

Eberhard Bosslet

EN - Janecke, Christian: Contemporary References to Material and Effect, Catalog Material & Effect, Kunsthau Dresden, Jul 1998

Material&Wirkung, Catalog Kunsthau Dresden, June 1998, by Christian Janecke

Contemporary References to Material and Effect

The history of art makes it wise to mistrust any praise of the „topical“. If the market prices set by trend-setting art magazines and large-scale exhibitions are taken as a yardstick, then the work of Eberhard Bosslet, Werner Klotz and Ottmar Sattel in the area of „Material and Effect“ can hardly be called topical. But if „topical“ is taken to mean not only what is now sensational, but what is now relevant, then things look very different; you just have to make the effort to draw comparisons, and you have to find arguments.

This investigation makes that effort: the approach of „Material and Effect“ is measured against its contemporary environment, looking at structures rather than names. The structures, strategies and the visual points of reference which are typical of „Material and Effect“ did not come about as arbitrary characteristics of a creature of fashion, rather they have identifiable roots, precursors and parallels. These, in turn, have of course not stood still, but have developed into the present time, sometimes remaining very similar, and in other respects changing a great deal. An investigation which refers only to the present would therefore be an unacceptable simplification.

In the first section I develop the idea of a transformation which already took place in the early eighties, of older principles of „Concrete Art“ and approaches from the field of arte povera or process art, and then I go on to discuss the consequences for the present in my second section. Because I can see common ground between „Material and Effect“ (in the following ME) and contemporary service art, the third section will be devoted to this issue. The few examples discussed will not give an overview, and not even a quintessence of each of the newest works of the artists in this exhibition, their main purpose will be to illustrate the ideas presented here. The very differing presentation in this text of the three artists in this exhibition says nothing about the artistic importance of each, but rather something about their significance for the subject in question.

Concrete art thematises its medium, but the mutual system of references between medium and representation which is its aim still always refers to the normal starting materials of the fine arts: stone, wood, metal and so on in sculpture; colour, light etc. in painting. Wood logically demonstrates that it can be split, stone its weight, paper the beautiful and manifold possibilities of layering or also of its destruction by varied forms of tearing. In the sixties there were two disruptions, which, though they made no impression on the credo of the unshakeable concrete artists, were highly significant for the transformations in the broader arena.

The first of these disruptions was brought about by minimal art, by replacing the usual artistic materials with materials normally used in industry, without renouncing the predilection for the elementary, for a brazen rhetoric of right angles and for silent repetition.

The second disruption was supported by arte povera, also process art and „Spurensuche“ and consisted in the programmatic revaluation of other „materials“ equally uncommon in art. These were driftwood, brushwood, clay, and also organic processes such as fermentation or growth, or the incorporation of living systems, including the use of animals.

Concrete art did not allow itself to be put off by either the emptiness of the minimalists or the practices of the other fraction, and consequently - strengthened in the face of the enemy - found its way to that mixture of pragmatism and purism, to which it and its legitimisation apparatus have remained true to this day, providing us with a production of basically limited prototypes, zealously varied according to position.

Above I suggested that these disruptions may have become a baptism by fire for the concrete artists, but there were none the less transformations in the broader arena, and these transformations must be looked for in various directions: firstly in the shift, advocated by Richard Serra in an exemplary way, from the objectivity of what is given in the work of art to the subjective experience of the observer, whose cautious, informative or even endangered observation of the work produces its meaning; secondly in a reference to place difficult to reconcile

with the orthodoxy of concrete art. Finally it would now be possible to refer to ME, and to the early period at the beginning of the eighties, when there was a peculiar synthesis of the self-referentiality of concrete art with materials and laws which were not usually associated with this movement, because they were often only indirectly to be visualised. Whereas concrete art wanted to reduce complexity by isolating single aspects or effects of earlier fine art and varying them for the sake of understanding, ME reacted to this immanent practice of the concrete artists, as some artists might have done a hundred years previously by turning away from the agreed contexts of salon painting or the saturation of *I pour l'art*, by pointing insistently to the given in its variety and its resistance. The artists of ME thus put their artistic faith less in the subject than in the events of fermentation in a bottle, in contouring ruined buildings with colour, or in allowing spiders to complete a man-made thread system. Chance occurrences which came with manifesting material relations, natural laws and processes, or with the direction in which a snail likes to crawl, were welcome, as long as they did not belong to the subject and the will of the artists.

Some recent approaches of ME can be fruitfully compared with post-modern further developments of, or rather attempts to refract concrete art, with Beat Zoderer as an exemplary figure. By taking the aesthetic tension of the coloured line in pictures of constructivist concrete modernism and repeating it as a factual tension of coloured household rubber bands on white carton, he leaves in doubt whether the practice of literality is of a parodistic and critical nature, or if it is not an homage, or simply a visual solution using the most simple means.

