

## **A POSSIBLE ARCHITECTURE**

**I am interested in a possible architecture. In my work I start with form or material that often comes from outside of it. In the conviction that things can always be re-examined and reinterpreted, they can also be seen as architecture. The way someone can see a butterfly or a lake in the ink blots of a Rorschach test. I want to look freely - more or less without a plan - at material gestures and found forms and let them perform as architecture. In this way, architecture emerges by imagining a next step to the previous steps that have been taken. I want the work to remain interpretable exactly the way it originated.**

### **I**

**In the documentary ZIZEK!<sup>1</sup> we see philosopher Slavoj Zizek explain his spontaneous attitude toward the origin of the universe. He starts with the idea of a total void – there is nothing. But how do things originate in that nothingness? Quantum physics is based on the idea that the universe is a positively charged void. And that specific things originate when there is an imbalance in that charge. There is not nothing – there are things. It means that something has gone terribly wrong in the universe. That what we call creation is a cosmic imbalance. A cosmic catastrophe. That things exist by accident.**

### **II**

**In his 1978 lecture HOW TO BUILD A UNIVERSE THAT DOESN'T FALL APART TWO DAYS LATER,<sup>2</sup> the American novelist Philip K. Dick also refers to the universe. It is his work as a science-fiction writer to create worlds, and in such a way – at least according to the demands of his editors – that these worlds do not fall apart two days later. Yet in his lecture Dick reveals that these worlds in fact have to fall apart. He loves chaos above all else, and he wants to describe how the characters in his stories deal with it. “Do not believe – and I am dead serious when I say this – do not assume that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe. The old, the ossified, must always give way to new life and the birth of new things. Before the new things are born the old must perish. This is a dangerous realization because it tells us that we must eventually part with much of what is familiar to us. Unless we can psychologically accommodate change, we ourselves will begin to die, inwardly.” What Dick means is**

that objects, habits and ways of living are always transient, so that his precious authentic human being can survive. And that it is this authentic human being who is viable – an elastic organism that can bend, absorb and deal with the new and the still unknown.

### III

Around 1915 the Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach devised a psychoanalytic test based on 15 ink blots. The blots are nothing more than a little ink on a sheet of paper folded in two and pressed together. A simple process, in which the utility of these constellations of shapes, to him, lay in the accidental nature of their creation. The psychologist used the images to uncover hidden character traits in his patients based on how they interpreted the blots. Not as an expression of imagination, but as a form of observation. You could argue, as did the American psychologist John E. Exner, that the test is based on misperception. The only factual answer to the question “What do you see?” is an ink blot on a sheet of paper that has been folded in two and pressed together. Every other answer is about interpretation, such as identifying the blot as a very badly drawn butterfly, or about misperception, by seeing the blot as a butterfly after all. But it is precisely this form of misperception that interests me about the blots. In reality it is only material and form, but it is a human compulsion to always want to identify something, even if what we are seeing is entirely new to us. And that is precisely the key to these blots. What we see we have never seen before in that way. That makes it possible to develop a renewed image, one still open to interpretation and identification, yet is sufficiently concrete and specific to hold on to.

### IV

“When I start with an empty canvas, I can, practically and theoretically, smear it with anything I want.” Gerhard Richter is in conversation with art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.<sup>3</sup> They are sitting in Richter’s studio. And just before this statement by Richter, Buchloh has confessed that he has always interpreted the work incorrectly, in the many texts he has written about the work, because he wanted to explain the work. This brings them to the question of what Richter actually does when he makes his abstract, scraped oil paintings, and what the meaning or interpretation of that work is. When is a work good or bad?

Only when there is something on the canvas can Richter respond to it by destroying it, changing it, smearing it away or repeating it. There is no pre-determined plan in the making of the painting. There is perhaps

something like a vague idea, an intuition. It is like simply beginning to walk in an unknown place. But if there is no plan, how do you know what a good next step is? Every step, Richter explains, is an answer to the previous step that was taken. And every step is harder and harder to take. Until no more steps can be imagined, and there is nothing wrong anymore. But indicating when the work is good, and therefore no longer bad – that is incredibly difficult.

The two look around the studio, and out of the 42 works hanging there they both point out one work they find very good. What is their joint capacity to see that is precisely this work that is good? There are identifiable, specific criteria that are important. There is a degree of innovation, of something new – of never having seen something like this. There is the discrepancy between what you know and what you experience. When someone makes or writes something he can start from what he has learned, or he can try to put a new experience into words. In Richter’s work there is no mystification, religion, subconscious, surreality or experience of nature. The work is verifiable thanks to what is visible. Yet its power lies in the impossibility of describing what one experiences when one sees it. It is an experience to be able to see the work as yet undefined, when it still provides enough freedom to be able to interpret it freely, and on the other hand provides enough to hold onto and lends enough conviction in everything that is visible. A framework for an experience in which the viewer has to find himself in an image that cannot yet be explained.

