Figuring Out

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The work *Figure (Villa Elisabeth)* is presented above your heads, suspended across the central, open space of the building. This talk entitled 'Figuring Out' is an attempt to complicate this visual presentation, since – and this is one of my hypotheses – an artwork may not naturally function in the context of artistic research. The figuring out of the work, i.e. my and your performative response to the work, forms an integral part of the work's contribution to knowledge and understanding. In other words, only if distance is introduced into the work and presentation is disrupted can research happen in the realm of art.

You may have noticed, however, that I am using the notion of 'figuration' twice. The title of the work *Figure (Villa Elisabeth)* implicates a relationship with the architecture within which it takes place, while the title of my talk in turn implicates a relationship with this relationship. Although figuration takes places in two seemingly different forms, it is my

hope that at the end of this talk, you will have understood figuration as the reflective principle that drives art's claim to research. Crucially, however, if figuration is at work in both presentations, there is no hierarchical difference between the work and the talk, a hierarchy that normally makes the work the primary source for a secondary discourse. Having the work here is good, because it helps understand visual processes, but it can also make us falsely believe that those processes are a privilege of, and limited to, the work.

It may be clear that there is distance involved between the talk and the work, because not only is the talk here and the work there, but also both utilise different forms of communication – language and art. It may be less clear, however, that distance is at play in the work itself, which is why I am using the talk (and the distancing that it creates) to highlight this fact.

Earlier this year I made a similar, but in some respects less abstract, installation at the Tramdepot Gallery in London. In that installation I surveyed the staircase that leads to the main gallery space and created a reconstruction based on corners that are close in distance. In the installation the remodelled reconstruction of the staircase was stretched in such a way as to take on the shape of the gallery space. The process leading to the work can be described in terms of a number of discreet transformations: (1) The measurement and the creation of a computer model transforming the physical space of the staircase into a virtual space; (2) The remodelling of the architecture based only on the corner points, transforming an architectural space that is predominantly made up from horizontals and verticals into a hybrid space jointly defined by the architecture and the conceptual remodelling procedure; (3) The fitting of this model into a differently shaped gallery space, adding an additional set of deformations; and finally, (4) the reconstruction of the virtual model in black shock cord and its suspension in the gallery. All those transformations taken together 'make' the work, which although abstract in appearance keeps a relationship to both site and process.

Figure (Villa Elisabeth) is based on a similar set of transformations. However, there are two key differences, which I want to point out. The first difference is due to the architecture of this room and the building regulations that prohibit anything that could damage the building. What we have as a consequence is a very restricted target space that offers only a handful of anchor points for the installation amplifying transformation (3) i.e., the deformation of the model by the space in which the work is shown. The second difference, an alteration of transformation (1), which is more essential to me in this instance, is the arbitrary choice of initial points, which allows for an increased degree of what may be called 'artistic subjectivity'. The work you see is not a safe piece of art executed many times before, but an experiment responding to shifts in architecture and processes.

The arbitrary choice of initial points was triggered by two artworks, to which I want briefly to refer. The first is Gabriel Orozco's *Dark Wave* (2006), a decorated, cast skeleton of a 14 metre long Fin Whale, where the decoration is made up of a number of concentric circles on each bone. The points that Orozco identified on each bone, around which the circles were drawn, are called 'pivotal points' in the catalogue ('vital' or 'critical' points according to the dictionary). *Dark Wave* inspired me to think about the way I arrive at such critical points in a freer, less constrained manner.

The second work I want to reference is related to the gesture by which I wanted to arrive at those points. Here, I am thinking of John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings* (1969), where he commissioned amateur painters to copy photographs of hands pointing to various objects. Could it be that vital points are nothing but the results of a pointing exercise?

In any case, the work consists of a set of transformations, to which I may add this talk as transformation (5), extending if not taking apart the notion of the 'work' with which we usually operate.

In a transformative procedure, a form is transformed into another form. The transformation itself, however, cannot be a form in its own right, because transformation happens between forms and not as form. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss suggest in *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997) Bataille's notion of 'informe' to characterise what lies between forms. A key artist in Formless is Robert Smithson, whose use of the notion of 'enantiomorphism' may serve to explain what I have in mind when I talk about 'figuration' or 'transformation'. Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965) consist of two metal-framed sculptural elements, inside each of which a mirror is fixed perpendicular to the wall, creating a kind of 'visual reactor'.

Two things are enantiomorphic when they mirror each other in a way that could not be achieved through a simple rotation. For example, our right and left hands are enantiomorphs. If I wanted to transform my right into my left hand, I would have to turn the hand inside out like a glove, a procedure that creates a mirror image that is not identical to its source. To quote Smithson: 'Two asymmetrical trails that mirror each other could be called enantiomorphic after those two common enantiomorphs – the right and the left hands. Eyes are enantiomorphs. Writing the reflection is supposed to match the physical reality, yet somehow the enantiomorphs don't quite fit together. The right hand is always at variance with the left … A mirror looking for its reflection but never quite finding it.' (Smithson, 1996: 131) According to the definition of enantiomorphism, the two sculptural elements of Enantiomorphic Chambers are strictly speaking not enantiomorphic, a fact often overlooked in the literature. What may be said to be

enantiomorphic, though, is the relation that the installation has to our vision. For Krauss, the installation demonstrates what she calls 'structural blindness', misunderstanding that this structural blindness for Smithson is enantiomorphic vision. As Smithson writes in an essay entitled *Pointless Vanishing Points* of 1967: 'It is as though one were being imprisoned by the actual structure of two alien eyes.' (Smithson, 1996: 359) What is 'alien' is that the installation is enantiomorphic to our vision. It is the sculpture itself that is like us – but not quite – and is completed through our exclusion. 'It's like a set of eyes outside my personal set, so it's a kind of depersonalization', said Smithson in an interview with Dennis Wheeler. (Smithson, 1996: 208) The *Enantiomorphic Chambers* are mirrored within (the one chamber mirrors the other), but also mirrored outwards (the 'alien' eyes mirror our eyes). Mirroring is here, however, not understood as perfect reflection but as enantiomorphic transformation. (Smithson *Non-Sites* are conceptually related to his theory of enantiomorphism.)

