

Broom, Broom Maneuvers for the Creation of Pure Immediacy // Nora Sdun

In her art, Stella Geppert uses the common, indeed the wearily familiar, in unusual, stubbornly estranged ways. She balances: space, space as frame, the body, movement. Here, movement is a fully-grown, two-headed Push-Me-Pull-You. What we have before us is the result of a ritualistic, industrious activity, magnificently busy, prominently nervous that has unfolded during the making of the exhibition. A ritual that reminds us of notions of purity in art—ancient, pseudo-intellectual babble brought into the world by, shall we say, Winkelmann—a characteristic from which art has shaken itself free. It has been quite a while since art had to satisfy the criterion of purity. However, these once binding claims are not easily forgotten; especially when the advertising industry hawks drivel on purity for every pore of the skin, and the co-inventor has a name like “Winkel”... And so it is considered downright slovenly to welcome guests to an exhibition with dirty floors and dusty corners, although art is allowed to be “dirty.” One therefore sweeps the exhibition space. For Stella Geppert the convention of purity, like the modification of pure art into a sweeping ritual, becomes sometimes awkward or malicious through her making one simple shift in proportion: the broomstick is unusually long.

The effect is that the space appears to annoy the person sweeping. The broomstick gets caught on the ceiling. It is as if the space wants to constantly point to itself as a special space; a space that is always cleaned with particular care, a vain gallery space that is in the position to transform something into art that in other circumstances would not be recognized as such. And another appalling fact becomes obvious—the price of a carefully cleaned floor is a messed-up ceiling. (There is no danger to the ceiling lights, they have been removed and stored on another floor.)

Which would you prefer, dirt on the ceiling or dirt on the floor? Although it is rather unusual, probably dirt on the ceiling, as long as it doesn't drift down. Or, if only for pragmatic reasons, dirt on the ceiling is less obvious. Only in grand buildings and churches do we look at the ceiling to marvel at some frescos or stucco works, colorful mud formations that one really wouldn't want on the floor, if only because of the danger of tripping. By way of grand buildings and churches, one moves from cleaning scenarios back into the galleries, where well-verses visitors immediately look at everything even the ceiling. For one now looks to the art exhibition as one once sought stately grandeur and religious edification. The gallery space holds out the promise that something is to be found within. And Stella Geppert draws together the historical development of ritual and space with the seldom considered displacement activities of the contemporary artist.

What's more, the artist plays tricks with a well-known artistic problem. Geppert's work is concerned with the loss of immediacy that, once lost, cannot be regained despite the will's every effort. Even Hegel verified this and he is right once again—which is why many generations of artists have thought up the most unbelievable ruses in order to restore a mystifying moment of immediacy for the artist and the viewer. Such ruses include painting with the left hand for a change when one is right-handed, painting in the dark, dripping paint, or other methods of chance.

With this broom the artist achieves what Hegel ruled out. The fastidious effort of the will to clean the floor of the exhibition space conjures an immediate, freehand drawing onto the ceiling.

For along with a Karl-Valentinesque action of sweeping using a tool that is not appropriate for the dimensions of the room, it is also concerned with a graphic documentation of the sweeping movement made by the tip of the broom on the ceiling.

Documentation, in the sense of a comprehensible reproduction of the sweeping, is the wrong word. Rather, we are dealing with a parody, with an untidy scrawl that in no way reproduces the systematic act of sweeping, but nevertheless records it simultaneously as the process runs its course. It is actually closer to the Push-Me-Pull-You in the Dr. Doolittle novel than the broom that the Goetheian magician's apprentice sends to get water. The Push-Me-Pull-You has two heads and is therefore in constant conflict—one head wants to clean the other head wants to draw. Both are only possible simultaneously in a space with the appropriate ceiling height.

Stella Geppert performs an ironic maneuver to create pure immediacy. There it is again, that word purity.

