Is this what Hobsbawm called intellectual arbitrariness?

Although no situationist, Hopf also recruits a third compatriot in the exhibition, who worked to change the situation in his own field and who succeeded as well, to a certain degree: John Hejduk. Hejduk, a much-loved architect, is known for his uncompromising language of the built environment, often at odds with what is conventionally considered architecture. In the exhibition, audiences are introduced to his building "Berlin Masque," through the video "OUT

(2018)," as well as in the work on display in KW's courtyard.

"Berlin Masque" was built on the occasion of the International Building Exhibition between 1986 and 1988, and demonstrates absolutely no regard for the guidelines provided by Critical Reconstruction.³ Hejduk's original plans included not only the building, but the entire area between Stresemannstraße and Friedrichstraße. Going against the grain has its price. Upon seeing one of Hejduk's constructions at Martin-Gropius-Bau, fellow "New York Five" architect Peter Eisenman remarked that Hejduk's work couldn't even be called architecture, because you couldn't get into them, to which Hejduk replied: "You can't get into them." As he then explained: "[Eisenman] was not in the position to get into them, because he did not understand that you can only get into something if you understand or are willing to."³

The site or battle ground of the Situationist strategies was located in realities described as situations, and the limits of those situations, like we see demonstrated in the little anecdote about Hejduk, carry in their delineation not only dogmatic views (a lack of fantasy), but also belief sys-



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tems, ideologies. Working to change any situation in minor or major ways will require a mobilization on all fronts. In this sense, "Stepping Stairs" does a lot to point to the beginnings of work, the building of a new situation. Indeed, one of the brick sculptures literally points upward to what is referred to in the exhibition text as an ambiguous meaning. Another brick sculpture, shaped like a pear, suggests perhaps low-hanging or windfall fruit; reaping benefits with minimal labor.

Prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution for how art would effectively be mobilized, or suggesting that it directly change the world, leaves a bitter taste on most palettes. With or without the legacy of the avant garde, art is already part and parcel of the creation of reality, world-building by virtue of its categorical existence and the nature of how it intersects with people through their relation to labor. Denying art any social agency seems theoretically absurd, not to mention the act of having to create a new term or moniker for a "socially

aware" art. Art itself probably only changes of its own accord, but what about its social context? The social context of art can no doubt for many artists and galleries be described as exclusive, intimidating, and even exploitative. And if you do "get in," it might involve money-laundering, financial speculation, and short selling. Perhaps the social context of art simply is itself anti-social?

Elsewhere in his aforementioned book, Hobsbawm refers to Gerald Reitlinger's assertion that "Art as an investment is a conception scarcely older than the early 1950s."⁴ Reminding ourselves that no situation is necessarily given might be the biggest takeaway from "Stepping Stairs." Respectively, the show offers many thoughts, proposals, and ideas, particularly in concert with the reader and the surrounding program. Another singular piece in the show, which does not intersect with any of the outlines given here, is a couple of abject arms emphatically stretching out of the wall, as if begging for something. Their placement, however, is so high up that the arms are simply out of reach.

"Judith Hopf: Stepping Stairs." KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, February 10–April 15, 2018.

Notes

- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, London 1995, p. 160.
- 2 Critical Reconstruction is a theory of architecture and urbanism developed by Josef Paul Kleihues, first utilized for the International Building Exhibition, then later for the reconstruction of the city after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- 3 In conversation with David Shapiro. From: John Hejduk, "Builder of Worlds" (1992), directed by Michael Blackwood.
- 4 Gerald Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste*, vol. 2, New York 1982, p. 14.