I would like to throw in a few words that I picked up at this conference over the last few days, which I think are quite relevant. These are: 'compression' – through repeated transformation; 'spatialisation' – as the constructive principle in which reflection is negotiated; 'movement' – as produced through contradictory elements; and 'anti-illusion' – through the foregrounding of processes. I may just add that in the current theory of art as I understand it, this is not directed towards, but against, what we refer to as 'image'. As image, the reflective potential of the presentation may be lost.

Reflection as a visual, mirroring principle displaces what it reflects. Identity, the ideal of rational reflection, is not possible under such visual constraints. Deconstructive philosophy attempts to make clear and to undo the idealisation that happens within logocentric discourse. Because the notion of 'reflection' has been used within processes of identity (for example when a discourse is said to reflect reality), Jean-Francois Lyotard introduces in his *Discours/Figure* (2002) the notion of the 'figural', a visual element that disrupts discourse.

In this book, Lyotard conceptualises three different types of 'figures': (1) The 'image-figure' as figurative representation, such as when opposed to a ground, the most conventional use of the notion of the 'figure' in art theory; (2) the 'form-figure' as the constitutive principle, such as the constellation or the gestalt of a image-figure; (3) the 'matrix-figure', which is invisible since it is the differential principle of disruption of the binary relation of the visible and invisible and indeed any binary relation. The matrix-figure's 'formal condition', as Krauss says, is a 'rhythm or pulse'. (Krauss, 1988: 65) Writing about the artists of the 'optical unconscious', such as Max Ernst or Marcel Duchamp, she states: 'the pulse they employ is not understood to be structurally distinct from vision but to be

at work from deep inside it'. (Krauss, 1988: 217) Although the figural may be invisible, as such – because otherwise it would have to take an appearance as figure/form of some sort – it is nevertheless visual and in this sense at play on all levels. David Carroll's point thus seems appropriate, according to which 'each of [the three aspects of the 'figure'] is *a complication of the visual nature of the figure*'. (Carroll, 1989: 39, my italics) As the figural, the visual disrupts discourse, a disruption that I think Lyotard attempted to expand in his later work through the philosophical rather than visual concept of the 'sublime'. (Cf. Lyotard, 1992) We may say that a visual account of the figural, which is not reduced to a deconstructive disruption of discourse, is outstanding. In the history of art, a remarkable exception is the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, whose book on Fra Angelico, for example, attempts such an account. (Didi-Huberman, 1995) Elements of dissemblance in Fra Angelico's work are not, according to Didi-Huberman, sections that are badly executed by his assistants, but figurations meant to disrupt the representational image space for the purpose of meditation. An a-representational history of art remains, however, to be written.

We can thus say in order to emphasise the visual that the reflective transformations that the work above your heads and the talk produce are figurations that displace and reconfigure the material at hand, which is Villa Elisabeth. We can also say that within the figuration a distance is created between the material and its reflection and that this distance is not just between the talk and the work but also within the work that figures its material.

Finally, what does this mean in relation to artistic research? Practice understood as figuration produces knowledge and understanding because it creates the necessary distance at the same time as making the material intelligible in the course of the reflective process. The notion of the 'work' is problematic (and this is where aesthetics would have to be critiqued) because it proposes an end to this process, limiting the figural transformations to a form that incidentally delivers the artwork as commodity to the market.

One question, however, remains, which I think is crucial to the current institutional striving for a definition of artistic research: What kind of difference does the transfigured work make? I hope you have understood from these brief remarks that if one operates in the visual field, reflective difference is created, which may, but need not, lead to new forms or even discourses. In this respect, I would like to remind you of Walter Benjamin's theory of early German Romanticism, in which he defines art for his theory of art criticism. According to Benjamin, an artwork can be situated between two poles: that of absolute reflection and that of first reflection (or 'Ur-Reflection' as he calls it). As he says: 'In order to differentiate between the two, one would have to assume that the absolute reflection captures the maximum, the ur-reflection the minimum, of reality, in the sense

that although both carry the whole reality … this [reality] would be unfolded to its highest clarity in the first [absolute reflection], not unfolded and murky in the other [ur-reflection].' (Benjamin, 2003: 31) Despite the fact that in reality material things are the same, it is the amount of reflection, i.e. intelligibility, that the same material carries that makes a difference. In other words, in artistic research understood through 'figuration', we understand more, although the material remains strictly speaking the same, while in order to remain artistic the epistemological surplus is necessarily withdrawn from circulation. This shields the visual qualities of such research, offering a visual alternative to logo-centric discourse, which has been overlooked even by philosophies that offer – to quote Lyotard in *Discours/Figure* – 'a defence of the eye'.

As artists, we know the figural inside out. The figural is precise and can be repeated, often in different materials or forms. The general public thinks: 'Oh, everything can be art!' and chooses not to look and think. We need a research community that dares to say what happens in a work. Often, we know, and often we choose not to challenge, because who are we to tell another artist what to do? When it comes to research, however, our quest for knowledge and understanding can replace personalised positions and liberate a debate about what really matters: the problem, the ambition and the figural solution.

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