

# The Grinding of the Mills

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Time takes its toll. Continuously. Material decays and is ground into temporary dust of generations. In his sculptural works, which are inscribed with the process of gradual decay, Benjamin Greber addresses the topos of degeneration as a vestige or an indication of provenance.

The *Windmühle aus dem südlichen Teil des Jenseits* (*Windmill from the Southern Part of the Ever-after*) is a leitmotif of the exhibition *Alles steuert der Blitz* (*The Thunderbolt Steers All Things*), though it is no longer identifiable as a sculpture in this context. Created in 2006, the *Windmühle* is the first in a series of installations and sculptures that tell their own story and are influenced by industrial forms. The 4.5-meter-tall construction reaped its mechanical character from its feigned functionality, among other things. A three-part structure with an octagonal cross-section was positioned on a base plate with folding doors, beneath which one would expect to find a cavity. A chute was directed toward the hatch and a boom secured to the other side, both suggesting the introduction of grist. The material, painted grey cardboard, simulated stability. Functionality and urbanity were promised, but not delivered. The missing rotor blades and traces of use imply that the windmill has been decommissioned – in other words: the mill was a relic of industrialization.

Benjamin Greber put this work to use as a “lost mold”. He divided the *Mühle* into its discrete components, which he then rinsed with a black matte synthetic material. The hollow casting process allows the artist to turn the objects inside out. Fragile hollow bodies emerged with discernible traces of production on their interior surfaces – grooves created by the originally liquid casting material and filler that came about when the weight was distributed into the corners.

After the forms were created, the cardboardcover was torn away. The new, smooth outer surfaces also show traces of the work process left by remnants of the release agent and the original material of the *Windmühle*.

Benjamin Greber thus destroyed the original cardboard sculpture for this multi-piece floor sculpture, leaving behind thin, partially fragmented casts of the interior – a fragile reminder of the mill.

These remains of the *Windmühle aus dem südlichen Teil des Jenseits* give the impression of having been casually placed in the exhibition space. Under the title *Alles steuert der Blitz #4*, the work makes reference to its own history, a history of the artwork that the observer can only surmise. In addition to imitations of fictional architecture, we also witness the performative aspect of the casting process, which leaves visible traces on the object itself. But the production traces also presage the future development of the objects. This is manifest as degeneration. The temporal aspect is inscribed in the work of art as its decay and “emerges as a narrative process”<sup>1</sup>. Drastically and in time-lapse Alfred Kubin describes the gradual demise of material in his novel *Die andere Seite* [*The Other Side*], a classic of fantastic literature:

“The most uncanny thing was a mysterious process that began with the alarming rise in the number of animals, then continued inexorably, at ever increasing speed, until it led to the complete collapse of the Dream Realm – *the Crumbling*. It affected everything. The buildings of such different materials, the objects that had been brought together over the years, all the things the Master had spent his money on were doomed. Cracks appeared in all the walls at once, wood rotted, iron rusted, glass went cloudy, cloth fell to pieces. Precious *objets d’art* succumbed to an irresistible *inner* decay without any reason being apparent.”<sup>2</sup>

The wear and tear on the material – also caused by physically moving it between venues – is inscribed in the individual object as a “trace” of its provenance. Each step implies a reduction or modification of the initial work. The “crumbling” (first and foremost of the work itself), as the narrative substance of the work, and its exhibition for a short period of time amount to the process of transformation – an interplay of becoming and passing away.

“All at once it became bright. With a violent start, I turned around to see the mill on fire. The windows were filled with the blinding glare of the flames, the rotting beams were sizzling and crackling. Smoke was coming out of the steep shingle roof, a huge tongue of flame blazed up and with a crash the front wall caved in. The machinery, illuminated from within, was still working. It was like looking into a human body that had been cut open.”<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Greber uses decay, disintegration and deterioration both as a notional and formal, physical means of incorporating temporality into his sculptures. He deploys decay as the calculated and controlled transformation of a work from a fictitious commodity to an abstract, autonomous *objet d'art*.

For the first time ever, Benjamin Greber brings his sculptures and photo-based video art together in a common context at the Kunstraum Fuhrwerkswaage under the exhibition title *Alles steuert der Blitz*. The dark atmosphere of both the sculptures and photographs feeds on the remnants of the cycle of growth and decay.

