

## Amplified Perceptions

*“What I especially like is the strange transparent presence of another room within the exhibition space.”* Antonia Low

In his fantastic story *Goethe spricht in den Phonographen* (Goethe Speaks into the Phonograph) the writer Salomo Friedländer, publishing in 1916 under the pseudonym Mynona, imagined that residual sound waves could be made audible even after a long time. Thus, in principle, Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann would still be latently present in the rooms in which they had occurred, and could be recorded with the help of a machine that amplified them.

The idea of a room in which events that occurred hundreds of years earlier retain a ghostly presence is the precise opposite of the idea of the typical modern exhibition hall, as so accurately and humorously analysed by Brian O’Doherty.<sup>(1)</sup> In its neutrality the white cube allows one to forget, as it were, that there was something else to see there prior to the exhibition currently on display. The white cube is freshly painted after each deinstallation, ‘renovated’ to produce a tabula rasa undisturbed by any trace of previous events.

Not all artists were at ease with the white cube. Some moved out of it, so to speak, and out of museums and institutional exhibition spaces altogether, in search of locations where they could find precisely that which is removed from the white cube: places with a history, with particular external spatial conditions from which to draw inspiration for the ‘site-specific’ works they realised there. Antonia Low is also interested in the spatial conditions of particular places – although less in urban or natural outdoor spaces than in those areas within public buildings to which visitors are not usually admitted. In Brussels she sought out and photographed such ‘hidden rooms’ in various administrative buildings. Such researches later find their way into exhibitions that she realises in art institutions. Thus did the marble walls that she photographed at the BOZAR reappear on half-transparent curtains in the Kunstmuseum Bonn, where they unfurl a phantom-like presence.

And just as other places can wander into the exhibition space like materialised thoughts, Low also makes it possible to imagine exhibition spaces in locations where one does not expect them. In 2012 she transformed a kitchen in the cellar of a church in Manchester into a white cube in which only a kitchen cupboard remained as a kind of free-standing sculpture. As if in an initiation ritual, in order to arrive at and admire this illuminated piece of furniture that had been turned into an art object one had to follow a long path through the sanctuary, past the parish room, down the back stairs, and through a common room in the cellar.

Although Low’s feeling for peculiar places undeniably touches on the tradition of site specificity from the 1960s and 70s, upon closer inspection the idea of the ‘specific’ does not appear to fit her art particularly well. It does seem to suggest itself when she undertakes a thorough investigation of the spatial conditions of a location that she has researched or where she is having an exhibition, directing her gaze towards everything from which the gaze of the observer would normally be averted, towards what is completely concealed or at least lies under the average visitor’s threshold of perception. But even when she exposes a room’s wiring (causing it to resemble a wall drawing) or reclaims the existing light switches, electrical outlets, and door handles as small plastic or ceramic sculptures, she is only rarely concerned with what is specific to that particular place. She most often transforms it, rather, into another place, superimposing upon it a second, imaginary space such as that

formed by the scaffolding built within the glass cube of the Städtische Galerie Nordhorn which, together with the surrounding architectural space, was doubled by the mirrored floor.

Low's work takes on an almost archaeological character when her detective's instinct points out the historical layers that lie under the visible surface. This is the use she made of the decorative sculptures in the foyer of the Villa Salve Hospes, home of the Braunschweiger Kunstverein. Through improper maintenance and repair their original well-proportioned forms have acquired partially disfigured bodily and facial features that nearly remind one of Frankenstein's monster. With the help of a conservator, the later additions were removed and the exposure of the original material documented throughout a process that occurred for the duration of the exhibition.

Though such 'repair' could be understood as a critique of the status quo, Low's analytical view of the architectonic and other practical framing conditions of the exhibition space should not primarily be sited in the tradition of so-called 'institutional critique'. There is no 'critique' in the narrow sense at the Braunschweiger Kunstverein, for example, even though the artist is never satisfied with what is available as the official, public (exhibition) space. Her interest is not so much in the directly political, in the uncovering of institutional hierarchies and power relations, as in a spatial reconstruction of the way that the recollections and after-images of spaces become fixed in one's mind, superimposed on the actual space. In the process, the question is posed whether everything that has left its original location and been placed in an exhibition space or museum becomes a kind of memento of itself.

Ultimately, what Low investigates is the conceptions that each person automatically brings along or internally generates when inhabiting, using, or even only visiting a place – to see an exhibition, for example. She makes such mental images real, so to speak, amplifying them like the sound waves of past acoustic events in Mynona's story. Her art makes such imaginary doublings and superimpositions – of the sort analysed by the American urban theorist Kevin Lynch in his book from 1960, *The Image of the City* – visible. Lynch demonstrated that people's perceptions of the city in which they live do not necessarily correspond with its physical geographical reality. And should, one day, a writer try to imagine how these internally generated images of places and cities could be recorded and made visible, perhaps he or she will have been inspired by an exhibition by Antonia Low.

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*Der verlorene Raum/Pax und Concordia, wartend*, Kettler Verlag 2014