

MADE-EN-ABYME

A conversation between Andrea Winkler and Jan Verwoert

J: Andrea, surfaces and physicality are in some way equally important in your works, right? It's about surfaces: they have a specific texture, are reflecting, are even crumpled, but they always seem attractive. At the same time, things are not only visible in your work, but really physically present as objects ...

A: Yes, that's how I approach things: they should have some physicality, especially when it comes to the way they are placed in the space. It is about a kind of presence a thing gains when it desires to be attractive and has its appearance in an exhibition. But you're right about the surfaces, too. In particular regarding images, so to say, flat things, by collaging and reworking their surface they become more object-like, even three-dimensional. This is a change of the state of matter of the thing: it is not clear anymore, if it is rather image or object.

J: In your case the idea of presence also derives from the presence that goods can have, when they are displayed ...

A: Yes, that definitely ties in with my latest works with the pieces of luggage. I decided to make sculpture. At the same time, I work with the space and think rather in terms of staging. So I consider things less in classical sculptural terms as a secluded work, I rather imagine a spatial situation.

J: What is important for you about the staging of a situation?

A: The knowledge that the space is part of the work and can offer some sort of footing for what I arrange in it – in the way that the distinction between the work and the space also becomes less obvious. When I freely work with installation elements in the space, I also do it in order to create uncertainty where about the work starts or ends.

J: If the work itself is not isolated, we navigate in a kind of zone. The installation conveys the feeling, that presence atmospherically expands in the space. One doesn't exactly know "where does this start here, where does it end?"

A: I am interested to blur categories and create spatial confusion – also what is going to happen regarding the objects in this moment.

J: In the gallery spaces it is traditionally about vying for attention. To disguise a situation and not immediately show which side the bread is buttered on, means taking a certain risk, right?



A: Yes. There are enough people that don't understand if an art work doesn't have a frame. To work without these sort of definitions doesn't make it easier.

J: At the same time, one recognises the kind of surroundings you are referring to in your stagings. They are surroundings where something is exposed as a product or a star, right? These are barrier cords from museums and displays reminiscent of the more expensive shops. That means you are dealing with instruments with which attention and desire is normally generated, means of staging that say: "Here is the thing you want. Here is someone coming along you crave to see. You are queuing and would like to be two cordons ahead, but that's not how things work here ..."

A: This plays a role, for sure. At the same time, the barriers convey some kind of security and overview. They regulate who is in front or behind you. With good reason, you call this stuff in English a "crowd control system". Exclusion as well as upgrading takes place. The bags that I use as material can turn into fetishes. They are status symbol, including a flip side, too. Shabby bags are carried around everywhere. They are like an external body part, a peg, that keeps walking next to you, or like a *prey*, that you drag along. That are some of my associations connected with the bags. As a fetish they can be extremely expensive and totally charged. At the same time, there is something very banal about them.

J: Yes, super. One might think, that one drags the just looted products back to the safe cave, the single-family home. But in the scenario you are drafting one carries them to the next airport instead and puts them into the X-ray machine ... In your vision the world of the 50s is over when people lived in small boxes they stocked up with possessions. The bungalow-reservoir doesn't anymore exist in the consumer world of today. One immediately transitions, together with the latest scored goods, back into the circulation. And glamour and pitifulness just sit next to each other.

A: Exactly, kind of both.

J: Queuing in front of the security check with the captured prey under the arm: what sort of terms could we bring into play to describe the situation? Your work doesn't say "Be smart, stay at home. Get off now!" It rather says: "The bag isn't bad at all and maybe it gets better, if I maltreat it. This is our reality of life. And in some way we don't want it any different, right? Bought yesterday, happily bashed up today ..."

A: (laughs) These are very real materials and an environment, that surrounds me. If I use barrier cords they are associated with airports. But they really stand in every art space, there is hardly any art association or museum without them. In London, where I am just right now, the whole queuing is, of course, literally cultivated. There's something to be said for that. In Germany people freak out very easily. In the UK, for some reason, they just know it























takes it's time. Of course, queuing is a trick to be able to deal with a lot of people ...

J: The post-war period never ended ...

A: Right, and so it continues forever ... I occasionally integrated flags, these "beach flags" in the work. By now any shop has its own flag. Any off-licence prints one, and any phone shop places one at the door. These are the mini-nations, designed at home with the new technologies. Or you send an image to a company and back comes the flag. Everybody can do it. Democratisation of possibilities.

J: The mini-nation of off licenses ... (laughs)

A: You can't see it that well on the images, but I took fragments of the computer desktop surface to print on the flags, that you are going to use for your own advertisement ... sort of a chain of associations ...

J: Not in the sense of a grand critique of civilisation à la *Zeit*-feuilleton: "Everything is going down the drain." You don't say: "Here I am in the queue and I can't help." However, your approach isn't neutral either, right?

