

Pax and Concordia, Waiting: Installation as Metaphor

Antonia Low's Production of Allegorical Spaces

Upon passing the threshold to the large room of the Remise at the Kunstverein Braunschweig, one finds oneself in the midst of a striking arrangement marked as much by architectonic recognisability as perpetual uncertainty. Sunlight presses through the six wide windows, entwining itself around something steeped in history but that unmistakably takes place in the present moment. Antonia Low has transformed the Remise into a restoration workshop. An open studio, so to speak, that turns its most hidden aspect – the work process – outwards through the medium of an exhibition. This forms the structure of the spatial installation and the exhibition of the same name, *Pax und Concordia, wartend* (*Pax and Concordia, Waiting*), which proves itself to be a compendium for representational-aesthetic and spatial-theoretical considerations of the production and presentation of art.

Four decorative sculptures of the Roman goddesses Minerva, Flora, Pax, and Concordia belonging to the original furnishings of the neoclassical Villa Salve Hospes (home of the Kunstverein) are the central elements of a new spatial hierarchy. One recognizes it immediately: Low had the more-than-two-hundred-year-old plaster sculptures, usually at rest in niches in the rotunda of the main building, transported from their plinths into the Remise. The sculptures had been damaged over the years, were painted over and mended in a makeshift fashion. Now they stand dethroned and waiting. A temporarily headless Concordia, a chipped Pax. A creased drop cloth covers the entire floor of the room, like an oversized shawl. The photograph of the rotunda printed upon it is a one-to-one reproduction of its architecture and a cross-section of the location whose perceptual coordinates Low arranges. The two sculptures to be restored take their usual places upon this two-dimensional stage-image – the niches – and emphasize the disordered spatial structure through the tilted viewing angle. A table vitrine, acting simultaneously as work and exhibition surface, and a step stool complete the Spartan interior of this temporary *mise-en-scène*, which changes continually throughout the duration of the exhibition. Following the initial exposure of the sculptures, the conservator removed, layer by layer, the traces of time. The ground-off and crumbled material landed on the image on the floor, forming a heap in reverse chronological order. The creases became flatter and more distinct as the drop cloth nestled itself into the stipulated space. By its use as an active space that one can enter, the simultaneous destruction and repositioning of its original artificiality is introduced.

In a darkened neighbouring room is a temporary display case, containing the objects that Low presents as mature, archive-worthy exhibits. Artistic, conservational, and curatorial approaches form an alliance in service of a clearly process-oriented aesthetic investigation. Fragments large and small that were removed during restoration are arranged in a vitrine in non-hierarchical juxtaposition beside material residues and earlier false additions. Low also disrupts their apparent isolation: fragments from the vitrines are removed by the conservator and added to the sculptures. This clearly aestheticising, museum-like presentation is, nonetheless, an almost barbaric sight: pieces of fingers, heads, and arms rest on fabric of malachite green as the angular remains of a peculiar archaeological dismemberment. The time-based and processual is austere displayed. The presence of the conservator, the progress of her work, the transformations visible on the outspread cloth and on the plaster sculptures occur carefully, without being a performance. They constitute the exhibition as

such, appear as art arising under the aspect of its presentation. Low's installation *Pax und Concordia, wartend* does not take the concretised form of an individual work, but rather responds to the requirements of the exhibition space and creates, by bringing together diverse individual elements, a quasi-utopian space that does not act as a mere object of observation but rather enables, through the aesthetic difference that it produces, another mode of perception. An aesthetic practice of observation reflects itself in site-specific works.(1)

For it is precisely the stage-like quality of the installation that Low so openly enacts. Low simultaneously pursues observation, collection, setting-in-relationship, and presentation, both analytically and with her senses and intuition. She integrates her interest in spaces as abstract stores of history and products of everyday cultural engineering into an apparently functional, usable, yet fictional structure. In this way the individual elements assemble themselves into a second-tier space: the rotunda with distinctive sculptures, the restoration workshop, the exhibition space – all these systems taken from the material world are coated with a virtual layer of spatial fiction and condensed into a heterotopia. The space that Low constructs would seem to correspond to a Foucaultian 'other' space: 'places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.'(2)

Pursuing an 'outing in the real',(3) Low transforms references from the outside in, and transfers her structures into the imaginary. The *Remise* shows structural qualities from an 'beyond-aesthetic elsewhere',(4) without reproducing this 'beyond'. For Low's installation implies a physically existing space – the rotunda as space of representation and literal place, as well as its insignia and historical index. Released from its entire frame of reference, it can only be grasped in fragments. The presentation space is thus semantically loaded in such a way that it shuttles back and forth, in a tension between aesthetic reflection and knowledge of historical contexts.(5)

Through the gesture, initially simple-seeming, of reinterpreting and repositioning the exhibition space, Antonia Low formulates a site-specific allegory for her own cultural practice. In bringing hidden, remote, overlooked institutional back rooms to light, she also illuminates the principles of artistic representation.

((Notes))

1 Compare Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 16.

2 Michael Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984 (trans. Jay Miskowic).

3 Compare Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011).

4 Rebentisch 2003 (see note 1), p. 274.

5 Compare *ibid.*

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