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Reto Pulfer, *Ofaz 1442. Performance with Sofa*. “Die Gunst der Sunde, die Kunst der Wunde” Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris., 2007-2008

Courtesy: Balice Hertling, Paris and the artist.

Reto Pulfer - Some whales and some ways of installing a sculpture

by David Lewis

A dictionary, wrote Bataille, begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words but their tasks. The same could be said of Reto Pulfer’s works: it is not a matter of what they mean, but rather of how they are to be used. What are their functions? What systems do they construct, and are they constructed by? The discussion that follows began as an attempt to fashion some first entries in Pulfer’s “dictionary” – a sketch, or first draft, of a user’s guide.

David Lewis: One of the things that might be said about your practice (an aspect that might not be obvious at first) concerns its relationship to language: not only it is about language, but, more exactly, it is structured like a language. Would you agree? Reto Pulfer: Answering in the language your question is asked: yes! But in the same way as foreign languages are not made for outsiders but for the people speaking it I would want to argue and talk about my language. Is not meant to be understood unless you spend time

learning it, or spend time in the country it is spoken. At the same time the shapes and colors are there to catch the first glimpse of the eye.

So how would someone go about learning it? What would they start with? What new habits might they want to develop? Quite some title of works give technical information: if a work has ZR in its title it means it is made with zippers and parts of it can be detached and attached in several ways. Such as the following mostly textile works: ZR Boot, ZR Der Exhibitionistische Eulenpinguin, ZR Autswaus O, ZR Potzwaus, ZR Innenzelt, ZR Der Exhibitionistische Bartpinguin, ZR Fliegzeug, ZR Spotwaus.

What else? If a work has the letter “O” in its title, it means it has “O-quality:” like the letter O, it can be rotated. As in ZR Autswaus O, O Flanktons, or O Planktoms.

And? Ofaz means a sofa: visitors can sit on it – like Ofaz so far, so good, and Ofaz 1442.

And often there are numbers in the titles: Ofaz 1442, Steinspiel in 27 Zuständen, Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen, Die 60 Zustände des Z Feld, etc. Are these also part of a system? A number in the title usually indicates the total number of different ways to install a piece. Ofaz 1442 has six wooden boards to sit on, each board can be placed in any of the six fields ($6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 = 720$), and furthermore each board can also be flipped upside-down ($720 \times 2 = 1440$). There are two guitar strings I used in the performance to make music ($1440 + 2 = 1442$).

And what is the significance of the whale (waus), like in ZR Potzwaus, ZR Autswaus O, ZR Öswaus, or ZR Spotwaus? That’s probably biographical: when I was a child I saw whales in the ocean and so this is the memory of them disappearing below the surface and sometimes surfacing. Several large textile works I did bear the syllable “waus” to indicating that this is a whale. Then there are also older drawings and prints of whales. What interests me moreover is the question of dimension: how small and how large things can be. I was brought up with microscopes in the day and looking at stars at night. This can be recalled standing next to artworks.



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You had a biologist mother and astronomer uncle? Well let's not exaggerate... I asked my father to describe his work. This is what he sent me: "I am a chemist and work as a microscopist in a service company for the life science industry. My work consists of showing or making visible the shape and surface of crystals and other small particles by light and electron microscopy and identifying unknown particles by the means of energy dispersive x-ray analysis (EDX) which gives the elemental composition of those particles". But going back to memory: it is close and far at the same time. But, most importantly, memory depends on the method you use and what you want to use it for. So yes: this is a language if language is the functioning of the brain learning to make differences, and naming and putting things into action.

And do you try to work with the process, or structure, of memory in your work? Or does it just provide material for you to transform? In the ancient world there was a division between natural and artificial memory. In my practice the later can be a mnemonic: a fantastic short story created to be recalled in mind during a performance. Or more generally a mnemonic to have in mind while physically making the work. Let me give an example. A performance of mine from 2007 had the following mnemonic. The text was never exhibited or shown previously:

- [Galerie Balice Hertling](#)

"I am in the city I have often been to, mostly in my dreams. It is a big and busy city. Then I find an entrance, I enter, then I am inside a Jungle. I am going through the jungle as a snake. I am a snake. Then I become a liana that looks like a snake. People are scared of the liana that looks like a snake, although I am a liana now. I wait, I wait for a thousand of years. I bisect in three directions."

In that sense mnemonics are parallel to the artworks. The example above is for a performance entitled *A Moment of Expression with Electric Guitar*.

So you repeat the mnemonic like a mantra when working? But how do you "use" it in a performance? In other words, when you say that the mnemonic is "for" the performance, what does that "for" mean, exactly? The "first" form of a mnemonic is not a text but something seen in your mind – just like a dream, but consciously. While performing, I can recall or think of the story the same way you may remember vividly an experience you shared with someone when seeing this person again. Later, sculptural artworks came out of the mnemonics: they are translations just as the performances are, and all are independent. In the example above it can be a snake-like sculpture. Afterwards real anachronisms take place: I put my own sculptures back into mnemonics that made me again do new sculptural works.



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So we have whales and snakes and now snakelike sculptures. Is this a coincidence? What's going on with animals in your world? And we have not yet mentioned penguins: Just as whales they change (literally speaking) from being a flying bird to swimming and from being a mammal at land to sea.

I do think there is a cosmic quality, for lack of a better word, in your work. I'm thinking of the floorpiece you showed last spring with the photograph of the Egyptian New Kingdom temple (Floorpiece # 4A and 4B), for example. Humanity's relationship to a larger whole, maybe? Yes, but it is still human beings telling the story and placing themselves within what they believe exists. Maybe it is the same with my work, which mostly concerns my perception of things.

Let's jump back to your background. You trained as an accountant? Not really: I did so-called Commercial High School which trains future accountants and the like. Not very interesting. Before that I failed a test to enter art school in Basel.

Were you making art at the Commercial High School? Yes, here and there, in spare time – as well as making music and writing. Not much different from when a child is given some color pencils at nursery school. My art is probably just like accounting: quite boring, but accurate.

But what is it accurate about, exactly? If an installation is called Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen, then it means it has 128 different ways of installing it. The performance involving with it is then just about installing it in one of the 128 different ways whereas each "Zustand" (or state) has a name made out of the letters of each element and a numeral: I think "Zustand" is quite a central term in my work. It is a German idiom for state, condition or situation, just like the French "état des choses". A "Zustand" is in itself complete but is only stable for a limited time. An entire performance can also be under the impact of one "Zustand". It is also the title of a series of small exhibitions I curated.

So each work is accurate about its own state, or Zustand? Is that what you meant by accurate? I guess we would have to ask the works themselves to find out. Each is complete and self-referential by itself. Each has its own rules. But on a larger spectrum there are overlapping rules (ZR, etc..) and mnemonics and interests. Finally, the work results in a state or "Zustand" where a viewer can look at it in whatever way he or she wishes to look at it, and I give up my authority to define what it is about. Well, that is just my theory about the functioning of the works. Of course on the other hand they are not accurate at all: I can also deliberately change the rules of the game-like works.

Lastly: what is the role of performance in all this? Instability. Just like the title of a piece from 2001: Instabile Konstruktion.

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