Eberhard Bosslet's „paintings“, which disputes the pictorial monopoly of the brush, functions according to just this literality: why should you use a brush, when industrial products use the most wonderful patterns and colours in such a way as perfectly to satisfy the requirement of self-referentiality? But- and here there is a difference to Zoderer's approach which is not always, but certainly very often applicable - Bosslet does not manoeuvre between parodistic quotation and cunning recapitulation. He does not make art about art, but he takes the literality seriously, something which he and Zoderer were able to learn from Robert Ryman, and perhaps also from Blinky Palermo. He does not use it for deconstruction, but neutrally investigates the potential of a heavy sheet of PVC, for example, and further uses this for definitely different visual aims than those of the concrete.

The different evaluation of a similar material-based type of working with reduced colour which the comparison has shown is not coincidental, but mirrors conflicts about the „colour ready made“ which has been simmering under the surface for the whole of our century, and which flagrantly came out into the open in the sixties. Marcel Duchamp, according to Thierry de Duve, did not raise the first, but the loudest doubt about the sense of choosing one colour in preference to another and justifying this choice with a rhetoric of necessity. This doubt can be seen in recent jokes at the expense of monochrome art, for example in the work of Johann Lorbeer, or Hanno Otten from Cologne, and certainly in the spatial work of Rockenschaub in the eighties. The development from Ryman to Rockenschaub is a development from a value-free, serious attempt to explore the visual consequences of the „colour ready made“ to deriding it, for example when the light really gathers in red Plexiglas screwed to the wall, and then moves out to the edges as a framing frost, so that the invoked aura of monochrome modernism is given over to exposing literality. Bosslet places himself between these possibilities, by accepting the seriousness of visual application with the consistency of Ryman, yet without relinquishing Rockenschaub's full use of the profane appearance of the PVC sheet, and its ready-made character, and thus losing his way in humility towards the material.

And now that it is a question of the „honest soul“ of the works: should Ottmar Sattel's understatement be believed? Asked about the meaning of the colour of a red hotwater bottle which he used in contrast to a white balloon, he smilingly pointed out that red hot-water bottles are the most common and therefore easiest to get. Admittedly, the main point is the differing elasticity of the rubber surfaces used, which resist the pressure of the gases in visually different ways. But the phenomenon with which the observer is confronted is two differently swelling bodies of differing colour; and when the development of a conceptual and ironic reference to colour and to monochrome in („concrete“) modernism discussed above is taken into account, the whole matter could be seen, a little overstated, as a spectacle of colour. Metaphorically speaking, the gases would then be the actors and the colour the play! This would be a „colour ready made“ of a special kind: the red hot-water bottle and its white counterpart would proclaim through expansion the non-identity of appearance and the materialised colour substance in the rubber, and they would do this with appropriate distance from the subject, because the artist lays aesthetic competence programmatically into the hands of fermentation processes!

And in any case it would be necessary, on closer investigation, to call into question Sattel's apparent mutual context of reference and illustration of medium and representation: taken alone the expansion of gases has no optical correspondence, and the round form of a coloured rubber balloon is contingent apart from the visual dimension of the expansion, and thus could just as well have been manifested in a different form, colour or type

of material. Thus the conclusion may be drawn that there is a performative function in addition to the visualised „material effect“, a conclusion which fits well with the considerations on colour made above.

When Sattel accelerates the yellowing of overlapping leaves pressed between sheets of glass by shining strong electric light on them, then it would seem fair to assume that the parascientific gesture of the staging of variations and the setting in a pictorial quadrant of coordinates is intended to improve the readability and the quantification of the project. In fact the voluminous lamps have a status which far transcends the putatively purely technical function, because their character is expressive - just like those modernist buildings which not only embodied but also portrayed functionalism.

It is not necessary to prove that Werner Klotz's work transcends mere visualisation of „material effect“; his early poetic, and in part consciously contrastive use of snails in various tableaux already shows the ability to be amazed, which can hardly be brought into line with the traditions already discussed or brought in for the purpose of comparison. The mythological, sometimes also symbolic or reproductive, then at other times just self-representing functions, which the material „glass“ later assumes for Klotz have long departed from the terrain of ME - unless, that is, the subsumption of the early manifesto, which presents itself as a statute, were, in an act of hermeneutic malice, to be taken literally, in which case Klotz's use of glass would still belong to ME, but then so would pretty well all art, which would make the categorisation more or less meaningless! One might object that a use of material in line with ME provides only the basics, on which a metaphorical use could then build, for example (but always with the properties of the material as such in mind). But in this case one would have to admit that this contribution was already made by an older generation of artists, for example Beuys, who was able to combine material properties and representative or symbolic functions by using a downright iconography of material; Mario Merz's use of glass should also be pointed to.