A: It comes from my experience, from my surroundings. There is often a material or an object that I start to experiment with. Bit by bit I try to connect the dots, relate things and collage them in the space ...

J: You are standing at the airport or in a museum, there are objects that bear value in one moment and function in another ... great handbag, but you also have to pack it. Great art, but I also have to make it ... (both laugh). Some people have the luxury to look at art. I have to do with it, *by making some*. That is one perspective. Instead of standing in line, I can act with art regarding the world of goods ...

A: I think so. For me it's a way, a form of dealing with things ... hm ... so to say, to not go crazy. There are always mixed feelings involved. Let's take the bags for example: I cut them up, do serious harm to them. At the same time, there is something that pulls them back together, holds them. They mostly keep themselves together. This is visible. There are no hidden seams or glue marks. The construction is disclosed ...

J: Okay, you take the thing. You do something with it and then it's alright again ... you can let it go as it is. It is pulled together and can be bag again.

A: Yes, the idea is to put things back together so they work again as an unit and don't end up in tatters ... But not all the attempts work out right away. I started with casts of silicone and I was looking for something having another physical composition.

J: I understand. But some of the silicone casts remained, right? Here I see a work with a vitrine with some strange partial objects, strange nipples, pimples, parts ... the things look as if fallen off somewhere, but nobody knows exactly, where they were attached to ...

A: Yeah, exactly. These are EAS security tags, that are attached to all goods in department stores. I did some casts of them and arranged them like an archeological overview collection. In case someone is looking at us in the future, they will see this collection in a museum, and a few non varietal objects joined in.

J: So these are the things that are everywhere tacked on and to clothes so you can't cart them out of the shop?

A: This is the shop system. If you carry them out, the alarm goes off. They have to be untacked in the shop. They have to stay in the shop.

J: One part of the product goes with the consumer back into the circulation and the rest is told "We have to stay inside".

A: Exactly! Goes into the vitrine.

J: There are also security vests in the vitrines. They are for the people regulating what stays inside and what goes outside, right?

A: They are like a token. Who wears such a vest is immediately recognised as someone in charge of "security". It is part of the same category "security elements" like the road blocks and barrier cords. They are like an emblem for all these ideas of security that we have.

J: "Elements" is good. That means there are tags, barriers, vests and people wearing them. People are basically also part of the infrastructure. One wonders from which moment on one is part of this infrastructure oneself: already when checking in or pulling the flight ticket out of the machine? Standing in line? Or only when you place your suitcase on the conveyor belt? Somehow or other, you are part of an automatic process. And just by mere chance you are not yourself – (inside) – the suitcase. (both laugh)

A: Not yet inside the suitcase! In fact the suitcase carries you. You don't carry the suitcase anymore, one is part of it. It is difficult not to.

J: ... to be checked-in along as a part of a logistic process. Infrastructure has something abstract, right? I have no clue where the electricity comes from that runs through this recorder ... at the same time, infrastructure is totally concrete. I see what happens, when the luggage belt jams. I know how it feels to get a jolt of electricity. There is something abstract, and there are moments when it touches you. You have either in your work, the abstract and the concrete dimension, right? But "concrete" doesn't mean, that someone opens his diary and says "1st of May, departure – Heathrow" ...













A: No, this happens rather on a formal level. There are both dimensions: the abstract and the object-based, figurative one. There are both. But there is also something very fragile about these infrastructures. The system can be very attackable. It is vulnerable. If the conveyor belt suddenly jams a chain of reactions occurs. Nothing is running smoothly anymore. Something of that, of a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability of the system might resonate in the openness and boundlessness of the installations ...

J: I like the term “vulnerability”. You used the term “give footing” before. It would figuratively mean, infrastructure wants to convey the illusion to “give us footing”. But it always conveys the contrary at the same time: how it becomes unstable, if it fails. One arrives, sees ten crappy suitcases and knows they would actually be somewhere else. As a matter of law, they are actually not here ...

A: ... but at the other end of the world, or ...

J: This is abstract. But the abstraction suddenly spits out objects – that are falling out on the wrong side of the black hole ...

A: (approving sums)

J: “Vulnerability” is nowadays often translated by “precarious”. The precarious ones are especially “vulnerable” to any mini-movement that happens in economy. If the economy betters or worsens, the precarious ones feel the changes first ...

A: ... the effects ...

J: Exactly, the effects, because they have no footing and are exposed to everything, that happens in the circulation. If your work deals with vulnerability and lack of footing then it is also about something like “precarity”. What is your relation to this term?

A: It crossed my mind. But I preferred to say another word, I don't know why. But I would definitely say that we are in a precarious situation and that the precariat, if it exists as such, is in a much more vulnerable way exposed to certain effects. Certain possibilities just don't exist, for example, to be able to take another airplane, to get picked up somehow. Some find a possibility, but the precarious ones have to stay at the station.

