

[ESC] – On Virtuality And Dissolution In The Work Of Ursula Döbereiner

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How does one go on living when the music dies down? For Ludwig II of Bavaria, this question reached an existential dimension. His response was a gesture of flight into the artificial parallel worlds he retreated to to escape reality's outrages.

In her installation *esc002* (2006) for the exhibition "You Won't Feel A Thing: On Panic, Obsession, Rituality and Anesthesia" at Kunsthaus Dresden, Ursula Döbereiner exclusively used motifs from the interior of the Linderhof Palace the Bavarian king had built in 1870 in the seclusion of the mountains near Ettal. Here, Ludwig II staged his dream of absolutism as an architectural phantasm in Neo-Baroque form. Linderhof was a theatrical stage architecture of historicism that assumed the effects of past building forms for the purpose of exaggerating an illusionism. The amalgamation of ornament, architecture, sculpture, and painting as well as the extravagant abundance of decoration in the mirrored halls and suites of rooms were meant to dissolve spatial boundaries and overwhelm the viewer. The rooms of the palace are a product of a romantic imagination; they function like a narcotic and turn history into a cloak that Ludwig II could wrap himself up in like a precious ermine fur.

In Döbereiner's installation, which is based on photographs of the Linderhof Palace, this illusionistic architecture is disrobed, reduced to a skeleton, calculated down to a binary code of 0 and 1. What remains of the gold-leaf rocaille, mirrors, paintings, Louis Quinze furniture, and the Carrara marble of the sculptures are the cool black and white digital contour drawings that are plotted and wallpapered as room-sized computer prints in the exhibition space. In the collage, in which all motifs are rendered equivalent, various views overlap in shifting perspectives and degrees of enlargement to create a dense web of pixelated lines.

This process of transformation generates a new, imaginary space that is superimposed over the existing architecture of the exhibition room. Döbereiner's drawing construction turns the classical interior element of wallpaper into a projection surface, tapping into the architecture's phantasmagorical core in order to activate the viewer's power of imagination. Döbereiner's strategy proves to be a necessary operation that saves this effect over the distance of time by peeling off the visible surface like a layer of dead skin. Thus, her handling of historical architecture as palimpsest is comparable to a digital file that can be revised and rewritten at any time.

Through Döbereiner's intervention, the walls of the exhibition space are transformed into screens, made virtual; they open up into the imaginary and, to the contemporary viewer, become as transparent as Linderhof's interiors were for Ludwig II. This corresponds to the virtual nature of all of Döbereiner's installations, which exist as digital blueprints in a pool of drawings in her computer and are later altered and printed for a concrete exhibition site. "Esc" was not only installed at Kunsthaus Dresden, but in modified form at Kunstverein

Tiergarten in Berlin (*esc003*, 2006) at the centre d'art passerelle in Brest (*esc004*, 2007), at the WYSPA Institute of Art in Gdansk (*esc005*, 2007), and as part of a collaborative work with Katharina Schmidt and Bettina Allamoda in the Project Room of the Deutscher Künstlerbund (Association of German Artists), Berlin (*esc006*, 2007).

With her installations, Döbereiner inscribes another spatial perspective into the exhibition space that juxtaposes Ludwig II's escapism with the function of the esc key. Here, a quiet complicity emerges that also highlights the parallels between historicism and post-modernism. Today, computers accomplish what architecture once achieved by means of an eclecticism of styles: the creation of virtual worlds. Where Ludwig

in his flight from reality recycled history through architecture in order to inhabit it, Döbereiner recycles found visual worlds through the medium of drawing. Both cases involve strategies of dissolving spatial boundaries and appropriating mediated realities.

Döbereiner uses the mass medium of photography to appropriate the illusory architecture of Linderhof, the result of an assimilation of already existing styles— digitalizing it in the computer as a drawing, collaging the elements using copy & paste, and finally restoring them to physical form as plotted wallpaper. It is a circular process in which the boundaries between signifier and signified are leveled out; its electronic equivalent would be sampling. In this regard, Döbereiner is less interested in the subject matter represented than in its quality as image.