<sup>1</sup> Zizek! (2005), directed by Astra Taylor

<sup>2</sup> Philip K. Dick, ‘How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later’ in: I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1-23

<sup>3</sup> ‘Benjamin H.D. Buchloh im Gespräch mit Gerhard Richter’ (17 May 2009), in: Gerhard Richter Painting (2011), directed by Corinna Belz

## **MATERIAL GESTURE**

**As architects we work with material to construct our work. How we make things depends largely on the materials we produce for our constructions. How and in which sizes the wood is cut is of an influence in the way we make our window frames or a wooden floor, the steel profiles are at the base of our steel structures.**

**When we would openly look again at source of material and its production we could take the gestures we recognize in them as the start of renewed approach. These gestures could redefine ways of making and constructing and question: what are the gestures that give shape to the environments we inhabit? What is the correlation between material and craft? What places of production do we see now, in the past and in the future?**

**Nowadays 3D printing is seen as one of the examples where the production of something is related to the place where and when it is needed. A shift that shortcuts material production and construction. Again, as it did in the past when houses were made out of mud on which the houses stood. Or temples were carved out of the mountains.**

**In the writings of Roland Barthes on the work of Cy Twombly, Barthes defines the term gesture as a surplus of an action. An action he writes: "... is transitive, it seeks only to provoke an object, a result." Whereas the gesture is: "the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, indolences which surround the action with an 'atmosphere'." The gesture does not necessarily bears the logic of cause and effect, as an action would do. A gesture is the production of an effect and at the same not to search for one. In other words the gesture is something not so apparent as a causal logic, but a thing more bound to the character of a certain act and in this case to a material.**

**Barthes describes the essence of the work of Twombly through the material. His art consist in making things seen - not the things he represent. Let me rephrase Barthes argument in a reverse order to end with the surface (the canvas or paper) the work is made on: "We might observe that these gestures, which aim to establish substance as a fact, are all related to 'dirtying'. A paradox: the fact, in its purity, is best defined by not being clean. Take an ordinary object: it is not its new, virgin state which best account for its essence, but it worn, lopsided, soiled, somewhat forsaken condition: the truth of things is best read in the cast-off. The**

truth of red is in the smear; the pencil's truth is in the wobbly line." What Barthes tells us, is that when we see the material smeared, clotted and scratched we see its real character. When seen a perfect straight black line of the pencil or a square painted red, we see form and color and we might understand what it represents. But when the paint is smeared over the surface with its different intensities of red and different thicknesses, that is when we start to see its real substance. And Barthes relates the gestures of Twombly with the surface it is brought on: "No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal, set in motion by some accident: there is the texture of the paper, then the stains, the hatchings, the tracery of strokes."<sup>1</sup>

Let me make a step to broaden the view on what material gesture might be also about. In 1970 Roger Caillois wrote a book with the title L'ECRITURE DES PIERRES (The Writing of Stones). In the book he shows a collection of interiors of agate, jasper, and onyx stones. The remarkable thing in these stones is that we tend to see images in them. One of these stones suggest a view of a typical English landscape. Another, a bit more abstract, but clearly still indicates a spatial angled structure. What fascinates me in these stones, is that we first of all see the material of the stone, and when we would be able to hold it in our hands we would feel its heaviness and we would touch its surface. Next to it, we see in the material of the stone an image of something else: a landscape, a spatial structure. Caillois writes: "Who knows whether this tumult of triangles inscribed in the stone, first brought about nature and then by art, does not contain one of the secret cyphers of the universe?" So what 'secret' message of the universe is found in the stone that Caillois shows us? We could say that the image is the gesture of the stone. What could we do with its gesture? Should we construct the space it indicates in the image of the stone with the stones?

Last year I saw three times a stone in the work DISRUPTION OF THE ANTICIPATED FUTURE of the Belgian artist Koenraad Dedobbeleer. I don't know what Dedobbeleer's specific intentions are with this work, but let me explain what I saw in it. The largest object is a faceted form. It looks like an abstracted natural form - in my view it looks like a stone. Seeing it as a stone is strengthened by the surface of it, which is made with sheets of formica that has an image of again a stone. Dedobbeleer might have made this constructed stone in formica and form and thought it could not stand straight up or not in the way he wanted it to stand up. And for the support

he needed, he used two real stones.

Let's relate his work to material gesture. We now have an idea about what a gesture is, as described in Roland Barthes text and we have a double view of stone as a material thing and an image - in Caillois' words a 'writing of the stone'. In the case of Dedobbeleer's work we see how these relate together in one work, where we see a stone, a constructed stone and an image of the surface of a stone. Three times you could say the same stone, and also three gestures bound to the stone.

<sup>1</sup> Cy Twombly: Works on Paper and The Wisdom of Art, Roland Barthes in The Responsibility of Forms