

As far as thoughts can take us

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*Reality is capable and incapable of many things that do not exist in a particular reality and world.*¹

Robert Musil²

Tine Bay Lührssen combines drawing, sculpture and video in her installation practice. The people, animals, plants and objects that populate her pictorial and spatial worlds correspond to vessels and instruments. The animate and inanimate, the alive and inert engage in unusual and contradictory relationships. The works evoke a spatial emptiness and absence.

Looking into her *Still life series*, we find that an intricately detailed figurative element is preponderant in her drawings. Imagery of the natural and the artificial connect by virtue of careful, fragile gestures, thus generating poetically ephemeral visions. Although the drawings of vessels, instruments or elementary building components such as tubes and cables exude a transparency and bareness, as if emptied of meaning, they appear to provide a kind of spatial structure to her installations. In addition to the drawings, her sculptural work, such as the *Tools series*, features module-like pieces that are reminiscent of furniture or vehicles. Functional or mobile in appearance only, they are actually a means to seize spaces with our imaginations. Akin to Lührssen's video installation *Spring Board* (2001), the *Tools* operate as conceptual springboards, in the same way as the ladders, rakes and various other instruments that appear recurrently in many pieces, thus manifesting fictive vanishing points and lines. Like sculptural markers, and simultaneously detached from reality, the *Tools* embody imaginary spatial thresholds. Moreover, her video work also incorporates the specific spatial context of the exhibition site, such as the video installation *Retention* (2010), which works with the actual structure of the floor's stone tiles. An electric fan, a further component of the installation, whirls some of these tiles virtually through the air as video projections on the wall. Squares of masonite with pencil drawings echoing the surface of the stone tiles are placed across the floor and arranged on a pushcart. The exhibition context turns into an illusory construction site: The ground dissolves, the tiles stand on the wall, they fall down and whirl around. The static space opens up and oscillates between restraint and unlimitedness.

Reduction is crucial to Tine Bay Lührssen's work. Black and white drawings are often condensed to outlines. The videos, almost transparent, have no sound. The fact that no concrete space is represented makes reduction all the more obvious. Thus, the space is imaginary, without borders, real and ungraspable at the same time. The video sequences appear as if extracted out of three-dimensionality, almost as stencil-like, filmed segments of a space that are projected on real screens. Thus, Tine Bay Lührssen's works all seem to hover in a distinctive way. That the represented image appears detached and isolated generates emptiness and allows room for further projections.

Many of her works, whether involving surfaces, sculpture or installation, convey the atmosphere of a stage setting. Animals, plants and vessels converge in her drawings as in a kind of *mise en scène*. This staging becomes all the more evident in her video installations,

¹ "Es ist vieles der Wirklichkeit fähig und weltfähig, was in einer bestimmten Wirklichkeit und Welt nicht vorkommt." (engl. trl. Leo Lipis)

² Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ed. Adolf Frisé, Band 2: Aus dem Nachlass, 11. Auflage, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2000, p. 1195.

which depict simple human movements and actions. Thus, the exhibition space turns into a stage for a kind of theatre of the absurd. The actions that individuals perform in the video series seem like signs; their gestures, while pointing into the distance, create space. The objects within the video installations – whether they are real objects, projections or drawings – determine the atmosphere of a staged setting. They function as instruments that provide the means to mark and lay claim to the space.

The two-dimensional and site-specific representations mark intersections, passages and free spaces, but also barriers and borders. They generate contradictory spatial constellations that turn into games of spatial illusion. Tine Bay Lührssen's works stand at the threshold of real and imaginary reality, like the *Still lives* drawings that hover within pictorial space, or the installations incorporating drawings (whether object-based or site-specific) and video projections that permeate its spatial environment. Furthermore, the *Tools* create spatial thresholds charged with moments of longing and evocation. While they may appear to be spaces of passage, they remain imaginary. On the one hand, Lührssen's work translates visions of the real into drawings and video installations. On the other, the *Tools* body of work invests everyday artifacts with a visionary quality. The imaginary becomes real. The real becomes imaginary.