It is particularly fine that while the floor below is absolutely cleaned, that is, made pure, on the ceiling above, pure (i.e. absolute) immediacy reigns. The artist neither scribbles willfully on the ceiling, nor does she seek to place Hygieia,

a goddess of purity and cleanliness, or a Mary, on a throne of clouds or some such thing. Instead, she concentrates on cleaning the floor, and her tool, like all brooms, sweeps reliably throughout. Only the broom handle catches, brakes, jams, slips, indeed draws, on the ceiling.

The refuse remains on the floor; it is not transported with a vacuum cleaner from floor to ceiling and pompously displayed there. On the ceiling of the room is only a drawing, a drawing that only a social sculpture could leave behind.

The Ante-Chamber Exposing a Leading Actor

Lobbying and antichambre, that is, the bowing and scraping in the ante-chamber of an aristocrat or minister to achieve one's ends, are in effect synonymous. The words have been in the world for different lengths of time, thus they are bound to their respective world languages. Both modes of behavior play out in the outer offices of power. The lobby as a waiting room which doubles as a rehearsal stage. Of course, these rehearsal stages or foyers could be furnished with those black and silver stackable chairs, for example. The work of the lobbyist is always framed by the furnishings of the person who lays down the rules of the game. That is one of the odious details one remembers in dreams, in government buildings, school halls, service centers, and other places. Naturally, museums and art galleries are also included.

In this case, the character of the waiting lobbyist in an ante-chamber has evidently been turned into furniture. Although they are still identifiable as chairs, they are chewed-up, rearranged, and altogether disheveled. They are chewed-up, atomized, and somehow disheveled, although they are still identifiable as chairs. The back rests have transformed themselves into the seats; the flat surfaces have slumped into each other like tired warriors. In order to maintain some semblance of form, their typical designer-waists have moved to their bottoms. Really, a scene right out of a bizarre dream.

A mini-excursus on sitting is absolutely necessary so as to avoid jumping too quickly to fatalistic conclusions and getting pulled down into little whirlpools regarding artists as self-promoting lobbyists who process gallery furniture into junk in spurts of well-dosed vindictiveness. Originally reserved for kings, office furniture eventually became a guarantee against continual protests marches. "The I seats itself," claimed Fichte and Nietzsche drew a little chair in the margin of his edition of Fichte's work. Descartes managed to achieve proof of the existence of God only after he recognized himself in a rocking chair. Beckett, consistent with his thought, tied up his naked hero with straps to his rocking chair. In another Beckett play, a character who cannot sit is pushed around in a wheelchair; a strange, nasty variation on the "Master and Slave" relationship set out by Hegel. That unholy theory is, above all else, the product of a cultural history of sitting, whose intricately twisted posture allowed an equally intricately twisted way of thinking a better seat at the table. A society takes its place. And so for a few hundred years thinking presupposes bodily immobility. (And whoever claims they think while engaging in sports is lying. For philosophizing while in motion is particularly rare, though the aforementioned Nietzsche insisted on it and, happily, Walter Benjamin had a thing or two to say about those who stroll. The Situationists were said to be great prowlers, although their name sounds suspiciously like sitting. However, all of the above do not currently have a lobby.)

Again Stella Geppert apprehends ritual and space, coupled with the precise probing of the terrain in which artists move, and she exposes a leading actor rarely seen—the seat.

SB Your installations tread a fine line between sculpture and architecture; yet they cannot be definitely assigned to either discipline. Depending on the location of the observer, they appear as an architectural element, or sometimes as a sculptural or pictorial instance.

SG I understand sculptural work as a process that emerges from dominant bodily actions, modes of behavior, as well as the architectural relationships in a space. These motivate movements and generate images. In my work, spatial elements are dislodged; “they move” between artistic intervention and actual occurrences. Locations and points of view are set into action. In that moment, definitions begin to oscillate and acquire new meanings. I regard space as something constantly in motion, continually reconfiguring itself. Yet, even when I work with space concretely as material, I probe it beyond its physical materiality.

