

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.

WILD THINGS

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In the late 1970s Roland Barthes held a lecture at the Collège de France titled *The Neutral*, in which he introduced a remarkable aesthetic.¹ Barthes was interested in phenomena that are neutral to the extent that they neutralize common paradigms. Things whose extremes have been suspended are considered neutral, as are states in which a balance has been maintained. These things are neither affirmative nor negative, neither masculine nor feminine, neither active nor passive. Rather, they are somehow in between; in ways that are not easy to classify, they are neither the one nor the other. For Barthes, neutralization is a highly intensifying process because it sharpens sensitivity. First, simple attributions are omitted, opening up an entire spectrum of nuances and intermediate forms that need to be described in different ways. Instead of the usual polarities, nuances become visible; instead of focusing on extremes, subtleties are sought. What Barthes called the “passion of the neutral”² is, therefore, the strong desire to set up ambiguity and equivocation. This desire resists the inclination to understand things through simple categorization; it renounces the will to have certainty. In turn, this renunciation is not fixed. Neutralization exists by consistently perfecting the process of nullification, repeatedly focusing on whatever endows things with indeterminacy. The impact of neutralization doesn’t simply consist of shifting from one thing to its opposite, as if trying to dilute blinding white with absorbent black. Rather, it means taking a position within the broad spectrum of gray zones, amid what is precariously nondifferentiated.³ The neutral, therefore, is still something else entirely; it exists beyond one thing or another. It is something completely different, whose otherness is multiplied. Maurice Blanchot, whose texts on the neutral comprise Barthes’s starting point, writes that the passion of the neutral is situated in a desire for the unknown.⁴ This is the actual artistic issue: to live in relation to the unknown, to undermine the familiar by neutralizing it, while devoting oneself to the uncertainty that evades conceptual and visual patterns and suspends orders, laws, pretensions, and appropriations.⁵

So, as an artistic process, neutralization means to establish – through well-calculated indecisions – those subtle states that no longer permit one to categorize or to ascribe terms to sensations. In a neutral aesthetic, there’s a process of becoming inconceivable that isn’t evoked through the means of overwhelming experiences, but rather, through a process of intense gradation that leads to dissolution, or through an ambiguity that is reinforced to the point of vagueness.⁶ The neutral is an aesthetic strategy for refining all familiar shapes or forms by partially dissolving them, producing something without shape that is liberated from the system of dualist categorization.

1 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier, New York 2005.

2 Ibid., p. 13.

3 See *ibid.*, pp. 49–51.

4 Maurice Blanchot, *Das Neutrale. Philosophische Schriften und Fragmente*, Zurich/Berlin 2010, p. 15.

5 See Barthes 2005 (see note 1), p. 12.

6 A neutral aesthetic doesn’t rely on either immersion or distance, and shouldn’t be situated on the side of either affect or reflexivity.













To neutralize means to refuse to take obvious positions, and instead establish states of balance that exist beyond the contradictory. This state of balance, the certainties of perception, and clarity of action are atomized and, lead, as Barthes writes, to the intensification of “tact”, or delicacy.⁷ Instead of aesthetic effects, there is attention for what has yet to be distinguished: the unclassifiable, the inconceivable, or the raw – in a state of open, practically sore intensity, at that.

The artist Andrea Winkler’s works have this kind of intensity. When, in an age of post-digitalism and new materialism, things are pouring into exhibition spaces, their most fragile examples can be found in Winkler’s arrangements. Winkler finds flotsam from the consumer world and removes it from its original context, sometimes spray painting or coating it in textures; other pieces are processed: first dissected, then reassembled to fit together, and finally, either positioned in a seemingly casual way, or laid upon makeshift pedestals. Despite their occasionally radical interventions, the impression of delicacy that her works create is the result of well-balanced ambiguities, within which suppositions are refuted in order to erect the kind of space that allows for the subtle uncertainties that Barthes values about the neutral.