Indeed, Lührssen's installations and compositions with objects appear like dream images and déjà-vu experiences. In this sense, her work draws on the Surrealist representation of the dream-like and unreal at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Surrealist artists focus on worlds beyond visible reality. Typically, such works manifest an unusual and bizarre intertwinement of objects and spheres of reality. Birds, above all owls, empty glasses, sprawling plants and window frames recur as motifs in many Surrealist works, in particular in the work of René Magritte (1898-1967). This is the kind of visual language that Lührssen takes up in her pieces. Objects begin to lead a magic life of their own. To be sure, the Surrealist aesthetics of the "mixed metaphor" are modeled after the poet Comte de Lautréamont (1846-1870). In 1869, he coined the unusual phrase that describes the beauty of the "chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table".³ Surrealist poets and painters discovered poetry and the multiple meanings dormant within everyday objects. Max Ernst (1891-1976) drew on objects, their structures and surfaces to create new visual techniques and ideas. These objects acquired the role of *agent provocateur* within his own art theory. In Lührssen's work, objects and the specific exhibition site adopt an analogous function. In one of her early performances, documented in photography and video, it is an oversized magnified cocktail stick that acts as an eye-catcher. Like a stage prop for a javelin throw, it is the artist's means to seize an open and imaginary space.

Lührssen's approach and formal language are conceptual and minimalist. It is in the minimalist aesthetics, the departure from customary visual practices and the transcendence or obliteration of spatial borders that there are parallels to the installations of Michael Elmgreen (born 1961) and Ingar Dragset (born 1969). The Scandinavian artist couple is well-known for their extensive body of work *powerless structures*, which questions the exhibition conventions inherent to the white cube. Their way of subverting the functionality of everyday objects (*Verfremdung*) turns conventional patterns of perception upside down, as is the case in Lührssen's *Tools*, and mingle art with design and architecture. In an interview in 1998, Ingar Dragset explains: "Our works are very simple, they are, in a way, minimal, and this is not to make a reduction, but to open up."⁴ This leaves room for individual interpretation and

³ Lautréamont, *Maldoror and Poems* (tr. Paul Knight), Penguin Books 1978, p.217

⁴ See "Performative constructions. Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist", in: Ingar Dragset/Michael Elmgreen, *Powerless Structures*, Copenhagen 1998, <http://www.nicolaiwallner.com/artists/micing/text1.html>

pondering for exhibition visitors. There are further correspondences with the video installations of Dutch artist Aernout Mik (born 1962). Although his videos stage absurd and odd scenarios that reflect aspects of reality, they create a reality of their own, causing bewilderment in the viewers as they are incorporated into the projection. What distinguishes Lührssen's work from the aforementioned artists is its poetic and subjective character. Her work joins and reconciles that which is seemingly contradictory and conveys a preponderantly romantic mood.

Spatial emptiness elicits the projections that are key to Lührssen's work. This emptiness, in turn, provokes moments of longing in a metaphorical and literal sense, including a longing for new modes of expression and room for art reception. Lührssen's works are like *Raum(er)dichtungen* or spatial poetry. As Max Ernst wrote on the technique of collage, it is "the artificially provoked encounter of (...) unrelated realities on an apparently inappropriate plane" that generates the "spark of poetry".⁵ The motifs and techniques that Lührssen chooses for her work are emblematic of this aesthetics of the contradictory.

It is one of the great achievements of art in the second half of the twentieth century to have gone beyond the confines of the image by virtue of collage, performance, happening and installation. What Tine Bay Lührssen affords is an access to new unreal visual spaces. New thought processes are sparked, confronting viewers with their own memories, dreams and correlations. Thus a spatial metamorphosis takes place, a spatial transformation in which the thought world of the artist and the inner projections of the viewer encounter and mingle with each other. That the artist eliminates limits is not just for the sake of border transgression, but a means to create poetic room for thought and perception.

Not unlike others among her contemporaries, Tine Bay Lührssen responds to the virtuality of art and life spaces. In her work, the imaginary is not solely digitized, but also executed with traditional techniques such as drawing and sculpture. Alongside these images and objects, the digitally altered video images can be rather grasped as a sum of individual frames. The space is at once opened up and encoded. Ultimately, as a viewer, one becomes involved in the thought-world that the works trigger and open.

⁵ Walther, Ingo F., & Robert Suckale, *Masterpieces Of Western Art: A History Of Art In 900 Individual Studies From The Gothic To The Present Day*, Taschen 2002, p. 608