SB Sculpture and installation coexist happily in your work, indeed often in a relationship of reciprocal influence. Your installations are frequently site-specific and take into account the concrete factors of the spatial environment, or react to them. How do you approach the spaces for which you develop your installations?

SG This amicable coexistence arises because I begin developing my sculptural and installation works from the existing structures present in the objects and spaces. These structures are legible in the signs of use; one can reconstruct them with the help of histories of use. Like a field researcher, I try to distill the essential characteristics of a space. Concretely, I pursue marks and structures while inspecting rooms and the surrounding environs. Meticulous, exacting, photographic notes and discussions with the people who use the space also influence me. Looking back, almost all of my installations seize upon former modes of use, found working conditions, or production facilities that I detect while I am there. This is particularly apparent in the work “Ohne hier ohne da” (without here without there). Since transportation costs were not included in the budget for the exhibition, I went there without materials. The idea to use the bicycle for the installation came to me because I used the curator’s bicycle to get around during the three days we installed the show, and because bicycles are stored in the space when the gallery is closed. It formed the basis of my intervention and other objects were placed on top of it. The gallery carpet that is normally rolled out was pointing at both entrances of the room—former women’s and men’s restrooms—and was wedged between the walls. The fluorescent lamps in the gallery formed the concluding arrangement of the carefully stacked laths.

SB And what approach did you take in developing “Unabhängig von der Lage” (independent of the situation)?

SG In a departure from my usual methods, I seldom went to the site. Using a model in my studio, I tried out different variations. I concentrated on the characteristic elements of the exhibition space: the pattern on the ceiling, the lighting construction, and the blinds. During the development phase, I was bothered by an area of the ceiling that lacked the typical pattern. I pursued it further and discovered that there was a passage to the floor above. I had the sheetrock removed which revealed a shaft measuring 140 × 140 cm. It went exactly one floor higher. I placed five ceiling lamps and two blinds at varying intervals all the way up to the ceiling of the floor above. I repaired portions of the ceiling underneath with new sheetrock cut in a coffered pattern. In this work, something is simultaneously deconstructed and constructed.

SB A recurring experience in your installations is that they incorporate structures that are hidden as well as clearly recognizable. But only through your interventions do they become manifest or truly visible. “Bist du da?” (are you there?) also plays with this experience, this moment of revealing and a simultaneous pulling-away by means of reflection, with reality and illusion, reality and reflection. What does this approach hold for you?

SG The exposure of and penetration into spatial structures, the appearance and the real materiality of spaces with definite atmospheres were present in my work from the very beginning. One of the first works that thematically dealt with architectural space is “Entfestigung” (defortification). In that work, the floors of an apartment building appeared to dissolve by means of a large, oversized form that resembled a blanket and bulged out of all the windows. In “Bist du da?,” I make use of the wall, including the door, that was used in the earlier exhibition and drill through the solidly built sheetrock of the gallery. Behind the panels there is a complete set of windows. Sheetrock may be concealing the windows, but they are present nevertheless and palpable through the resonance created when walking in the room. In “Bist du da?” they are visible in places. Noteworthy here is that spectators perceive the space while moving through it and at the same time can observe themselves from above as well as below. It is the movement through a space that makes these spatially constituted moments most intensely felt.

SB Do you prefer to conceal or to reveal?

SG The important thing is how much is being exposed or revealed.

SB In recent environmental works such as “Nowhere is Everywhere,” “Unabhängig von der Lage,” and “Bist du da?” you deploy mirrors that are perforated in places. How did you choose this special, evocative material?

SG At that time, I was studying the spatial theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The preoccupation with smooth and striated space inspired me to develop the perforated mirrors. The de-functionalized mirrors reflect the body or spatial

fragments and allow the real as well as illusionary spatial relationships to coalesce into a collage. When looking through the ceiling opening the levels also optically interlock so that their spatial dimensions are difficult to determine. The spatial layers contract. Thus, the space undergoes a simultaneous expansion and compression.