This refutation primarily affects the terms and categories that are normally used in approaches to art. Winkler’s works oscillate between image and thing, object and installation; they’re simultaneously exhibit and display, ambivalent pedestal or work, barrier and sculpture – and thus, puzzlingly, neither completely one nor the other. Out of this ambivalence – which is the result of de-categorizing the works, as well as their refusal to obey the dictates of genre – arise works of remarkable intangibility with an aura of elusiveness. Walls are also included in the spatial situations Winkler arranges in this method. They are lightly spray-painted in a way that makes the marks seem so ephemeral that one can hardly call them murals. More of a trace than a firm statement, they are clear indications that there’s something that remains equivocal, withdrawn. If marks are always signs that a space has been appropriated, the dissolving marks, their luminous colour, and misleading lines of Winkler’s work are evidence of a gesture of restraint, engendering a keener sensitivity to the room’s surfaces.

These fragile wall drawings function as elements of larger installative arrangements that draw the viewer into the process of observation. Among these three-dimensional images are pedestal-like sculptures whose plastic quality is derived not only from bodies, but layers, as well, through which Winkler induces space and surface to oscillate. Sometimes the coloured paper over the objects interacts with their bulk; other times black plastic sheets give them additional depth, or else Mylar sheets are crumpled into figures and attached to them; all expand and fray the plastic bodies. Here, it’s interesting that the de-classifying gesture of crumpling is used to give a sense of three-dimensionality to the surface. In each case, Winkler neutralizes the obvious

7 See Barthes 2005 (see note 1), pp. 29–30.

order of two and three dimensions, picture and object, by using paper sculpturally, not for the sake of representation. Hence, in other works, she folds pages torn from fashion magazines, or stuffs crumpled sheets of paper into picture frames, displaying real folds behind the glass. In their sculptural application, their representational function is suspended.

The neutralization of the representational function is also carried out in other vivid, three-dimensional objects, among them the pennant flags set up in the installations. Here, too, Winkler picks up on everyday visual aesthetics and turns them around. The displays, found on the street in front of nearly every store in Germany, are intended to capture attention. Usually, shop owners design them on computers and then order them online. Through them, Winkler visualizes the now ubiquitous conditions of production: you can recognize the scroll bar on the blue desk, a screenshot of which she used to commission the pennants. In Winkler's work the displays are otherwise free of advertising content. She takes what is ordinarily the signs' occupation of space and translates it into frank aesthetics by removing images and slogans. Like works of art, the flags refer to the conditions of their own production. The advertising pennants also mirror sculptures that have been turned into surfaces, as it were; designed on a computer screen, the image possesses a vanishing physicality.

A kind of inverse process of combining surface and space can be found in Winkler's treatment of retractable belt barriers, which she uses as elements in her installative arrangements. Here, she uses poles equipped with belts of varying forms and colours, sometimes drawing fragmented lines through the space with them. Winkler presents an entire study of different types of barrier systems – stands made of materials ranging from highly polished metal to simple plastic. She combines these with glittering chains and colourful cords, and then displays them as collages of things. They refer to various functional contexts, while dividing space into zones, creating differences, arousing desires, or establishing hierarchies. When it comes to Winkler's barriers, however, what needs to be separated, or for what event they were required remain unanswered questions. On one hand, the barriers are unmistakably autonomous objets d'art that primarily underscore the aesthetic qualities of these everyday, three-dimensional things. On the other hand, they retain their normal function as a type of barrier system for steering bodies through space, regulating behavior, preventing touch, and establishing value. In the context of art they look like part of a museum display and reinforce the sacrosanctity of art. Yet, because they prove to be works of art at the same time, they reflect upon instinctive use, as well as on the kind of subconscious regulation that art works also practice when they take over a space, determining perception through the way they are placed, preventing things being grasped, and leading to purely aesthetic observation. Here, too, Winkler's works change: they fluctuate between being functionless art objects and belt barriers on display. Only partially unused, they reveal a subtle effectiveness. They could be called





contradictory objects, inside of which power and powerlessness level each other. Above all, because Winkler positions the barriers so that they react to each other, what is in front and behind them appears to be ambiguous; the space is divided into absurd zones, or paths are marked out, yet cannot be followed. This obscures the relationship one has to the pieces, with the effect that they begin to expose the viewers themselves, who are now equipped with the heightened sensitivity Barthes discusses.

