

It's Real (The Knowing, Dreaming Spectator)

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"The eyes do not see things but images of things that mean other things," Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The explorer is narrating his fantastical journey through Khan's crumbling empire, city by city. In the town of Tamara, "pinchers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks." As Polo describes Tamara, its semiotic labyrinth grows increasingly complex, sometimes indecipherable: "statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something—who knows what?—has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star." Prohibitions, possibilities, everything one knows about Tamara is learned by interpreting an array of symbols that may or may not bring us closer to understanding the city, but still spark our imaginations with their strange, outmoded beauty. "The cornucopia, the hourglass, the medusa...the embroidered headband...the gilded palanquin..." are all fragments of visual experience that point elsewhere, but we stop to linger on them for their own sake before choosing between their many meanings.

The collaborative work of Sabina Lang and Daniel Baumann (hereafter referred to as L/B) unites the symbolic and the spectacular in a practice that has been defying genre for nearly twenty years. Together they have created installations, environments, public interventions, paintings, games and even a mobile hotel room, often using visual languages that are often reminiscent of Op and Pop-inspired design. In their previous works, brightly-colored patterns run across the walls, floors and windows of art centers, community centers and galleries and even cover a stretch of rural roadway. Elsewhere, giant, inflatable plastic tubes span the windows of a building's facade, becoming a twisted (but highly regular) latticework of impossible passageways. Shiny, decorative "modules" and light fixtures made of molded plastic are arranged into patterns that bring a set of visual variables into harmony. Throughout L/B's universe, there is an emphasis on creating new connections between and within existing spaces and sets, and a desire to activate otherwise aesthetically neglected zones of connection (hallways, stairwells, etc.). Visually stimulating, the work highlights the act of seeing while inviting viewers to forge their own pathways toward interpretation.

Diving Platform (2005), first presented in Bern and later at the outdoor exhibition *Art en plein air* (Môtiers, 2007), is an impossibly tall diving board—thirteen meters high—that has no water beneath it. The work disappoints those who wish to scale it: the ladder attached to the steel mast is unreachable, its lowest point pitched seven meters above the ground. Other than this shift of scale and location, the work replicates a conventional diving platform one might find at a public swimming pool, a utilitarian object (and place) that does not normally inspire contemplation.

Still, a diving platform is a transitional, temporary space that evokes in users an unusually intense combination of feelings: the heightened vulnerability during the ascent (wearing only a bathing suit, perched at the edge of a pool ringed with tile or concrete, one climbs slippery steps with wet feet); the excitement and nervousness that precede the dive; the singularity of purpose when, after a moment of intense concentration, one suddenly rushes towards the board's edge. A dive must be experienced alone, but takes place in front of an audience of other swimmers. Broken down into its constitutive parts, diving from a platform like the one L/B have extended is akin to doing acrobatics in a shopping mall, but it's expected, part of the routine, and goes largely unnoticed.

Towering over us and without a pool, *Diving Platform*, L/B's simple, poetic addition to the landscape, both suggests and forecloses various possibilities for its use: it might be a place from which to admire the bucolic Swiss countryside; then again, it could be the scene of a dramatic exit, a leaping suicide. Regardless, the associations that the work yields are more important than its potential uses. An elevated, unreachable platform suggests many interpretations, but its meaning centers largely on unrealized aspirations: goals one will never achieve; the desire and inability to find a vista from which one can finally see a situation clearly; the basic necessity to rise above one's difficulties.

At the same time, the platform has become an enduring (if increasingly questioned) metaphor in contemporary art, particularly since Artistic Director Okwui Enwezor structured Documenta 11 (2002) as a series of five “Platforms” (including the exhibition in Kassel), the first four of which were essentially focused discussions with a strong ethico-political imperative. Held on four different continents, these Platforms (which I did not attend), with topics like “Democracy Unrealized” and “Truth and Reconciliation,” can be seen as an effort to engage both experts and the public in a dialogue about present social / political exigencies. As the material produced by Documenta’s communications team explains:

The platforms can be understood then as constellations that open up a critical review of processes of a range of knowledge production. Equally, these platforms perform a second operation in that they allow Documenta11 the opportunity to render transparent the dimension of its intellectual interest and curatorial research. Hence the entire conceptual orientation of the exhibition is decidedly interdisciplinary, connecting a wide range of scholars, philosophers, artists, and filmmakers, institutions, cities, and audiences.

The locus of Documenta11 is one of debate and contestation, intellectually rigorous; methodologically adventurous more than any exhibition of contemporary art.ⁱⁱ

Such hyperbole (“more than *any* exhibition of contemporary art?”) is typical of the rhetoric that positions both art practices and art spaces *as* platforms for exchange and dialogue. Here “platform” suggests the participation of various publics in discussions or other forms of engagement that are implicitly understood as democratic and interstitial (outside the chokehold of capital), a recreation of the Greek polis, where each voice is heard and group decisions are reached about the shape of the society we share. But before donning your toga, think back on the number of boring panels you’ve attended, where grandstanding and speechmaking stood in for dialogue, or you were unable to follow the presentations. Seen in this light, L/B’s *Diving Platform* suggests the increasing ambition to create viable platforms for meaningful exchanges may often be realized in name alone. Of course, it’s a symbol with multiple meanings; they will shift depending on the viewer’s perspective.