Let me not be misunderstood: I intend no devaluation of Werner Klotz's works, but only observe that especially his later work is not only a very advanced transformation of „ME“, as is the case for Sattel and Bosslet in their different ways, but that it is strictly speaking an equally justified combination - using themes and methods from quite different artistic realms, which - understandably - are not to be thematised here.

But I would like to relativise the observation just made, because there is a further perspective on ME, which allows discussion of the recent work of Werner Klotz and also that of Eberhard Bosslet -, namely the perspective of service art which I mentioned in my introduction.

In the following I understand service art to be not only services offered, but also offers for use of products in the artistic field, thus, for example, not only travel agencies or address services with an artistic dimension, but also Zbigniew Libera's birthstools for small girls or Carsten Hller's „Happiness“.

Sometimes the sense of order as in a laboratory, more often the appearance of technical utilizability, and finally also the way „Material and Effect“ views itself all justify a comparison with service art, even if ME's investigation of reality hardly flirts with extraartistic meaning, but rather „serves“ the education of perception and sensibility. Werner Klotz's visual instruments show affinities to the offers made by service art, without, for example in the case of „Telescope Instrument“, seriously wanting to compete with optical instruments and their complex possibilities for application. The interested observer takes a preciously silver-plated glass instrument which looks like a telescope out of a cross between a chest and a glass cabinet, the floor of which is a mirror. A chain on a keystone protects from theft but allows the unsupervised observer a certain freedom of use; but of course it is a question as well of the representation of this protection, just as the variety of materia and its sumptuous presentation rather encourage a game according to the rules of art than pragmatic use. If the object is used in this way, then one eye of the observer sees itself, the other looks into a Euclidean grid and kaleidoscopic hall of mirrors with the same number of cubic cells as round holes each with an eye looking back. This is really a beautiful effect, and possibly „the telescope instrument works as a tool of elementary self-reflections“, but a more modest and sober arrangement would have sufficed for that. If what goes beyond this should not be disqualified as mannered, then this work cannot be stylised as an optical didactic tool of self-recognition. Instead of that a more fruitful idea is that the offer for use should be observed in its own right.

No one will or should have to believe on first sight that Eberhard Bosslet's hydraulic cushions, compressions, barricades are actually designed for non-aesthetic use, but sometimes they are seen to possess forces and effects, which they directly visually embody, or the appearance of which they assume. The observer believes that he is really feeling pressure, although he is merely inferring it or is taken in by the actualisation of an internalised cliché. It is easy to believe, when seeing Bosslet's connecting architectonic supports, that something is being supported or blocked off. Natural laws or relationships of effect become expressive or virulent, and rarely play any further role. Gravity, pressure in containers etc. indicate their potential for use, but rather as a prototype would do, a prototype of which they themselves are the only model. Service art, on the other hand, imitates technologically and structurally polished utilizability. Service art advertises praxis extrinsic to art in the

name of art- and thus compromises aesthetic appearance. Its potential utilizability is thus framed by the merits of a prestige transference of the imitated object realm, so that it ultimately reveals itself to be radical naturalism. In respect of the type of praxis which service art aims at there can be no doubt that the service of service art must always hopelessly lose out to professional businesses, due to a lack of real networking. The appearance that remains beyond this (e.g. the „sense of a travel agency“) necessarily belongs to the realm of the cliché or the counterfeited model, because any deviation as alienation would endanger the imitation and also the plausibility.

To give an example of a similar pseudo utilizability: Z. Liberas's birthstools seem warlike because our knowledge of similarly formed real birth chairs allows us to draw the planned and outrageous analogy to potential use. But there is no sense in which Liberas's birthstools visually carry in themselves any of the effect which intends to shock, their formal language is more harmless than that of a fitness trainer. But a work by Bosslet offers utilizability or evokes danger in exactly the manner which is visualised in the work, only as a prototype, but as a genuinely designed one. Some observers may see here a return to a principle, that was embodied in Klapheck's obsessive typewriters, for example, which were only threatening in just that specific way which came about as a result of their own images, instead of simply being a parasite of a generally threatening appearance; Bosslet's putative technical relevance is similarly precise, because it is visualised. Its potential lies in the combination of the service of service art with the possibility of fiction, a supposed effect expresses itself only via form in a specific and genuine way. I believe that this makes out the topicality of „Material and Effect“, which neither expends itself in the mere effect of material revealing itself (parallel to artistic elements revealing themselves in Concrete Art) nor, on the other hand, in the dull alternative of service art: pure naturalism or pseudo-praxis.

Service art polarises the options „observation“ and „use“ and thus threatens to trivialise them. Because the works of „Material and Effect“ combine both aspects from the outset, and at the same time do not aim at any contexts really distant from art and relevant to praxis, they can mistrust the animation programme reclaimed by service art, without having to suggest to the observer a remorseful return to the pure play of reflected contemplation.