

art agenda

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REVIEWS:

“ABSTRACT POSSIBLE: THE STOCKHOLM SYNERGIES”

By Judith Schwarzbart

From an historical perspective, abstraction in art represents both a radical avant-garde achievement and the perfect format for art as luxury. Abstraction gave birth to the ultimate autonomous works, and—one could claim—freedom itself. Free from commissioners' intensions, moralization or political agendas. And it was free to be absolutely self-absorbed.

From a contemporary perspective, the exhibition “Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies” throws new light on abstraction. While on the surface sharing an interest in formal abstraction, it would seem that the artists travelled various routes before arriving at abstraction. For some, abstraction is a way out of a dead-end. And if abstraction is experiencing a revival in contemporary art, it is rather a notion of it that extends beyond formal bounds. In Maria Lind's exhibition there are three different concepts of abstraction (partially doubled over) in three venues. While the main venue Tensta Konsthall has a strong formal emphasis, a seminar room in the Fashion Studies department at Stockholm University is a site of social abstraction as a form of “withdrawal,” and Bukowskis Auction House hosts a commercial exhibition indirectly addressing “economic abstraction.”

The space at Tensta Konsthall offers a seductive exhibition rich in visual exercises and tactile play with material such as Falke Pisano's series of fabric wall objects, *Figures of Speech* (2009) and Claire Barclay's familiar-yet-strange sculptures loosely referencing a domestic interior. The atmosphere of beauty and harmony is only interrupted by the punk aesthetics of Matias Faldbakken and Wade Guyton. Faldbakken's *Triple Cover Screen Print* (2011) series performs an act of auto-distortion with

its multiple print layers and almost theatrically sloppy hanging with brown packaging tape, and Wade Guyton's black-painted plywood floor covering both gallery spaces offers up a challenge to the overall classical presentation of art objects.

Yet all the works have conceptual or speculative subtexts that only slowly (if at all) appear in the show. Although one can read abstraction as an act of withdrawal from the social world, the liaison with reality never completely disappears. Mika Tajima's reworked disused office furniture including Herman Miller panels (bought from a bankrupted telemarketing company) resemble monochromes. They play out a twist between particular types of functionality in the office (regulating bodies) and functionality in the exhibition (the screen holds another piece).

In Doug Ashford's *Six Moments in 1967* (2011) abstraction becomes a means of withdrawing to a personal space and of reflecting on a social reality, nonetheless. In other works, such as Iman Issa's *Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people* (2010), abstraction is at a crucial point from where new social meaning emerges, or a new political imagination is born. Mai-Thu Perret's ornamental wallpaper (together with Wade Guyton's floor) give a light performative feeling to the space hinting at a "design for social situations," which since the late 90s has been a keen format for formal experiments in art, an aesthetic *mise-en-scène*, so to speak.

Beyond the sanctioned surroundings of the exhibition space, however, the works function differently. If there is a passage from the materiality and open signifier—form where meaning might or might not emerge—to social practice, this takes on a different life in a seminar room. Mai-Thu Perret's avant-garde inspired wallpaper offers a backdrop, and Emily Roysdon's serigraphic poster *Ecstatic Resistance* (2009) promotes the idea of an embodied experience and a way to reorganize the cultural and political imaginary. Here the interventions in a "found space" for withdrawal from productivity and dominant discourses emphasize or even amplify the site as a micro-utopia for a potentially changed social practice.

The (in many ways, secure) situation of Tensta Konsthall finds its strongest contrast at a third venue: Bukowskis Auction House. On display are works by some of the artists from the Konsthall, here presented next to a series of works by local abstract painter Albert Johansson (1926–1998). Somehow, this show becomes a *Gestamtkunstwerk*. As always at

Bukowskis, the works are on sale, although with fixed prices rather than on auction. This commercial logic is an organizing factor in what we see, hence affecting not only the selection (what other role do Mr. Johansson's paintings play?), but also the presentation of the works. It becomes more obvious to the audience through the artist duo Goldin+Senneby's obscure conceptual devising, which among other things means that the works are taken off the wall as they are sold.

One of the works on offer is a Bible-like book, a box allegedly containing a report produced by Thea Westreich, Art Advisory Services, providing a "detailed evaluation of the collecting opportunities presented by each of the works on offer." With this work, the artists Goldin+Senneby make Westreich's service available for the neat sum of EUR 12,850. Pricing is an odd thing, and the pricing of insider knowledge that might affect the commercial value of contemporary art an even odder one.

The show at Bukowskis is at once a sombre "grotesque" and pure reality. What appears to be controversial, however, is not the show itself, but a publicly funded art gallery working with a high-end, market-driven agent, or even a politically conscious curator and a company affiliated with the most controversial Swedish oil and gas production company (Lundin Petroleum). Although this exhibition does not take on a moral stance, it does, however, ignite a certain debate about how art is funded—not least the growing demand from the welfare states for private-public match funding. Such a debate can never be fully orchestrated. And despite a certain hands-off position she maintains by letting Goldin+Senneby frame the show, curator Maria Lind has willingly performed a radical gesture with this exhibition.

To understand the full dimensions of a project like this, one has to take into consideration a fourth "venue" (if you like), which is tightly connected to the presentation at Bukowskis: the publication *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios* edited by the curator with Olav Velthuis. Various contributions reflect on the current transformations (and status quos) of how the market impacts art beyond the mere trading of artworks. The publication offers up an interesting analysis of changing regimes of values and how art has become increasingly an object of investment. In an economy of attention and experience we also see a growth of large-scale production: meaning not only that more artist's studios are turning into huge production units but also professionalizing structures of agencies of production. This obviously causes new funding challenges for the institutions that wish to

commission such work. Eventually, the role of criticism is discussed within a concept of “relative heteronomy.” For what can criticism be when every publishing platform has a commercial dependency?

The publication is informative and a good read for anyone who is involved in art. (Especially one, like this author, who hoped to maintain a safe distance to the market’s impact on art.) What is sadly absent, however, is the recognition that some types of art are more affected by these structures than others, i.e., art with low-production costs and little market appeal. Also wished for is a discussion about the variety of models (already in place or imaginative) that could support or even increase the relative independence of art from its market. That said, the show’s multiple venues as well as the publication in conjunction make it clear how Lind’s curatorial work does not rest only with the selection, display, and pedagogical contextualization of the artworks but also addresses the exhibition’s infrastructure. This infrastructure is what sets up the conditions for an engagement with the art, its social relations, and possible ways of operating.