

BENJAMIN GREBER'S PROCESSUAL SCULPTURES

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If Benjamin Greber's sculpture *MARY STAR OF THE SEAS* had already existed in 2006, it would have been a succinct contribution to the exhibition *TOTALSCHADEN* [Write-off] at the Bonner Kunstverein – at least at first glance. The initially intact life-sized replica of a hydroplane racing boat suffered so much damage in the course of several exhibitions that in the end only a heap of bits and pieces lay scattered around the space, almost giving the impression that the boat had been shattered by a bomb.

The destruction was much more clearly visible than that of most of the works shown in Bonn, for whose submission the artist Gregor Schneider had called under the condition that they also had to be actuarially recognised as write-offs. But Greber's sculpture would have been in entirely the wrong place there. All the damage exhibited in Bonn had been caused by outer agencies not intended by the artists, while Benjamin Greber makes it feature of his work and factors it in from the very beginning. For this reason he doesn't create his sculptures from wood, metal or durable synthetic material, but usually from cardboard or corrugated paper: materials that are easy to handle, but, as it then turns out, are just as easily damaged. The gradual falling to pieces of the boat sculpture becomes a narrative process. What Greber presents us with are not 'fruitful moments' in the sense of Lessing's discussion of the ancient Laocoön and his sons. It is not the successful implication of movement within a solid material, but the documentation of what has happened to the sculpture; its history, as it were.

This is also the case with the box sculptures, which are either piled up or half torn, and sometimes contain parts of earlier installations, suggesting that they have yet to be unpacked.

Sculptures like these were exhibited in Greber's GWK Young Artists Award exhibition *ALMAGIA II* at the Marta Herford in 2011. Two of the oblong cardboard boxes contained parts of the sculptures *UMSPANNWERK* [Transformer Station] (2008) and *UNTITLED* (Supermarket checkout) (2008).

The artist himself refers to the state of affairs shown in the exhibition as an 'unpacking situation': the content is examined and tested; is it intact?

Two boxes hang on the wall unfolded, like panel paintings. When still intact, and each filled with four palettes, they belonged to an installation shown in 2009 at the Parkhaus Düsseldorf. They were indiscriminately pushed around, packed, unpacked and stored, so that considerable wear and tear inevitably occurred. For the exhibition at the Marta they were opened after almost three years. The palettes now formed a kind of pedestal for a pile of other boxes, while these two were hung on the wall in frames carefully constructed from corrugated paper.

As in *MARY STAR OF THE SEAS*, different states of the same objects can be seen in different exhibitions. While the increasingly damaged boat presents a sculptural process, the two cardboard boxes on the wall establish an associative connection to painting, even if the production process has little to do with the depiction of images. The unfolded boxes recall directions in painting that work with traces and go beyond the constraints of the panel painting through the use of unusual or industrial materials, as with Alberto Burri, for example, who in the 1950s stretched his frames with

heavy tarpaulin instead of fine canvas.

Actual painting occurs in Greber's work in as much the surfaces of objects made from cardboard are treated with paint in various ways. Fragments of the 'transformer station' and 'supermarket checkout' were initially covered with green industrial paint and given a semi-transparent shellac coating which left the underlying layer of paint still discernable. Temporal processes, traces of which are left by 'real' wear and tear, are thus also expressed metaphorically. Procedures such as deliberate dirtying, repair, dismantling or repainting bring about new conditions in the objects, so that they continually change from exhibition to exhibition.

Benjamin Greber distinguishes between objects that are solidly installed, directly connected to the given exhibition space and enter into a formal relationship to architecture¹, and those that are more like cast-offs, that lie around, not yet having found their place, waiting for something to happen to them.

The latter applies to a three-part work that was also exhibited in Herford. Tubular objects of cardboard show indications of interference or use. They are packaged in exactly fitting containers, like the styrofoam often used to protect technical or sensitive appliances in transport. Here the packaging seems unfinished, however. It has only been given a provisional coat of paint and displays pencil markings. And the fact that the containers and their tubes lie on palettes implies an interim situation. The objects still seem to be searching for their final state or definitive position.