SB In works that can be described as formally sculptural, you also conduct spatial studies: a broom is furnished with a piece of graphite so that it spans the entire height of the room. Then you sweep the floor with this object and in so doing produce a drawing on the ceiling that visually records the movements and at the same time circumscribes their limits. You play with habits of visual perception and create surprising spatial as well as sculptural effects.

SG For me, the distinctive aspect of the work is that in the course of the action both activities mutually influence each other. As the sweeping ritual takes place it is inscribed into the room. The rhythm of cleaning engenders a staccato-like free drawing. However, there are no marks on the ceiling above the pile of swept-up debris. I titled the work „Ohne es zu merken“ (without noticing it) because we carry out permanent acts that continually and unwittingly generate space and we inscribe ourselves into that space.

SB In “Ohne es zu merken,” we encounter a recurring element in your work: performance. What fascinates me about your work is your processual handling of space. You capture the function of the locations and thematize the movements you find there. However, you do not permanently arrest them, but rather you create a basis from which to initiate a new dynamic. You provide the impetus for a new orientation.

SG In general, my overriding interest has always been the way we physically and mentally appropriate space and locate ourselves within it so as to express our social relationships and orient ourselves. It is never “copy and paste,” but always “enter and change.” Specifically in my works, modes of behavior are questioned and negotiated concretely and spatially, if only for a moment. So, for instance, in the work “Parasitäre Verhältnisse und Dialoge” (parasitic relationships and dialogues) at the U2-Alexanderplatz subway station in Berlin: There, in those locations where I noticed that people casually leaned, I installed cushions of different sizes. The sizes were determined by how often pedestrians used the spot for leaning. By highlighting private gestures, public architecture designated for purely functional purposes was undercut. The cushions that the pedestrians intuitively used, their related modes of behavior that underwent change, the lounging about, looking and being looked at, etc. all this gave the space a communicative charge and redefined it.

SB The cover-image on the catalogue is an apt example of your open interaction with space, two-dimensional as well as three-dimensional. In “Both at the Same Time,” two fingerprints are centrally placed on an empty, flat piece of paper and divide it. At the same time, they form the points at which the paper is attached to the wall. They represent the hinge-points from which the paper curves forward into the room. The paper becomes the means by which and through which the space unfolds.

SG In this work, I used a piece of paper and played with simple, common forms. Actually, I wanted to create a depiction, but the result is a classical form of sculptural casting. The gesture of the cast and the contact pressure caused a spatial setting to reveal itself.

SB Again and again, viewers of your works are sent through your artistic oeuvre on a search for clues. You lay a trail for them with fingerprints, perforated mirrors, or a graphite drawing on a ceiling and compel them to actively investigate.

SG When movement processes condense within a work, there are moments in which space is created; they affect the spectator as well as the corresponding space. For only in those moments, in my opinion, can habits of visual perception be transformed into existential spatial experiences. This approach is essential to my work.

SB The catalogues “ach so” (oh, I see), and “Unabhängig von der Lage” encompass your playful and experimental way with “space.” The dynamic inherent in your works is expressed in the conceptual design. Coffee stains and fingerprints awaken inclinations toward criminal forensics. Subtle humor and formal rigor are as much a part of your publications as your artworks.

SG The coffee stain (on the catalogue cover) is an irritant. It captures casual, quotidian activities and marks the location, the place that was formerly occupied by the coffee cup. The catalogue doubles as a utilitarian object. Catalogue users find themselves tempted to ascribe the marks to their own negligence. Authorship of this action requires an explanation, initiating an investigation of the actions. In “Both at the Same Time” fingerprints first appear as black organic dots. It takes a moment until one sets off in pursuit of the tracks.