In contrast to the objects, it is not darkness, but rather flashes of light that prevail in the videos. The first impression of the light is misleading. Its source is neither the technical shimmer of the flat-screen monitors that are distributed along the walls, nor the nervous flickering of illuminants. The five videos are each based on two photographs of the same subject that are distinguished only by the length of exposure time. At first, the pictures from the series *Alles steuert der Blitz* appear nearly black on the five monitors. Even upon closer inspection, only a few points of light can be detected. They act like coordinates in an abstract space that is not otherwise defined. In irregular, organically rhythmic intervals, the longer exposure photo flashes as if lit by a distant bolt of lightning. The immaterial points become concrete streetlights that briefly illuminate a nocturnal landscape out of the darkness. It has an otherworldly appearance – an atmosphere generated by the yellow glow of the street lamps.

Benjamin Greber once used this type of sodium vapor light in a sculptural installation, taking advantage of its materiality. For *Heizungsraum* (2012) (*Heating Room*), a radiator and its feed pipes made of folded tin foil were installed in the middle of a room that was painted white. The addition of high-contrast sodium vapor light made them seem unrealistic and detached from their surroundings.

Friedrich Nietzsche quotes Heraclitus, from whom Benjamin Greber derived his exhibition title:

“I see nothing other than becoming. Be not deceived! It is the fault of your short-sightedness, not of the essence of things, if you believe you see land somewhere in the ocean of becoming and passing away. You use names for things as though they rigidly, persistently endured; yet even the stream into which you step a second time is not the one you stepped into before.”<sup>4</sup>

The nocturnal landscapes “come into being”, linger briefly as afterimages in the eye of the beholder and vanish again – as if illuminated by a flash of lightning. Benjamin Greber raises the question of whether the subject actually undergoes a change between the repeated flashes. He suggests a narrative, however, the location of which remains undefined, and idealizes that which is visible as common property of the collective memory. It's almost as if the

lightning invoked by pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus also sheds metaphysical light on the landscape. He says:

“[...] that the world and everything in it will be judged by fire, as revealed in the following words: »The thunderbolt steers all things«, i.e. it controls them. By »thunderbolt« he means the eternal fire in this case. He also indicates that this fire is rational, and that it governs all things.“<sup>5</sup>

This primal fire is eternal and inherent in every-thing; in the steady flow of time, in *pánta rhei*<sup>6</sup>, rationality reigns over the world of things.

“Everything that occurs is the result of contradiction and all things are in a constant state of change ... and the world was born in fire and is consumed by fire in certain periods of time, in a constant state of change for all eternity. This comes to pass, however, according to the fate [that it is the law of the universe, the logos, that creates things]“<sup>7</sup>.

For Benjamin Greber, the otherworldly lightning, radiance and flickering are more than just metaphorical elements of vanitas imagery. The light, which illuminates the darkness – the mythical night – also plays a metaphysical role in that he endows it with creative power.

“Into the midst of this mystical night [...] Heraclitus of Ephesus approached and illuminated it with a divine flash of lightning. »I contemplate Becoming«, he exclaimed, and nobody has so attentively watched this eternal wave-surg-ing and rhythm of things.“<sup>8</sup>

In the exhibition *Alles steuert der Blitz*, Benjamin Greber combines themes of perception and recognition, visibility and invisibility with the metaphor of becoming and fading – an interplay of the ascertainable and unascertainable, light and darkness, movement and idleness. What remains visible are the traces that Greber incorporates into the works as signs of provenance, temporality and process.

1 Ludwig Seyfarth: *Benjamin Grebers prozessuale Skulpturen*, in: *ALMAGIA. Benjamin Greber*, Bönen 2012, p. 30

2 Alfred Kubin: *Die andere Seite*, Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 196

3 Kubin, p. 225f.

4 Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari (Ed.): *Nietzsche. Werke. Abt.3, Bd. 2, Nachgelassene Schriften, 1870 – 1873*, Berlin 1973, p. 317

5 Wilhelm Capelle: *Die Vorsokratiker. Die Fragmente und Quellenberichte*, Stuttgart 2008, Fragment 57 fr. 63-66, p.

6 “Everything flows”, Heraclitus’ most famous phrase, is not actually originally from him, but was rather coined later by those who read his works.

7 Capelle: *Die Vorsokratiker*, fragment 52 *ibid* 8, p. 106. See also fragment 54 Aetius I 7, 22 = 22 A 8, *ibid*.

8 Colli, Montinari, p. 316