

FILLIP

Sean Paul's Kammerspiel

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Sean Paul's recent exhibition, Sprachbarrierenstrasse, at the Centre for Opinions in Music and Art (COMA), Berlin, consisted, in part, of a number of white, wall-mounted shapes, many of which were derived from formal components of the Euro (both hypothetical and real) and various denominations of its currency. Two works titled *Denkmal*, for example, suggested pared-down "universal" monuments suitable for a commemorative currency, whereas another pair of constructions, both titled *Five*, quartered the integer into four parts each.¹ Made of Dibond and installed rather like paintings around the COMA space, these works called to mind certain strains of modernist abstraction in their critical reflection on their own support (evidenced, for example, in their questioning of conventional shape, their experimentation with materials, their taking up of the monochrome, etc.). By summoning the Euro as the work's condition of possibility, and by transforming its signifiers into a set of largely indiscernible figures, however, Paul turned to the tradition of modernist abstraction as a metaphor with which to discuss the abstraction of financial markets. Though such a tendency is not particular to Paul—indeed, a whole slew of contemporary artists have recently imagined their work in similar terms—this exhibition took up the question with a notable transparency and rigour. Abstraction was posited here as the only means by which the immaterial flows of capital might be visualized while nevertheless appearing as a rather impoverished means of representation. Such a paradox was further hinted at by Paul's use of Dibond, a material typically used to convey commercial graphics, which was here left blank. Rather than point to the possibility of "an image to come," this evacuation of the work's surface turned one's focus to the systems and structures surrounding the work—both architectural and financial—and in doing so showed the legacy of modernist practice giving way to the subsequent discourse of institutional critique. In their simultaneous dependence on and fracturing of the tropes of graphic design, and in their heavy reliance on the gallery space as support (the Dibond "paintings" matched the whiteness of the gallery's walls and at times seemed to disappear into them), these works harkened back to the practices of John Knight and Michael Asher in particular. Unlike the work of such predecessors, however, Paul's dispersion of the Euro into the gallery walls did less to expose the space as a site of financial transaction than it did to point to the increasing prominence of finance and design as the primary demands placed on the contemporary subject today. Taken together the Dibond works induced an almost environmental effect, suggesting a microclimate of contemporary culture—an alienated "second nature."

Offering another shade of white in the gallery space was a lone and rather rough-looking bale of cotton (emitting, up close, a quite pungent odour), shipped from Sudan and lent courtesy of W. Buckman Speditionsges, MBH, Bremen. As a sculptural monochrome (one might think of Piero Manzoni's "achromes" as a precursor), the cotton bale functioned as both complement and counterpoint to the wall-mounted works—a concrete instance of abstraction. Importantly, neither the cotton bale nor the wall works were privileged as starting points. If the bale appeared to the viewer as the end result of processes of labour, exchange, and distribution, it also served as the point of departure for observation about such processes. In contemplating this object in particular, one noticed what a haunting thing it was. At once blank, global, and generic, it also possessed—coming from the very particular context of Sudan, perhaps most associated for Western audiences today with the Darfur genocide—a particularly eerie quality, sitting in the gallery—like all commodities—perfectly mute about the social relations behind it. The cool system of the Dibond works and their reflection on protocols of exchange assumed here a rather chilling form.²

If the cotton bale functioned as an emblem of nature submitted to the demands of the commodity form, three oak trees included in a side gallery—severed from their roots—functioned as a vision of pure nature as seen through the eyes of high culture.³ In his seminal essay "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel," Jeff Wall quotes Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co on a similar effect in Mies van der Rohe's glass houses, noting that in them "nature was made part

of the furnishings, a spectacle to be enjoyed only on condition that it is kept impalpably remote”.⁴ Something of these lines haunted Paul’s installation as well. Even though nature penetrated the gallery space here, it nevertheless appeared distant, a denatured organism transformed into an abstract object of contemplation. “The idealized or fantasized intimacy of man with nature (one of the original dreams of the bourgeoisie),” as Wall notes in his text, assumed the terms of an increasingly estranged relationship.⁵ Binding this image of alienated nature even more closely to the logic of modernist design were a pair of black leather Knoll chairs, lent courtesy of Walter Knoll AG & Co. KG, Herrenberg, which functioned as uncanny doubles to the lone cotton bale, which itself appeared as a kind of bench.⁶ In transporting these lifestyle supports into the gallery space, Paul located his viewer as the modern, contemplative type, fixed between the beautiful ruin of nature and the sublime abstraction of capital. Though both the chair and sofa have functioned as recurrent motifs in Paul’s exhibitions, they have never carried the connotation of easy sociability characteristic of “relational aesthetics.” Indeed, the title of Paul’s show, *Sprachbarrierenstrasse*, a neologism of the artist’s own devising that might literally be translated as “speech barrier street,” suggests a problematics of communication and circulation—an interruption of distribution. Modernism’s aspirations to an abstract universalism and a global society were thus spoken here in an especially alienated, if not absurdist, tongue. Indeed, the exhibition brought to mind something of the scenario of Jacques Tati’s *Trafic* (1971), in which various bureaucratic bloopers and breakdowns prevent Monsieur Hulot from getting his camper to Amsterdam in time for the auto show. As a result, his allotted exhibition space is left empty except for a lone log transported from Paris. The relative emptiness of Paul’s display similarly pointed to the various checkpoints and logistical disruptions that compose life today—a world in which rationality has become so heightened as to become ineffably bizarre. One feels that it can’t go on and yet on it goes.

Notes

1. Other works in the series, such as *Schaufenster*, spoke more directly to ideas of architecture and display.
2. In certain respects, this work put me in mind of Zoe Leonard’s recent project *Analogue*, which, in part, traced the movements of the global rag trade. If Leonard’s photographic work was both mournful and invested in a project of world-making, Paul’s sculptural gesture spoke more deeply to issues of displacement and decontextualization endemic to the commodity-form itself.
3. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 53.
4. Paul notes in the press release that two of the trees were German and one was American. Like the Euro, this gesture appeared as yet another example of the breakdown of national borders albeit here via “natural” means.
5. Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel*, 51.
6. I give the full company names here following Paul, who provided this information in an accompanying booklet. Indeed, there was an emphasis on borrowing and corporate alliances throughout the exhibition. The invitation, for example, bears the imprint of both Walter Knoll and W. Buckman Speditionsges.