

fix und flux

Michael Kutschbach's mad odor roses

November 1 – December 7, 2013

In Michael Kutschbach's photo series *mad odor roses* (2013) we encounter free floating formations, agglomerating without any apparent footing. They are the result of fortunate moments in which perspective, lighting and atmospheric intention combine to form a harmonious whole, where artistic will of creation manifests in unique pictorial aggregation. The elegance of alabaster colored crystals consorts with the opulence of biomorphic shapes radiating with color. A Mobius strip winds around organic looking, matted conglomerates, and constructs of technoid precision display their surprisingly furrowed, turbid tarnish. These formations may strike the viewer as "combinations of hand ax and space debris", to be situated somewhere between "cultural exaltation and the experience of deformation,"¹ but they certainly elude instant recognition. Instead, they document the sheer joy of playfully researching and exploring an as yet undefined formal terrain.

Although Kutschbach uses lighting techniques employed in portrait photography – the mellow diffusion of frontal lighting, or modulating spotlights from the wings – to lend each of his structures its individual 'face,' the aim is not to lure the viewer into a visual trap with illusionist effects. Rather what's on display here is handcraft in the literal sense: Not only are the shots free of post-productive digital trickery, stemming solely from the photographer's technical adeptness during the shooting process, but their subject-matter is handcrafted, too. The artist has formed each of the compact, miniature sculptures to be autonomous and unique, using material as diverse as plaster, foam, glue and liberal coatings of paint, and placed them smack middle in the viewer's field of vision. While concentrating on the haptic quality that comes with the sculptures' three-dimensionality, the pictures awaken an atmospheric quality as well, with vapors clouding rather diffusely around the objects, evocating a moment of enigma if not irritation in the observer. Kutschbach has captured the point in time when two disparate physical states meet; he has held onto this moment of something solid and fixed amalgamating with something gaseous in flux, and preserved it on a two-dimensional pictorial surface.

Thus his photos present us with solidified images of apparition, singular ensembles of impressive phenomena derived from orchestrations that cannot be iterated. The vapors' lack of contour and their uncontrollability as they evaporate throughout the image space visually enforce our impression of weightlessness with respect to the solid material. So here

¹ See Christoph Tannert, "Harmonieentwürfe in Mikro und Makro," in: Michael Kutschbach, *Callooh! Callay!*, Exhibition Catalogue Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin 2010, n. p.

illusion does come into the picture after all – for the artist quite casually shows us, by way of a picture, what a picture can transport that an inert sculpture cannot: countering gravity. Photographic fixation interlaces with both the irretrievability of the event and the untouchable immateriality of the ephemeral. Kutschbach has already experimented with the potential of the ephemeral in earlier works, such as the 2011 video work *gimble in the wabe*, in which he sought, via filmic means of slow motion and fast forward, to embed the qualities of a volatile substrate within a temporal dimension.²

In fact the creative engagement with different states of aggregation has been part of the established and programmatic repertoire of artistic enquiry since the late 1960s, and as such has assumed manifold forms. Artists have converted and re-converted solid mass into liquids, cold matter into warm matter, inorganic substance into organic substance, or unformed mass into defined shape, for these metamorphoses, fluctuating between the fleeting and the concrete, serve to question the existential and material processes of transformation. As is well known, the *Steam* installations by Robert Morris were not accepted into the 1967 *New York Sculpture Exhibition*, since their anti-form conceptualization did not correspond with the then prevalent idea of sculpture. In 1984 it was however possible for Joseph Beuys to install his *Thermal/Plastic Standard Measure* as part of Basel's *Sculpture in the 20th Century* exhibition. Beuys considered the dynamic and energetic aspects of steam as a metaphor for thinking, an integral part in his concept of Social Sculpture.³ The creative employment of vapors was and is predominantly linked to artists who seek to step outside traditional art genres to develop a "processual" form of art dictated, as it were, by its material. Steam here appears as an "intelligent" substance because it unfolds its volume-shaping independent of artistic assistance and, moreover, transcends the traditional prioritization of *shape*.

The processual is an important element in Michael Kutschbach's oeuvre. Visualizing the transformative powers of the material and surface structures employed, he thinks of himself less as a creator than as a facilitator – as initiator of autonomous productive processes.⁴ In a separate work complex therefore, his drawings, fluctuation and arrest, the oscillation between form denial and form finding emerge as *modus operandi*. These "process drawings," as Kutschbach calls them, are the result of drawing, smudging, erasing, scratching, scraping, and constant overdrawing, in a way that antecedent trails remain visible, comparable to a palimpsest where we can still see traces of the original text. The

² See the interview with Michael Kutschbach regarding this video work in: *Sculpture and the Enemies Magazine*, July-September 2011, Sydney, pp. 28-32.