In Winkler's works, markings, barrier systems, and occupations of sites are disempowered through skillful contrast. Through her neutralizing process involving suspension, emptying, ambiguity, and opening up, they come close to becoming something formless that Winkler nonetheless endows with a new interpretation. Georges Bataille has described whatever cannot be classified as *informe* – the other, the heterogeneous, which remains incomprehensible. In this way Bataille elevates a concept often used to vilify, thus redirecting it from its deviant aesthetic. Assuming that each and every thing has a form, then the concept of “formless” describes something that, as Bataille writes, has “no rights”, and “gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm”.⁸ His examples are dirt, dust, or spit. Bordering on the nauseating, the formless is usually discarded, because it's not identifiable. Bataille rejects the notion that everything should have an obvious form, and therefore he prefers processes in which forms are played against each other, ground against other forms, as it were. The boundary lies in the decay, the disorder, the imbalance, or failure of a form. In every case the markings of dissolution and destruction no longer simply represent stages of production, but are the intended result, for the purpose of showing what's been lost in the process of shaping something. Winkler is also working with this aesthetic of disintegrated form when she scatters fragments of materials across the floors of the exhibition space. Refuse – undesirable output – is also part of the inherent logic of formlessness, and it's produced through both manufacturing and consumption: Styrofoam, for example, slides out of packaging, then crumbles and sticks when you try to dispose of it. They're leftovers that continue to exist despite disintegration, the remains that persist no matter the degree of exploitation. It's all about what isn't included in the process of shaping something, and can therefore not be sublimated: the recalcitrance of material in its disintegrated form, whose “formal language” Winkler visualizes in her installation of crumbs. Referring to Walter Benjamin here, “de-formation” (*Entstaltung*) becomes the more artistically important process, rather than “formation” (*Gestaltung*).⁹

This aesthetic of disfiguration is also characteristic of Winkler's more recent works, which are more strongly oriented toward things per se. If contemporary sculpture reflects the state of things in today's late-capitalist world of objects, then it's articulated in Winkler's objects through a formlessness that appears under the auspices of consumerism, where “dirt” and “dust” are no longer insignia of the formless, but rather, consumer goods that have been

8 Georges Bataille “Formless”, in: *Vision of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Minneapolis 1985, p. 31.

9 For more on the concept of *Entstaltung* (“de-formation”), see Walter Benjamin, “Imagination [PHANTASIE]”, in: *Selected Writings: Volume I: 1913–1926*, Cambridge, MA 1996, pp. 280–282.

de-formed. In her latest works Winkler starts with the world of prefabricated objects, whose given forms and materials are both neutralized by her work on them and thoroughly decomposed – although in each case the boundary between thing and material is eliminated.

Among other things, Winkler produces casts of everyday objects, which she honours in a certain way by regarding them as suitable for making art. She selects objects that are familiar because they are convenient, and thus distinguished less by their formal and visual qualities than by their tangible characteristics. Obviously endowed with sexual connotations, pepper mills and those little electronic security devices that are attached to items to prevent shoplifting are among the items she makes use of. Her interest in the latter is based on their interactive function. They're equipped with sensors that animate them, turning them into quasi-living creatures. The latex casts, with tiny flaws that distinguish them from the originals, are kept in display cases, along with the original devices and other similarly shaped objects, such as a computer mouse, for example. These display cases, some of them handmade, are, for their part, also exhibits. The bricolage on display and the obvious imperfection of the handmade pieces are further indications of an ambiguous aesthetic that unites production and destruction under the rubrics of animation and mutilation. Their meaning lies in the implicit claim that individuality can only assert itself as deviation.

While Winkler's earlier works were mainly three-dimensional drawings that inscribed ambivalences into sites with their tangible dots and three-dimensional lines, her current art is based on the human body. Even though they're no longer in use, the helmets and purses that are the material for the newest objects refer to their absent users or wearers, to touch and utilization. Mannequin legs reinforce the feeling that the uncertainties of categorization have been expanded to include people and things, the relationship between human and non-human actors. The ambiguity that prevails from now on affects the interplay between the reification of life and the endowment of objects with life and soul, which allows us to see the combined essence of consumerism and aesthetics.

When they're not scattered across the floor, some of the hybrid things are arranged on top of bins and boxes, while others appear to have been randomly placed on little side tables or cardboard boxes. This kind of casual exposition in art spaces sharpens the eye for the everyday arrangements in which Winkler also visualizes a sense of alienation or decontextualization. The obvious *dérangement*, the total lack of cosiness, order, or context, testifies to the evanescence of the human. The pedestals made of insulated bags and pizza boxes become the insignia of mobility, service jobs, and rapid consumption, the expression of a provisory lifestyle. Yet, it's not just about simple ready-mades composed of trash; rather, Winkler artistically dissects everyday aesthetics, as if one has to first examine the materiality and formal language of

everything that surrounds us. Besides combining things, she does this by taping over things, spray-painting them, and cutting them up – actions applied in the process of producing her assemblages of things.