J: This is an excellent description: precarious is, if nobody comes to pick you up ... and the object or the person has to bear the full consequences. So, who bears the consequences for the abstraction of the system? And finally, it is someone ‘on the ground’ that can't get away, with or without security vest. At the same time, the objects in your installation are not necessarily victims of the abstraction. They have their own character, some sort of dignity, how they sit on the platform, right? They are free ... the suitcase doesn't care ... “Alright, might they be in Thailand, I am still in Düsseldorf ...”



A: (laughs)

J: The objekt says to itself: "If the lights go out in the museum tonight, I am still here. I don't care, where you are ..."

A: It is really out of the cycle. The having-fallen-through-the-cracks creates some sort of halt ... and the place of uncertainty gives the form of a thing some sort of freedom ...

J: In the cargo bay of the Düsseldorf airport is more freedom, because space is undefined. Being at one with yourself at the place of uncertainty as a feeling of freedom: "Let these idiots go on holidays, where they believe to find freedom." (both laugh)

A: Yes, exactly. Perfect.

J: Just a footnote. I did a seminar on the cannibalistic manifesto by Oswald de Andrade last summer. He says you cannot remain idle towards a world where colonial conditions prevailed, you rather "eat" this world that isn't yours: you put it in the mouth. You eat, you make it physical, but precisely not to internalize it, on the contrary, to transpire this world instead. He said: "Taboo must be totem again." As long as we only mentally suck up this shit and mistake it for our own culture, we create taboos, so to say, unexpressed irrevocable *inner* laws. But a world that you ate and excreted you treat as something external again. The taboo stiffens an inside. But the totem marks an outside. The tradition of "awareness-raising" says: "Internalize it! Become aware of it!" Andrade says: "No, eat and digest it, so you can expose it outside of yourself. Then it is totem." Digested, it can be really external. That fits, right? These objects are totems of the state we are right now. But now, when they stand around, you can ...

A: ... you can go on ... go to the next ... it passed through you once ...

J: ... so you can separate. The feeling of the lost suitcase: what I mixed up for my own one ... it has to work without ...

A: It has to work without. Can be totally liberating. When I went to the UK, I left all my belongings in a cellar of a friend. Flooding destroyed almost everything. A lot of art, a record collection. This was painful, but also great, that all the things were gone ... the things surrounding you all the time ... they were just gone, weight dropped.

J: Because it is clearly external. It happened to me once that the luggage had gone and I received a small pouch with a T-shirt, tooth paste and tooth brush saying: "We care for you!" (both laugh loud)

A: Yes, very good!

J: This recalibrates the relation of value and objects.

A: Yes.

J: Shall we go back once more, from object to the image and to the surface? The first step when you go from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, you mentioned that this is connected with collage. What do you connect with the moment when the collage makes surfaces to objects?

A: In the beginning I mainly worked with images of magazines. I folded them. The material on the image level becomes less image through the folding. It gets volume, becomes voluminous. I'm looking for a "double state", when something can exist in such a way it can be one or the other. In this way, the image becomes more abstract. I also worked with large volumes that look like pedestals. If an image is pasted on such a volume and placed in the space, a strange spatiality emerges that is strangely enough diffuse. Even by circling around the work, it doesn't fully reveal itself. That creates a particular kind of vibration ...

J: ... a vibration that occurs because something is part of two realities ... hm, not because it couldn't decide nor wanted, but because it finds itself exactly in this in-between state.

A: This is the state to strive for, to remain in the vibration between the decisions, yes.

J: In this intermediate state things and people can have a very concrete presence though, for example if they become obstacles. It is a curse of today that all objects and people have one foot in the virtual space, however, precisely for that reason also stand in the way, right? Absorbed in the smart phone's display, in the middle right in front of the escalator, someone blocks the entire traffic even without noticing it.

A: (laughing) Yes, exactly!

J: And what does actually "post-internet" mean for public traffic? "Post-internet", a term that spooks around at the moment. In some way one uses it to describe this strange simultaneity of virtual and concrete reality. Do you think this term is useful?

A: It is just a fact that everyone is working with the internet and a lot is made with digital programmes. But if you make a sketch in Photoshop are you a "digital native"? What exactly do these labels mean? Of course, they help to describe phenomena, like the free simultaneity of virtuality and reality. In this sense it is right, that I purposely mix analogue and digital.

J: But in your case it is less about commenting a phenomenon, but rather that you first "eat" it, you feed a metabolism in order to expose it, out of itself, in the space.





A: Yes, including the means of production, the manner how my environment not only *presents* but also *produces* itself. This means a lot of different things interlock: technics and concrete *catchy ... tactile ...* objects. They are intertwined.

J: To act regarding the experience of the environment would mean to be responsive not only to the way it “presents” itself, but also, as you say, to the way it “produces” itself.

A: Exactly, produces.

J: And after the thing is produced you can place it somewhere. There it is in the space. Hey, Andrea, I think we just did one circle through your work ... I press stop now.