

Udo Koch: Ectoplasm and the *Wirtschaftswunder* Notes on work from 1988 – 91

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In his *Mechanization Takes Command*, the Swiss art historian Siegfried Giedion traces the effects of mechanization on various aspects of work, everyday life and art. One of the many interesting chapters of Giedion's interdisciplinary research is entitled Mechanization and Death: Meat. Beginning with Haussman's modernization of the abattoir - the construction of the slaughter house of La Villette, Giedion employs photographs and diagrams to illustrate the sometimes humorous, but mostly gruesome, history of attempts to mechanize the slaughter and processing of animals in the interest of maximizing profit.

Examining the evolution of 'mechanical hog scraping', Giedion discovers that creating machines adaptable to the infinitely varied contours of organic forms is so difficult, that after over one hundred years of failed attempts, the human hand remains necessary to properly finish the job. Scores of Kafkaesque devices were attempted; an illustration from 1900 shows a mechanism wherein the pig is drawn by a chain through a hoop from which protrude hundreds of hinged antennae fitted with tiny blades. A more successful solution was to plunge the carcass in a vat of molten wax, when the wax cools it is torn off in strips - taking the hair with it. Giedion concludes: "only the organic can conform to the organic". Although it has been decades since this work was published, a few phone calls to local slaughtering plants proved there is no reason to revise his conclusion.

I read *Mechanization Takes Command* on the suggestion of Udo Koch - that an artist would find this book compelling should not be surprising. It has often been argued that artists emerged from the transition to capitalism and modernity as autonomous agents because their job could not be mechanized. Freed from the service of the aristocracy, they were also of little use to the early capitalists who were more interested in the bottom line of maximizing profits. The artist was left with an empty and free hand with which he did as could be expected. The self-absorbed products of Aestheticism indicated the new autonomy of art and artist within bourgeois society. While the pay might be little, the potential for expression of personal autonomy is great. Art could also become a laboratory for less introspective research in those areas abandoned by a mismanaged Enlightenment.

Udo Koch's research is constantly developing in an enquiring, logical way. His early works begin with questions closer to the artist while his more recent projects extend outward, registering social and historic conditions. Koch's oeuvre begins with the hand of the artist; in this case it is not a fetish or necro-kitsch plaster cast in a velvet-lined vitrine, but a device that invites participation. *Hand* (1988) is not simply one of the first of his plaster pieces, it is an anchor to which all his subsequent works are tied and provides the initial key to their exegesis. *Hand* consists of four plaster of Paris discs held in an armature of two planes of particleboard. The discs are positive models of the spaces between the artist's outstretched fingers. The viewer is free to slide their own hand into the piece, as though it were a glove.

The off-white orbiculi are slightly imperfect in finish - betraying the quasi-organic mode of their 'growth' via a process of accretion (Koch's plaster discs begin as drawings, photographs or plastic moulds of negative spaces, from these he cuts a metal plate which will determine the disc's exterior contour. The plate is then attached to an armature which holds it parallel to a horizontal rod that can be turned by hand. Next, plaster is dripped onto the turning rod until it builds up to the limit set by the plate. After it dries, the plaster is removed from the rod, integrated into, or assembled to form the completed work.) Koch has been known to provide a supplement of *Hand* in the form of an enlargement from a grainy black & white Polaroid. While *Hand* provides a tactile negative of its referent, the photo is another indexical trace offering an illusory positive original. It is the zone of interplay between nature and machine entertained by Giedion to

which Koch directs our attention. Koch prefers archaic technologies because they bring us closer to understanding the relation between human and machine sometimes obscured by more dazzling, sophisticated technologies. Tracing any technology back to its genesis invariably demystifies it by revealing a prosthetic function or simulation of natural phenomena.

Clivia (1989) is constructed similarly to *Hand*, only this time the orbiculi are displayed like a string of rough pearls on the rod around which they grew. Again, the artist supplies a supplementary photograph as well as a drawing for a template. These documents show that the plaster discs derived their shapes from the spaces between the leaves of a house-plant. The photograph presents an ironic Garden of Eden - while the forests of Europe are choking and withering, tropical plants are imported as low-maintenance 'pets' for shoebox apartment dwellers. *Clivia* discovers and affirms the nature that is disguised through its transformation into artworks and commodities and rejects the pastoral as illegitimate for contemporaneity. It is not that artists are no longer concerned with the beauty of nature, but that they recognized there is no 'outside' from which to view it. With both *Hand* and *Clivia* Koch makes something of beauty not by picturing nature but by mimicking its creative process. This strategy has roots in Art Informel, arte povera and the 'process art' of the seventies, it has also been seen in the recent work of new artists concerned with ecological issues.

