

RETO PULFER

Spike Island, Bristol

On an unusually hot British summer evening, Reto Pulfer's installation *MMMS Reticulum Gewässerzeiten* (2015) appeared like a desert mirage in the intense white light of the central gallery at Spike Island. (An unwieldy if descriptive title, MMMS stands for maps, mnemonics, methods and *spiele* – games in German; *reticulum* is Latin for net; *Gewässerzeiten* roughly translates as 'water times'.) Tremulous ribbons of golden yellows and aquatic blues hung from a large, partially constructed nautical net hoisted overhead. Below, a bell, a cotton tent, a food tin and canister, a sail-like shelter stitched from bed sheets and an arrangement of painted wooden string instruments resembled both a Bedouin camp and an improvised childhood den. The net is an orderly grid indicating safety but also invoking the depths and caprices of the ocean. The scene is set for a story or, rather, myriad possible stories – of adventure, peril and survival in distant lands and treacherous seas – but told and imagined from the comfort and sanctuary of under the blankets.

This amalgamation of the familiar and the fantastical continued in an adjacent corridor with Pulfer's 'Maps' series (2009–15). The large watercolours are approximations of places Pulfer has lived, visited or imagined – from his birthplace of Bern to Ancient Abydos. The artist's two-part performance on opening night had a similar air – casting the artist as a wandering minstrel bringing tales of the long ago, far away or yet-to-be. (A verse from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera came to mind: 'A wand'ring minstrel I; A thing of shreds and patches; Of ballads songs and snatches; And dreamy lullaby!') The final stages of a live raku firing taking place on the pavement outside the gallery were introduced by the sound of Pulfer's electric guitar – rather than the lute or lyre of his medieval counterpart. Layering looping chords with the closed-eyed, earnest concentration of a wannabe rock star, the artist produced waves of sound that continued to

reverberate as he ceremoniously lifted each ceramic from the kiln to cool in sawdust.

Raku ware, whose name derives from the Japanese family that have been making it since the late 1500s, is particularly prized for use in the traditional, ritualistic Japanese tea ceremony. The technique, honed over centuries, nevertheless continues to give rise to an infinite array of unpredictable results. This has a particular resonance in terms of Pulfer's work, where a convergence of system and chance, stability and mutability, is reflected in the show's title: *Gewässerzeiten* is a neologism that combines the German words for 'water' and 'tides' – one fluid and unstable, the other predictable and regular. Pulfer's use of systems is revealed in *Methoden und Spieletisch* (Methods and Games Table, 1988–2015), which comprises 44 works laid out and minutely labelled like museum exhibits. The works include combinatorial games and charts, and maquettes of improbable sculptures that the artist made as a child. *Methoden und Spieletisch* acts as a kind of reference grid and creation myth for Pulfer and his work.

A guitar interlude also introduced the second part of the performance in the central gallery. (My rock star allusion holds – at one point, Pulfer played the guitar behind his head, Hendrix-style.) The artist enacted an indecipherable but peculiarly compelling ritual, tying the freshly cooled ceramics to other elements of the *MMMS Reticulum Gewässerzeiten* installation with shoelaces. He leapt, crept and crawled between objects, as though re-enacting a private, silent story. It made me think of the Classical mnemonic technique by which lengthy orations were memorized by visualizing a path through an imagined familiar space (sometimes known as a 'memory palace'). Continuing the performance, Pulfer used handfuls of silt from the local river (which had been incongruously standing by, topped with nettles, in a wheelbarrow) to daub the words *Pass auf Gina* (Watch out Gina) and *verfolgt* (hunted or pursued) – fragments of latent narratives – on the gallery floor. Pulfer signalled the end of the performance with a jubilant vocal trill and sounded the bell before leaving the building. I like to think of him riding off into the sunset on his trusty steed, but perhaps I'm overly affected by quixotic tales.

LINDA TAYLOR



DISPLAY SHOW

Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin

Curated by Gavin Wade (with Céline Condorelli and James Langdon), the first iteration of 'Display Show' (it will travel to Eastside Projects, Birmingham, and Stroom Den Haag, the Hague, over the next year) looked anew at avant-garde exhibition-making, whilst simultaneously stressing the politics inherent in its contemporary forms. One important reference point, the De Stijl group, prioritized the synthesis of life and art; another – the Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer – created the 'Universal' typeface, which eliminated the need for capitalization. 'Display Show' reconsidered these utopian propositions and, by extension, the modernist project more broadly. Its embedded working method, which has been integral to many of Wade's artistic and curatorial projects at least since 'This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things' (2009), works to foreground the possibility of display's transformative role within a contemporary public sphere.

Throughout, individual but scarcely demarcated works appeared to seep in and out of each other: works by Flore Nové-Josserand (*Thoughts on the conceptualization of space and mechanisms of display, relative to subjectivity and emotion, in schematic form, with reference to [Herbert Bayer] [Frederick Kiesler] [Lina Bo Bardi] [Eileen Gray] [Adolf Krischanitz] [El Lissitzky] [Carlo Scarpa] [Franco Albini] among Others. Temple Bar Version, 2015*) and Eilis McDonald (*Numinous Objects, 2010-2015*) were mounted on top of Wade's *Z-Type Display Unit (After Kiesler & Krischanitz)* (2015). Wade's sculpture, in turn, referenced both De Stijl designer Frederick Kiesler's L+T display units (1924) and architect Adolf Krischanitz's mobile wall system, created for the renovation of the Vienna Secession in 1986. The size and position of Andrew Lacon's wall-based work, *A Display for Sculpture 07* (2015) was dictated by Wade's – admittedly counterintuitive – proposal for the location of the gallery's new entrance, on the internal back wall of the space. One of Condorelli's pieces, *Sound of the Swindelier* (2015) comprised a 20-minute ambient recording of her studio, the sounds of work and daily life blurring with the noise from the lively Dublin streets outside the gallery space: a nod to Kiesler's holistic approach to exhibition-making. Similarly, Christopher Williams's *Hortenkachel* (2013), an abstract representation of a type of brick used in German buildings to eliminate the need for windows, worked in symbiosis with Wade's luminous *Mobile Wall System with two permanent pole positions (After Krischanitz & Kiesler)* (For Christopher Williams) (2015) – on which it was hung. Throughout the exhibition, a kind of humility pervaded, with the sense of each component playing a part in an organic whole. Within a dominant culture of individualism – perpetuated by strategies of subjective display – this subjugation of the individual to the whole was refreshing.

