

## Patterns Why

Matthew Burbidge/Jaro Straub

Spesshardt & Klein, Berlin

By Wojciech Olejnik

In today's art practice, the dysfunctional can be rebellious, a positive, but only when it is embedded in the user's competence (meaning that the viewer must have the ability to correctly decipher dysfunctionality, to decipher its purposefulness). In the first show at Spesshardt & Klein, Matthew Burbidge and Jaro Straub, who work individually and together, explore the limits and utility of functionality in a practical and also conceptual manner.

Most of the works in this exhibition use the strategy of appropriating found objects, and altering them in some way; the objects are cut, inverted, replicated, others are broken, or are about to break, and so no longer operate in their original capacities. Yet they are not abandoned as non-functional objects; instead each one contributes to the ever-changing dynamic of the exhibition as a whole. This is especially prevalent in Plaza (Burbidge/Straub, 2007) a fountain, made with a mosaic of mortar, broken glass and metal, which is slowly decaying. As both artists were inspired by completely different existing fountains, the work is a result of their separate visions; diverse histories tirelessly negating and propagating each other. It is an installation born out of dialogue, experimentation and lack of expertise, without a prescribed end. After all, the fountain will not be finished until, propelled by entropy and frailty, it breaks down itself. In fact, when a motorized object finally fails it is thought to have reached a threshold, a kind of mechanical death. However, this moment is not its last moment. As the video Doublebroken (Straub, 2007) shows, an inoperative fountain in Berlin needs only to be rained on in order to be reactivated, in order to function again, but in a completely different manner.

A key element in this exhibition is a dull humming and muttering produced by failing motors, leaking water, and friction from rubbing materials. The sounds add a tonal hue, a soundtrack to the exhibition. They almost feel subterranean, surfacing from some deep organic caverns. As the viewer threads through the gallery each sound can be carved away from the rest, and can be measured and experienced completely on its own terms. But although one can easily identify such singularities in this exhibition, they can also at that point disintegrate to divide up into multiplicities, further layers and associations. Take Bildfläche 2 (Burbidge, 2007) for example. Here a solitary, white window frame hanging by its hinges is fastened perpendicularly to the gallery wall. Within the frame there is nothing except for various thin, painted, wood beams. They look like cracks in a window, like incarnate forms delineating the inexistent broken glass. The piece itself acts like a cleaver and cracks the space of the wall in two, as each side of the work is lit separately, casting two distinct shadows on the wall. This spectral duality floats in the background, fading into the wall like a hushed dialogue that trails behind the object. It is an imprint of the artists themselves, always lurking behind the stage, in the shadows, subsisting in plurality.

The exhibition allows one to drift through this subtle background of contingency, through its historical traces and vague outlines. Yet there is an unmistakable theatricality to each piece, a performative aspect which locks the viewer in the present moment. Heraclitus with Broken Foot (Burbidge/Straub, 2007) is a sculpture composed of found objects and materials. Its base is a wooden tripod supporting a small object, which appears to be a fragment of a piece of furniture; this object, almost impaled, sits at roughly the height of the human torso, underneath which are scattered red pieces of Plexiglas. In the front of the sculpture stands a small lamp, emanating a weak light which passes through the lens of a slowly rotating magnifying glass, illuminating the Plexiglas. The combination of elements creates intense atmosphere, as if the found object is like a heretic that is about to be engulfed in the plastic fire. Dispersing through the lens, the light dims and gleams, with protracted flickers it oscillates on the surface of the Plexiglas. This has the effect of appearing to slow down the drama the work evokes before the viewer's eyes. All the while, the piece functions at a minimal pace, its components like wheels in a machine that is about to fail. This creates a tension that stretches over time, it is present in the work's separate parts, and even lingers in its raw materials. The wood, the glass, the light are inherently linked to the idea of fire, they summon this idea, but it is not actualized. With Heraclitus with Broken Foot, the artists create a situation that hovers in between the object and its realization; it exists only as potency and potential. The idea of creating an artwork that conceptually 'hangs over the edge' is exactly the strength of the work, for it operates in a gap, a gap between its current state and its imagined realization. You may call this distance dysfunctional, but really it is an area rich with possibilities, encompassing the simple binary of function/dysfunction, to open it up beyond dialectics.