The world of mass culture and advertising has provided material for artists on both sides of the Atlantic. However, with Koch's brand-name works (1988 - 89), which take the form of drawings, graphics and wallpaper, it is apparent that the tautological re-presentations of American Pop Art are not on Koch's agenda any more than they were on Sigmar Polke's. Instead, the clearly hand-drawn designs evoke the early experiments of Warhol, before he made the decision towards mechanical media (it is noteworthy that Warhol returned to his handcrafted mode after Polke's American success in the 80's). Koch has chosen only brand-names that affect the appearance of handwriting i.e.; *Kellogg's*, *Milka*, and *Melitta*. Although the product of diligent research and the latest technology, these logotypes are intended to suggest an amiable, human quality. Koch undoes the designer's work by transforming these logotypes back into truly hand-made designs. He then parodies the manufacturer by mechanically reproducing multiples of his own, new design. Although these operations initially suggest an affinity to the Pop, appropriation or simulation strategies of other artists, Koch's manual mediation of his material points to the paradigm of craftsman rather than entrepreneur. Further, and most importantly, it is not the brand-name but its silhouette or the spaces between repeated brand-names that are in fact figured and enlarged. In engaging the name Koch goes further than a mute, Pop Art style affirmation and quite literally looks beyond its edge for an uninfected space. The signs and fetishes of commodity culture only provide a point of departure from which he leads us to a presently impossible place. Lacking a serious paradigm, we might expect it to resemble a happy Albania.

The group of works based on soft-drink and other beverage bottles continues Koch's consumption research in three dimensional forms. *Coca-Cola Flaschen* (1989) presents three free-standing plaster columns that are immediately recognizable as figurations of the space between two Coca-Cola bottles. A supplementary photo of various empty beverage containers proposes the artist's kitchen as studio of laboratory. The domestic correlate of the culture industry is the living room bathed in the electric light of the television, this is the true atelier of those artists lost or found in *The Forest of Signs*. Koch apparently has no taste for the tube and Baudrillard, but prefers to stay closer to the economic base. Koch's penchant for the supposedly obsolete is also reflected in his employment of a craft that reached its zenith in Rococo. Instead of aristocratic excess, he fashions a ghost architecture for the kingdom of Coca-Cola. Again, the strategy of multiplying these forms into larger works mimics mass production but is in actual fact closer to cottage industry.

Wertkauf (1989 - 90), is likewise a phantom *orbis pictus* for late capitalism. A department store catalogue provides an encyclopedic accounting of our cluttered world that will be invaluable anthropological information in future times. Koch repeats his strategy of cancelling out his referent and presenting the remainders as a positive figure. These designs will later find their way into applications as public artwork where they are sure to disturb. This work lacks the humour typical of Koch's other work, it suggests a kind of *vanitas* of the whole society caught in an apocalyptic flash of light.

In the recent series of *Kannen* pieces Koch returns to making plaster pieces but attaches them to the tea or coffee pots which are their referents. The *orbiculi* are now parasites appearing to have anchored themselves to the metal or ceramic pots like fungi on a tree trunk. The titles usually refer to the make or design of the pot Le.: *Arzberg* (1991), *China Green* (1991) and *Türkei* (1991). Occasionally, as with *Olaf* (1991), a work is named in homage to the friend who supplied the vessel.

All of the pots are products of mass production, they vary from the spartan and utilitarian, to the ornate and kitsch. Second-hand, they invite speculation about their owners; this one might have belonged to a Turkish guest-worker who has now returned to Dogubayazit, that one to a recently departed doctor's wife, and so on. The fetish character has been drained from these once-commodities and supplanted by the aura of years of use. We might describe a pot anthropomorphically as: '30 years old, in good shape and exhibiting a pretense to being of a higher station'. Finally, each pot is a picture of a world. Koch's selection is a testament to the failure of successive attempts to unite art and mass production. His intention is clearly critical or realist, but thankfully not dogmatic or didactic. Had he been born in former, more optimistic times, Koch might have been a follower of William Morris or an idealistic *Bauhausler*. That no such utopian movements are possible today does not deny the continuing utopian function of art.

Koch's 'empty' space, like the development of the 'white cube' gallery, is an allegory of the free space of art. His plaster emissions echo the volumes of ectoplasm that, earlier in modernity, were vomited in response to a rationalization of life. Koch's negativity takes a fluid form in order to cling to surfaces and penetrate crevices, eventually solidifying into figures that are nothing but ciphers for the real. Of course, the freedom of art can also be construed as its irrelevance, or complicity with the status quo. The extremes of art production today range from those that seek legitimation by reproducing social sciences or politics, to the mercenary, which takes its example from the 'entertainment' industry - both tendencies risk losing sight of personal autonomy. At a distance from this dynamic is an attitude that is not necessarily *l'art pour l'art*, but resists the pull to model artistic practice on activities in other areas. Udo Koch may utilize the expanded technique or vocabulary made available by previous avant-gardes, but he does not seek legitimation from outside the modern tradition of art. His 'academy' is of his own construction, as it must be for any artist today. From this position he is best able to make a picture both of the world he lives in and the world he would wish for.