

Moments of Temporary Failure

Daniela Hardmeier, in „Drop Out“, Modo Verlag, Freiburg 2013, published on occasion of the exhibition DROP OUT, Kunst(Zeug)Haus, Rapperswil, 2013

Out of place, pushed to the edge of a long exhibition wall, a free-hanging object juts out perpendicularly from the surface. Light pricks our eyes. Neon tubes, wires, wall panels are visible. They form a space that is defined more by the irradiating light than the panels' physical boundaries. Ilona Ruegg has dubbed this work *Wall Scan* (2012, ill. X), which immediately brings to mind that something is being pored over on the empty wall. Light is a strong stimulus, drawing our gaze, and so our line of vision moves on to the neon lights that constitute part of the work *Conference* (2012, ill. X). Here again, wooden surfaces (revealed to be table tops upon closer inspection) teeter in precarious balance with their protruding table legs, where it is completely impossible to identify what is supporting and what being supported. Two rows of neon tubes lie on top like a roof, conveying something of peace.

Light plays a substantial role in all of Ilona Ruegg's works. It is not necessarily the real light emanating from a light bulb, but more often light that is reflected or refracted in coloured glass or metal surfaces; or the light that constitutes the peculiar atmospheres within Ruegg's photographs (see ill. p. xxx), which cannot be put down to a certain time of day. Light is an important element for exploring the dimensions and materiality of an object. At the same time, it is also deceptive and can be misleading. It is interfering: through reflection and intensity, it can lead to the obliteration of what it illuminates. The neon lights of the work *Conference* (ill. x) exude a cold, almost glittering light. Their luminosity is intensified by their reflection in the tabletops and legs. One half of the negative space formed by the tables is overexposed due to the neon lights facing downwards, which accentuates the harshness of the massive table surfaces while lending the pair of legs a sort of violence. Meanwhile, the row of lights directed upwards result in an illumination of the surrounding space, opening up the work into its environment. The object *Eclipse* (2013, ill. x) treats the relationship between light and dark in an even more immediate way. Resembling an oversized light bulb, the work's form stands in contrast to its dark materiality, as does its flattened truncation and fixation to a window. This "light bulb" lights up nothing in a literal sense, in the same way that no "conference" will ever take place at the desk arrangement of *Conference*.

In her work, Ilona Ruegg deals with the configuration and arrangement of components and objects that, despite their foreignness, most definitely relate to the everyday. These are elements that we recognise from their functional context and that we can name: table, doorframe, neon tube, window. We use most of these objects without question every day, but now we encounter them uncoupled from their function and out of alignment with their inherent place. Function and sociocultural space become the central line of inquiry. Function is defined as the role that the object has to fulfil. Next to the parameters of form, material or substance, it is the most essential characteristic of things. Every thing can fulfil multiple functions.¹ A chair can be a surface on which to place a coffee cup, thus not actually fulfilling its real function. Here, we are dealing with what was not originally designed as its purpose.² The use for a different purpose often results from an interest in solving a problem. In this sense, Ilona Ruegg uses different object parts to solve problems. Here, intention does not relate to the solution for a practical everyday problem, but rather with her works, which are in point of fact experiments, she generates new questions: of the function and impact of production sequences; of what the objects provoke through their displacement in an artistic context; or of the temporality of these processes.³

The object *Quinten Triple* (2012, ill. x) is comprised of three doorframes that have been slotted into and face one another. Contrary to their original purpose, they no longer designate a doorway. Entry is not intended, passage not possible. Due to their alignment towards one another and the absence of actual walls, the definitions "inside" and "outside" become obsolete. Ilona Ruegg has placed extendable bracketing plate made from polished aluminium on the floor at the junction of each of two doorframes. We stumble and falter as familiar and time-tested strategies for dealing with the object 'door frame'

¹Peter Achinstein has undertaken such classification: design functions describe functions for which an object has

²See Uta Brandes, Miriam Steffen, Sonja Stich, "Alltaglich und medial: NID – Nicht intentionales Design", in: *UmOrdnungen der Dinge*, Konigstein/Taunus 2000, p. 115 ff.

³See text contribution by Vanessa J. Muller.

begin to fail. Until now, the object with which we engaged theoretically had been defined by its (intended) function. If we continue to walk out of line into this unfamiliar configuration, our thought processes expose new possibilities. Free associations and metaphors open up beyond what is self-evident and familiar. By blocking out the familiar, the object is not only freed of its utilitarian function, but also of established hierarchies. The encounter becomes unmediated; the object 'door frame' gains a sensual and emotional quality that until now has been concealed by its use value. Questions are thrust open: What meaning is conveyed by the loose Velcro bond? How do we experience the fragile configuration of what are in themselves massive parts? What significance do the polished aluminium components acquire? The custom-fit floor plates designed by Ilona Ruegg lock the configuration in place. On the other hand, the potential to attach further doorframes to the connector brackets points to the possibility of modularly expanding the configuration and creating a system. Beyond the materials themselves, it possesses obvious surplus value. Besides the bracketing plate implemented in *Quinten Triple*, there are another five connector plates, all of which could come into use. They carry the inscriptions "and Routes ©QuintenTriple", referring beyond the work itself to a generative system.

The title of the exhibition alludes to the question of function – original, current and future. *Drop Out* suggests something being skipped, on which activity has been suspended or prematurely broken off. In a technical sense, the term also describes the temporary failure of a certain function. This choice of titles corresponds strongly to the notion of the "temporary", whose concept constitutes a specific temporal space in-between, making possible what was not intended. This breaks down structure, leading to release and opening, which are all involved in Ilona Ruegg's works. Different (functional and process-based) operations are arranged in new configurations. Ultimately, it is about an incredibly sensual experience of our thought processes. What is unstable or not firmly fixed in itself is risky and dangerous, but also offers the space for new things to emerge. Our thoughts about what an object and what a function is are expanded in the transformed space where the object now stands (the museum) and through the temporal interruption to which it has been subjected. Theoretically, each part can break away from this configuration and return to its original context.

Ilona Ruegg also questions the temporality of art with her objects. The impermanence of art has long been established⁴ and yet an artwork is still vested with the pretense of immortality, which somewhere encompasses the longings of people. The work *Untitled* (2012, ill. x) perfectly illustrates this. A simple pinewood window has been laboriously covered in black piano finish whereby the artist creates an object of perceived higher quality. The process is expensive. The object is reminiscent of a sumptuous grand piano. The glistening surface and the depth of the black exert an incredible pull. Transferred to an art context where it no longer fulfils a function but stands in and of itself, the banal window has become a precious object. Amongst Ilona Ruegg's works, every basic object-commodity experiences a form of temporal disruption. "The objects [attain] new life, not as illusion, but in their temporary displacement. From here, a form of sensuality develops that is not to be separated from actual function. Alongside their actual purpose, the objects transmit a sort of concealed reality."⁵ The meaning of Ilona Ruegg's works is best unlocked in this space 'in between'. Especially because their displacement is not final, new configurations unclothe multiple layers of meaning and complex sensual experiences.

Daniela Hardmeier was at the time of the show, Curator in Kunst(Zeug)Haus und is currently scientific Collaborator in Kunsthaus Zürich.

⁴Since the 1950's, materials have been used in fine art contexts, which expressly resist longevity. Examples for this are Dieter Roth and his use of food supplies. See Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*, Munich 2002.

⁵Mika Hannula, "Sensually yours", in *Ilona Ruegg. Air House/ Time construction 4*, 2006, p.14.