The extent to which our sense of self is bound up with forms of display formed an omnipresent motif. McDonald's digital



2

video work, *Numinous Objects* (2010–15), reconfigures the subject as an indiscriminate compendium of things: cardboard boxes, buttercups, opals and bottles, alongside other miscellany. Evocative of the rolling advertisements at urban bus stops, the objects slip up the screen, miming our unquenchable – if distracted – parsing of contemporary technology. Similarly, Yelena Popova's *The Collector's Case* (2015) comprised a metal flight case modified so as to extend, snake-like, out over the gallery floor. Stemming from the imagined life of infamous collector Cornelius Gurlitt, its individual compartments are lined with a series of abstract and esoteric canvases. Alluding to the priceless artworks seized from Gurlitt's unassuming Munich flat in 2012, here the demand that art be seen rubs up against personal desires for its possession and containment. The work functions almost like an uneasy self-portrait, unravelling somewhere in the gap between public and private space.

The work of avant-garde theorists of space, who embraced the museum as an integral site for the formation of a renewed public sphere, is referenced throughout 'Display Show'. With their legacy in mind, questions of form and function within contemporary space take on a renewed political urgency. As this exhibition showed, the spaces of art might again be instructive in this regard.

REBECCA O'DWYER

1
Reto Pulfer, *MMMS Reticulum Gewässerzeiten*, 2015, installation view

2
'Display Show', Temple Bar Gallery, 2015, exhibition view

3
Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at a Cubist Painting*, 1946, printed newspaper tear sheet, 29 × 35 cm

AD REINHARDT Malmö Konsthall

Before he established himself as one of the most revered abstract painters in America, artist and writer Ad Reinhardt made a living by drawing cartoons. During the 1930s and '40s, his humorous and frequently satirical drawings appeared regularly in print for a variety of clients ranging from the Brooklyn *Dodgers* to *Glamour* magazine. More often, they appeared in the pages of the communist-party affiliated newspaper *New Masses*, where they were mobilized in support of the American anti-war and labour movements.

'Ad Reinhardt: Art vs. History' featured approximately 300 of Reinhardt's original illustrations, collages and cartoons. These included the well-known 'How to Look' (1946) series of playful educational strips published in the leftist newspaper *PM*, which sought to introduce the general public to the basics of modern art, and abstract painting in particular. In *How to Look at a Cubist Painting* (1946), for instance, a viewer's incredulous query ('What does this represent?') is met with the anthropomorphized painting shouting back: 'What do you represent?' This exhibition, which took its title from one of Reinhardt's essays for *ArtNews*, marked the first time these works have been shown in Europe, introducing a lesser-known aspect of the artist's visual production at a moment when discussions on political satire, and cartooning especially, have a particular urgency.

In the few cases when Reinhardt's drawings have been shown previously, it was largely to illustrate what his paintings were *not* – a practice in line with the distinctions that the artist upheld between pictures (representations) and paintings (line, shape and colour). But, in 1949, Reinhardt remarked of his painting and cartooning: 'Contradictory as though these roles may seem, they can be viewed as aspects of a unified stance.' Although much of the work in 'Art vs. History' was made long before the 'black' paintings that gained him notoriety, and seems to contradict the strategies of negation and refusal with which he is so strongly associated, for the most part the show left speculation

aside regarding how Reinhardt's freelance commercial work informed the development of his painterly practice.

Instead, the show presented his cartoons, illustrations and collages as art works in their own right. In the process, it rendered Reinhardt as idealistic and crestfallen by turns, yet steadfastly committed to his beliefs in internationalism and equality, as well as to the politics of looking. Smaller works – including spot illustrations and single-panel cartoons – revealed Reinhardt's virtuosity as a visual communicator and are infused with a lightness nearly unthinkable within the frame of abstract expressionism, much less organized labour. One untitled illustration dated 1943–47 depicted an 'unorganized employee' riding a snail on his way to 'better conditions'. Other works demonstrated the painter's disdain for social realism, as well as his indebtedness to Russian constructivism, cubism, dada and surrealism. Often ironic and witty, when taken as a whole these works nonetheless registered deep tensions within Reinhardt's visual practice, as well as his negotiation of concerns surrounding distribution, media and the integration of art and everyday life. It was evident in the collage, too, where photographic material was abstracted into geometrical compositions that he later used in his paintings. Here, it wasn't purity at stake in modernism but hybridization and complexity.

As Michael Corris noted in his 2008 book on the artist, 'radical politics, architecture, graphic design, mass media and abstract art: these are the terms of reference that organize and contextualize Reinhardt's full creative practice'. From this perspective, Reinhardt's interdisciplinary output also recalls Karl Marx's oft-cited statement that in communist society, 'nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he [sic] wishes! If today the divisions of labour within the arts are increasingly blurred, and every artist can make claims to being a writer, a designer, an editor, a critic and a curator, then it owes less to practices of cooperation and solidarity than to ragged individualism and economic precarity. What do you represent?'

MATTHEW RANA