Diving Platform also casts a shadow over the rhetoric of “relational aesthetics” the interpretive rubric that can circumscribe many of L/B’s site-sensitive installation works, thanks to Nicholas Bourriaud’s groundbreaking book of the same name, which presents certain interactive, “sociable” art practices as idealized platforms for exchange. In the book, Bourriaud outlines a new paradigm for the discussion of “relational” works of art made during the 1990s, asking at the outset how (not “if”) “an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality [is] capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complimenting it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?”ⁱⁱⁱ His argument extends to those artists who create environments that are made to promote or produce social interaction, Michael Lin, Jorge Pardo, and L/B among them. Describing the goals of such artists, Bourriaud writes:

What they produce are relational space-time elements, inter-human experiences trying to rid themselves of the straightjacket of the ideology of mass communications, in a way, of the places where alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out^{iv}

But, as art historian and theorist Claire Bishop has asked, “If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”^v

The “relational” or interactive component of L/B’s artistic practice is ambivalent and non-directive. Their brightly colored installations often cover the surfaces of public or semi-public spaces—walls, floors and sometimes furniture—in vivid, sprawling patterns that point to retro interior design, such as the “Supergraphics” of the 1970s. Though they foster encounters between visitors, these works (like those of Lin and other artists, including those cited by Bourriaud) do not constitute new forms of emancipatory social engineering. However, the works are not aimed at creating a particular set of outcomes beyond the visitor’s

increased optical and tactile pleasure. They're surprising aesthetic experiments that charge otherwise dull spaces with a pulsing magnetism that sets the mind in motion.

Beautiful Carpet #4 (2006), presented at Tokyo's Art Spiral / Wacoal Art Center, is typical of many of L/B's works made in this style. A giant carpet, covered in an electric palette of interlocking geometric figures resembling lightning bolts, spread across the gallery's wall and floor and into the center's restaurant. Unifying otherwise disparate spaces, the work greatly lessened the division between the relaxed social atmosphere of the café and the sterile, white gallery adjacent to it. Couldn't conjoining the two experiences – the appreciation of art and the act of sharing a lunch with friends—help us to imagine a more relaxed, open way to encounter contemporary art, as opposed to the state of mind reflected by the hushed tones of the typical gallery, a guarded white box?

We must not overstate the liberatory potential of *Beautiful Carpet #4* and others works like it, which are often commissioned by institutions in order to decorate restaurants and cafes, making them more appealing and profitable. As the artists astutely remark, "The dilemma as we see it is that social interaction often is only another way of 'consuming,' there is no real participation. For us, one important point with works inviting the viewer is to offer him both: a beautiful image to look at AND invitation to participate."^{vi} None of this, however, makes *Beautiful Carpet #4* any less visually appealing, and herein rests its ability to improve a visitor's mood or day. Cries of "spectacle"—which would liken L/B's candy-colored, patterned walls to a stupefying drug, an optical opiate—miss the point entirely, as the artists' works do nothing if not awaken the senses, the lenses through which we begin to form interpretations.

For "I'm Real", their solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, the result of L/B's three-month residency at the gallery, the artists have combined two elements to create a site-sensitive response to the city of Beijing and the gallery space. Galerie Urs Meile's Beijing location, designed by Ai Weiwei, is a gated complex of several conjoined, two-level buildings set in a triangulated formation, with all facades, outdoor walkways and surrounding walls made of grey brick. Entering the gallery, one's eyes are immediately directed downward, toward *Beautiful Carpet #1* (2009), which covers the gallery in zigzagging bands of color that include lemon yellow, Barbie pink and midnight blue, amplifying the existing architecture's angularity. The carpet's pattern suggests a fractured, crisscrossing network of galvanic pathways that visitors can use to navigate the space, trying one and then another as they move about the installation. Walking on the artwork, one is suddenly surrounded by it; rather than studying wall-hung artworks from a measured distance, we have no choice but to move into and through an immersive visual experience that ignites the senses.

Finally, we pass through a dim corridor to reach *Flash #2* (2009), an installation comprised of 59 custom-made barber poles arranged in a circular configuration of swirling green and silver bands that curls opens on one end to admit visitors into its vertiginous center. Spinning in unison and lit from within, the poles, which are 230 cm high, form a curving wall that nearly encloses viewers; once in its epicenter, the familiar symbol of the barber's pole becomes dizzying and hypnotic, an optical experience that begins to impact the body's equilibrium. Wrapped in its pulsing light, we are transported again to Calvino's city of Tamara, contained by something at once spectacular and loaded with symbolic value.