The artist counters Ludwig's intoxicated imagination with a process that very nearly revives it before covering it with a filter of sobriety that robs it of all its illusion. The crude resolution of her low-tech digitalization, whose effects become stronger the closer the proximity to the work, reduces the swinging lines of the Neo-Baroque interiors with ruthless persistence into the irregular steps of squares and rectangles that recall the charm of early computer games. Thus, the virtualization of architecture and image that carries through all of Döbereiner's work also implies an archaeology of a process that has become so ordinary today.

Döbereiner's installations are techniques for activating dormant and often dulled synapses. The proliferating ornaments (*esc003–esc006*), the confusion of cables from electronic devices (*zuhausel musik004*, 2007; spaces into spaces, 2005) and the chaotic tangles of hair (*frauen001* and *frauen002*, 2003) visualize artistic processes in more than just a metaphoric sense; similar to Leonardo da Vinci's visual exercises for training the imagination through the observation of a wall's irregularities, these images prompt creative processes of association and activate the viewer's "inner screen" (Oswald Wiener).

The clusters, knots, and diffusions resulting from the overlapping drawings oscillate between recognizability and unrecognizability; in some areas, they resemble optical puzzles. The installations are based on an act of subversion that not only renders the walls permeable, but also extends to the viewer's gaze—which seeks the recognizable in a thicket of superimpositions of shifting perspective, becoming immersed in a dizziness that demands physical movement. Here, the acts of approaching the wall and standing back from it as one walks through the installation in search of clarity come close to simulating a lucid state of intoxication. Corresponding elements and superimpositions that Döbereiner creates between her vibrating projections and the actual space of the exhibition room serve as anchors for the viewer's meandering eye—such as a real door hinge that becomes transformed into the handle of a casement window of the Linderhof Palace (*esc005*), or a "Sortie de Secours" sign placed in the middle of an oval mirror (*esc004*) that suddenly takes on a dual meaning.

In Döbereiner's work, the viewer's perception and the artistic process merge in the principle of projection symbolized by the computer: "For me, the computer is the interface between thinking in images and the physical presence of the drawings" (Ursula Döbereiner). It is here that the artist remixes her own drawings, in a form that is by necessity virtual; here where she deconstructs the cycle in which all images are produced, perceived, and handled today. Döbereiner's work consists of modules whose respective manifestations— whether drawing, installation, or animation— are treated as so many material states. One can be transferred into another at any time; a state of suspension between alternatives becomes the norm.

In the installation *häuser003* (2003), this analogy-based principle, which is as virtual as it is circular, is demonstrated in an almost exemplary way: on a computer screen, one sees an animation of a camera pan over a series of architectural views that also cover the walls of the exhibition space in the form of digital prints. The modular system of the projected 70s architecture, reminiscent of circuit diagrams, finds its equivalent in the fuse box of the actual space. Located between the computer screen and the wallpaper, it

takes on a metaphoric meaning that sheds considerable light on the central position of the computer in Döbereiner's work.

The combinatorics and form each working module assumes are determined in the computer. Here, the sum of the whole is immanent in every individual unit; each element finds its correspondence elsewhere. In this manner, the overall scope of the artistic field of operation is present at all times. Thus, the installations *zuhouse001* (2002) and *esc002* are complementary works that describe the spectrum's range from the private to the public. Döbereiner's *zuhouse001* consists of rooms and furnishings depicted larger than life in cropped close-ups and long shots. These are the nearly rote notations of an everyday life in which a can of beer and the remote control catch the eye as randomly as the end table, the couch set, or the sleeping boyfriend. In *zuhouse001*, Döbereiner's method of leveling the differences between categories assures that the private and the everyday remain distanced, while in *esc002* history and public space become subjectified and domesticated.