³ See Theodora Vischer, "Joseph Beuys. Thermisch-plastisches Urmeter – ein Spätwerk," in: Volker Harlan a.o. (Eds.), *Joseph Beuys-Tagung*, Basel 1991, pp. 214-219.

⁴ Regarding the aspect of transformation see Varga Hosseini, "Surface in Flux: Michael Kutschbach," in: *Australian Art Collector*, Issue 34 (October/November), Sydney 2005, p. 241; on the role of the artist see 'Interview' (n. 2).

process of persistently applying and deleting lines, contours, and shades is not so much motivated by obsession or even denoting gestures of aggression but rather corresponds to an archeological practice, where the artist slowly and painstakingly peels the eventually remaining shape from layers situated deep within his unconscious. Akin to how a certain history of geological strata, marked by erosion and tectonic peaks, is unraveled, the traces of scraping and foregoing lines on the artist's sheets lead like trails to an inexhaustible well of form. Again, what we have here is the attempted arrest of the ephemeral and transitory into a picture, the gradual metamorphosis of powdered graphite to wondrously poignant and elegant formal concretion, fragments so precise and clear-cut they seem born into this world from larger contexts.

Presence and absence are, as a result, components of how the *mad odor roses* series is presented. Kutschbach hangs his photographs against three by three meter photographic wall prints, which depict blown-up details from the formal repertoire of his objects, bringing them closer to the viewer's eye. Admittedly, there is some loss of vigor in this camouflaging effect of a 'picture on a picture'; yet the phenomenal concurrence of part and whole, their inter- and correlation make the installation contradict vanguard convictions that the whole can no longer be visually depicted. Micro and macro images in Kutschbach's work have a referencing character. When he lays out a site, small format drawings find themselves echoed in their gigantically blown-up counterparts applied directly onto the walls, or capacious wall cladding that is close to the ornamental and decorative picks up figural elements from his world of sculptures. Sometimes photo wallpaper– like in his present work – invites the viewer to enter the work's realm by its sheer size alone, yet what all of these treatments of space and surface also signify is indeed the need to step outside the picture, to take a step back from the work and distance oneself from the medium for only this way can the beholder experience both part and whole.

Another 'work in progress'-element at play here is Kutschbach's odd custom of finding titles (Paul Klee once fittingly called titles "linguistic levitations" due to their evocative and multifaceted powers to transfer signification). In this case the odd title *mad odor roses* does not indeed hint at the olfactory perception of the viewer but serves as the poetically-humorous code for the artist's reverence of one of his role models, whose name is hidden anagrammatically here: Medardo Rosso. The Italian sculptor, famous for transcending the limitations of genre in terms of painting, sculpture and photography, has struggled hard during a lifetime to achieve harmonious expression of the fleetingness of occurrence – a struggle that would generate the most terrific oeuvre. Seemingly floating portraits without contour as well as figure heads on the brink of dissolution populate Rosso's pantheon of form, while his photography contrapuntally displays a pictorial fusion of object and space. Another artistic authority is referenced when we turn to Kutschbach's individual

photographs and their titles' composition: *Strong-Minded Kiosk Roach*, *Thick-Skinned Orgasm Odor*, *Rest Room Dockhand Skiing* etc. They are anagrams as well, combining Rosso's name and that of Nick Knight, the fashion photographer whose ecstatic and eccentric pictures are distinguished by a transitory momentum that puts him in immediate neighborhood with the Italian pioneer of the modern era. Clearly these titles spring from Kutschbach's delight in illogical gags, nonsense-poetry and palindromes, all of which testify to the unrestrained power of fabulation which eventuates in its very own, albeit illusory systematic. Definitely far from any intent of explication, these working titles serve as parallels to the work itself and point to the impossibility to explain oneself, one's oeuvre, or art in general.

The concurrences in Michael Kutschbach's work are dialectic on many levels: the malleable and the amorphous, the spontaneous and the conceptual, the comprehensible and the elusive, the sensual and the notional, intuition and ratio. Art's capability to invert matter, to conjoin the paradoxical and to transform actual states of existence is linked to the qualities of clarity, stillness and depth in his oeuvre, which permit for the viewer to be momentarily led into regions of contemplation – and lightheartedness.

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Translated by Tine Kutschbach