There is a whole series of collaged handbags, which she uses to play through everything that can be made out of consumer goods, and what they show us about the unconsciousness of things when they're processed, rather than consumed. To cut up two bags and join them together is like montage; it's primarily enlightening in the respect that it evokes aesthetic intensification and surreal animation – when, for instance, the bulge of imitation leather combined with a purple snakeskin bag takes on the look of skin growths, or when the completely absurd (because it's purposeless) mimicry of a camouflage-patterned bag mutates into something animalistic, owing to its muzzle-like opening. By slitting or folding surfaces, the objects are endowed with an internal life that seems to be almost sensitive, as if they were equipped with feelings of pain and desire. When this way of practicing sculpture is revealed to be a kind of abuse, then importunities that border on the sadomasochistic come to light – impositions that are tied to today's demands for modeling the self. Besides mobility, the bags also address sports and fashion in their roles as ruthless techniques of the self. This can be seen in the sawed-open, rolling suitcase, which reveals a martial-looking organism, or in the laced bags whose bodies are incised with belts or chains, as if bondage games were being played.

Related to the aesthetic of deformation, it becomes clear that this includes not just usage, contamination, or crumbling, but also the more violent variations of destructive interventions, such as cutting off, or slitting and sawing open, and these determine how much impact the deformation has. Overall, Winkler pursues the morphology of “base materialism”¹⁰, which recalls things that have been discarded, and refers to the physical, unconscious gender connotations of sculpture, as well as to the violence of sculptural practice. Of consequence here, therefore, is the physical proximity of the newer works to the ground. Remaining on the horizontal plane, they defy any attempt to stand them up or elevate them,¹¹ as if they were reclining animals, or hinting at exhaustion. Even the handmade pedestals and flat, sometimes open platforms are spread out across the floor, as if they were stage-like plateaus. They underscore the aura of desublimation and dehumanization.

The new works also make use of carbon fiber, a high-tech material, which Winkler uses to re-cover helmets and prosthetic limbs. Instead of employing processes such as decomposition or cutting, she uses it as a kind of covering layered onto things, appearing to meld with them, although it actually does not conceal as much as it emphasizes the expression of form. Touchable surfaces, like flesh, heighten sensitivity for their volumes. Covered in membranes, their tactile quality is reinforced, effectively inspiring a kind of haptic vision, an amalgam of observation and touch. The artificial textures take on a life of their own that extends the individual objects and potentially allows them to

10 See Georges Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism”, in: *New German Critique*, no 16, winter 1979.

11 For more on interpreting the horizontal, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. 156.

coalesce with others. Here, the works transcend the anthropomorphic scheme. A black helmet placed on a piece of white leather functions like a dialectic image; as it switches from body to skin, from protection to flaying, from technicity to the bestial and back, it refers to something that goes beyond the human.

In other works Winkler covers the loosely crossed legs of a mannequin with colourful leggings that feature prints of natural events, lightning, and planets. They're attached so that the textiles are layered, extending beyond the mannequin foot and petering out into something indefinite, yet serpentine. Another pair of leggings – with a pattern of muscle sinews – is attached to the waist, apparently not to cover, but to peel off and expose what the skin conceals: the flesh, which perhaps undercuts the human to the same extent that the cosmological may exceed it. Next to it Winkler positions yet another display of leggings on a spray-painted block made out of wood maché. Its artificial nature echoes the purple, scintillating crater of the fabric amid the bulges of the surface. Here, mimesis has expanded to things, which, endowed with aesthetic powers, imitate each other.

In any case, Winkler deals with the artifacts as if they were not dead objects, but living things, out of which the material for their transformation can be drawn. Violently dissecting and reconnecting things that have already been made exposes something that has yet to be made, something raw inside of them. Along with Barthes and Bataille, one could assert that Winkler, by neutralizing what's already been formed, allows its formlessness to alight – which is nothing more than a process of the most beautiful wildness.