At the same time, this juxtaposition also describes a backwards zoom from the close-up to the long shot that is typical for the development of Ursula Döbereiner's work. Thus, one can observe an increasing expansion in her radius of categories to include the collective and public, as well as a shift from the concrete to the abstract that underscores the spacial dimension of the "inner screen." An example for this tendency is the installation *hier001* (2007), conceived in collaboration with the artist Sabina Maria van der Linden for the exhibition "fluffy minimalism". The work is based on the scribbles people make to describe something when they are at a loss for words or gestures. Döbereiner has been collecting notations of this kind—address directions, floor plans, mathematic formulae, and musical notations—redrawing them on the computer, superimposing them one upon the other, and wallpapering them as computer prints in exhibition spaces, where these traces of inner processes are translated into abstract patterns consisting of numerals, letters, signs, and lines.

Döbereiner's work thrives on the endless combinatorics of the digital universe of dots as well as on its own subjective approach to it. Its smallest common denominator, however, is drawing; it is the means with which the artist illuminates the conditions of seeing in the age of the "iconic turn." Her contours record the afterglow that the plethora of media and everyday images flooding us each day leave behind on the retina—shortly before they are extinguished, rewritten. Film stills, poster motifs, found and self-made photographs, as well as images from the Internet provide the material that nourishes the pop-cultural inventory of her ballpoint-pen and computer drawings. As a visual "journal of an infantile society," they deconstruct the rapacious cycle of mass culture's image repertoire as it assimilates private and collective desires, internalizes them, and then spits them out again, reproduced by the millions.

Operating along the interface between private and public memory, everyday life and glamour, Döbereiner subverts the strategies of the entertainment industry by rendering everyday scenes and portraits of friends indistinguishable from poster motifs and film stills (*poster001* and *poster002*, 2004). Her work embodies a guerilla tactic in which her own living environment, personal taste, and preferences are agents that infuse the cool gloss of the prefabricated image worlds with the warmth of a sympathetic eye. Döbereiner's deconstructions are also homages, declarations of love, and confessions of "guilty pleasures"—she is drawn to the films of Godard, Cassavetes, and Fassbinder as well as to horror movies; her affections are divided between the film stars Anna Karina and Gena Rowlands, the underground icons Nico and Throbbing Gristle, the martial arts legend Bruce Lee, and the Russian cosmonaut Juri Gagarin; while in the area of fashion the artist's gaze is directed at handbags, sunglasses, and shoes with noticeable frequency.

Döbereiner's ballpoint-pen drawings resemble notations of adolescent states of enamoredness and daydream that run counter to the cool guise of her graphic works. Made with commonly available materials, they seem as random as telephone doodles and as dreamy as the initials and hearts kids furtively scratch

into their school desks with the points of their compasses. Like the installations, they are about states of lucid intoxication. A heavy crosshatching of pen on paper counters the formal austerity of Döbereiner's ballpoint-pen drawings, which are often produced in series. This is the true carrier of the intoxicating element that also characterizes the content of many of these drawings; they enhance the effect of enchantment in which Gena Rowlands revolves around her own axis in "A Woman Under the Influence" (*gena1001-1005*, 2004), the manic-obsessive behavior of a possessed Linda Blair in "The Exorcist" (*exorcist010*, 2005), or the violence and speed of skidding crash cars (*auto041-043*, 2004).

Döbereiner's strategies and motifs evince a skepticism towards ironic attitudes, whose distance she finds artificial. In her ballpoint-pen drawings as well as in her computer drawings, in which the handmade and the subjective intervention always remain transparent, she never conceals that she herself is a part of the world she is deconstructing. On the contrary, she takes a contemporary version of an approach whose impulses are indebted to modern utopias of merging art, life, and the everyday; throughout the 60s, for instance, camp was one possibility for interacting with reality in this way. The 19th-century forerunner of this position was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose postulate that the world and existence itself are only justifiable as aesthetic phenomena was brought to fruition by Ludwig II in his constructed fantasy and escapist worlds.

Döbereiner's work echoes this wish to escape into its own loop of drawing, animation, and installation. It can take on various forms, such as that of the butterfly in poster001, manifested not only in a series of ballpoint-pen drawings, but also in larger-than-life computer prints on walls and doors. In Döbereiner's aesthetic process, no module is fully anchored, no material state a lasting one—a virtual Linderhof whose interior is the endless space between 0 and 1.

Translated by Andrea Scrima