Benjamin Greber's exhibitions often give the impression of an industrial warehouse that has been transported into the art context. This also suggests a reading of the objects in the tradition of the ready-made. But they are not 'real' ready-mades in Duchamp's sense of the things materially being what they appear to be: the bottle-drier is 'real', and its reproductions as a multiple, in as much as they count as or are intended to be 'real' Duchamps, are made from the same material as the drier Duchamp bought in a department store. (In the 1960s Duchamp replied to the Viennese museum director who wanted to acquire a bottle-drier for the collection by telling him to go to the same store and buy it there.)

Greber's approach seems to be closer to that of Fischli and Weiss, who cleverly inverted Duchamp's ready-made idea during the 1990s. They carved various everyday objects out of polyurethane and painted them to create the impression of real things. A ladder, tins of paint and other items standing around as if for the setting up of an exhibition are the artwork itself. The illusion is sustained by barriers preventing closer inspection of the polyurethane objects, as if the rooms were not yet ready. If it was once seen as an affront that Duchamp didn't produce his ready-mades himself, there seems to be hardly any reason today why artists should want to play the traditional craftsman again and apparently waste their time and effort carefully replicating objects when the real ones would do.

Greber's sculptures, unlike those of Fischli and Weiss, are not replicas of familiar everyday items, however, but peculiar objects that suggest technical functions without indicating any practical value. Some of them could almost be taken for visualisations of Odradek, the mysterious object or being central to Franz Kafka's short story *The Care of a Family Man*, published in 1920:

'One might be tempted to believe that this construction once had a form fit for some purpose and is only broken now. That doesn't seem to be the case; at least there is no indication of it to be found; nowhere are there damaged places or worn surfaces to be seen which might suggest as much; the whole thing appears to be pointless, but complete in its way. In any case, there is little to be said by way of further detail, as Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and elusive.' (Franz Kafka, *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*, trans. Joyce Crick, Oxford 2012, p. 29)

With Benjamin Greber it seems to be equally impossible to grasp the 'essence' of the things. And he too gives them mysterious names that express this fact. Almagia doesn't stand for a single object, however, but like a company or product name suggests a common affiliation, although there is no reference to the actual existence of such an enterprise. So Almagia is finally as imaginary as the implied movement in the Laocoön sculpture. With diverse references to the idea of process and transport, Greber breaks through the static, finished nature of sculpture without making use of kinetic or performance elements.

And yet an enduring tension arises between suggested stability and permanence as opposed to actual sensitivity and mutability. But unlike in a film, for example, which takes place before our very eyes, the change that occurs here is not anticipated from the very beginning. For the traditional expectation that sculptures don't change, except through the ravages of time or the impact of wind and weather, is not fundamentally invalidated by kinetic objects. If sculptures are to physically express the contemporary requirements of flexibility and mobility, they have to be able to continually change in themselves.

¹ A striking example of this is Greber's GREETINGS FROM HOLLERITH, an installation realised at the LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster in 2009. A piece of wall has been removed from an otherwise empty room to reveal two objects that initially appear to be connection boxes. A closer look reveals them to be grey roll-fronted cabinets containing piles of small cards.

In the 1880s the American engineer and entrepreneur Herman Hollerith developed and patented a punch-card system for data storage. In retrospect this was a predecessor of electronic storage techniques. It remained long in use, but gradually disappeared with increasing digitalisation. Greber now primarily reveals its sculptural qualities, well away from its earlier practical function.

He presents the cabinet, which of course is not a 'real' one, but an imitation in cardboard and MDF, like a found object uncovered from a previous era. As if it had disappeared behind a wall built later, only to reappear in the course of renovations: a process that could in fact have been possible. The exhibition Aufriss [Breakdown], which included Greber's installation, took place in a space which had already been emptied for renovation.