On the one hand, we've passed over the carpet and into an installation that recalls the work of Op artists like Bridget Riley, but is perhaps more closely related to Duchamp's works from the 1920s, termed "Precision Optics," which put patterned sculptures into motion in order to create optical illusions. Most famous of these were Duchamp's rotoreliefs, in which asymmetrical arrangements of concentric circles were set spinning in order to create the effect of three-dimensionality. The rotoreliefs and other "retinal" art, including *Flash #2*, foster not only a sense of illusion; with dual perception comes an awareness of the fragility of the mechanics of vision itself. Since we know we cannot be seeing what the eye is registering (in case of the rotoreliefs, seeing a flat surface suddenly enter the third dimension, rushing toward or receding from the eye), one's confidence in a singular interpretation of vision is called into question.^{vii} Rather than eroding our confidence, *Flash #2*, with its disorienting embrace, reminds us of how various experiences and meanings can exist simultaneously,

without canceling each other out. Thus the emphasis the work places on retinal experience does not dull the visitor into a state of passive spectatorship, but instead encourages one to consider the work's multiplicity of meanings.

Another of these meanings is linked to the macabre history of the barber pole. It is hard to imagine now, but until the end of the 18th Century, barbers also performed surgical procedures, including bloodletting, a popular practice throughout the Dark Ages and beyond. Barbers would ask patients to grasp a pole to help them locate veins in their arms, which the barber would then open in order to drain blood and balance the humors. "After the procedure," the BBC reports, "the washed bandages were hung outside on a pole to dry, and to advertise the ghastly therapeutic specialities offered in the barbershop. Flapping in the wind, the long strips of bandages would twist around the pole in the spiral pattern we now associate with barbers."^{viii} While L/B's work, with its industrial precision, may evoke Greg Brady's bedroom more than a scene involving leeches and revolving bandages, any work that takes a readymade form as its basis inherits the history of the object it modifies, assists or re-locates in an art context.

When L/B traveled to Beijing to conceive of the new works on view in "I'm Real", it seems that they were drawn to the familiar – the patterns of the barber's poles in China rhyme nicely with L/B's artistic vocabulary of bright, flat colors often put into swirling, curving and geometric patterns whose play of scale and pattern make them seem as if they are in motion. In Beijing, the effect of barber poles is greatly intensified: they are often grouped two or three at a single storefront, lighting up dark alleys and adding extra color to busy intersections, especially near residential areas, where salons are grouped three or four in a row. But in Beijing, the poles do not just announce a place for a haircut; at night, girls in short skirts and heavy makeup call outside to passersby, "Massage? Massage, sir?" In fact, the barber poles connote that prostitutes' services are available. Seen in this light, the pole suggests an erection dressed in vivid prophylactics. The contradiction between this overtly visible sign and its covert meaning was not lost on L/B, who observe:

The Beijing-style seemed easy, fun and somehow "Italian": very colorful, eccentric and blinking seem to be very popular. The barber poles we noticed everywhere. Of course, soon we found out about the double meaning of them and this even seemed more absurd: to have a secret code for something illegal and it's this blinking large sign you could not ignore. Why wouldn't they make it a bit more discrete (we as typical Swiss asked ourselves)?^x

The polyvalence of the symbols employed by L/B attest to an interest in the "local," in as much as certain pieces of the landscape of Beijing resonate with their pre-existing sensibilities.

While their work is visually spectacular, the multiple meanings radiating from the elements in "I'm Real" invite us to make interpretative choices, as opposed to participating in a zombifying "consumption of spectacle," as has been so often asserted about work of such visual impact. "Spectatorship is not the passivity [that] has to be turned into activity," philosopher Jacques Rancière has argued. He continues:

It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt... We have not to turn spectators into actors. We have to acknowledge that any spectator already is an actor of his own story and that the actor also is the spectator of the same kind of story.^x

Like many of their previous works, L/B's latest exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing simultaneously dazzles the retina and opens a liminal space for the contemplation of vision itself. At the same time, its symbolic value allows us to test the interpretive filters that form the screens of visibility as we engage with different associations offered up by the work, sex and death among them. As a result, our sense of spectatorship is amplified for a time that extends beyond the gallery. As Calvino writes, when we leave the city of Tamara:

The land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant...

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ⁱ Italo Calvino quotes excerpted from *Invisible Cities*, William Weaver, trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p.13-14.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/d11/data/english/platform1/index.html>, last accessed March 14, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, trans. (Paris: le press du reel, 1998 [Eng. Edition, 2002]), p.16.

^{iv} Bourriaud, p.44.

^v Claire Bishop, "Relational Antagonisms," *October Magazine*, No. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51–79.

^{vi} Email from the artists to the author dated February 24, 2009.

^{vii} I am borrowing here from Michael Betancourt, "Precision Optics / Optical Illusions: Inconsistency, *Anemic Cinema*, and the *Rotoreliefs*," in *The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, http://www.toutfait.com/online_journal_details.php?postid=1570 posted November 30, 2004, last accessed March 15, 2009.

^{viii} See "Blood, Bandages and Barber Poles," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/brunel/A885062> posted November 29, 2002, last accessed on March 14, 2009.

^{ix} Email from the artists to the author dated February 24, 2009.

^x Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," a lecture given on August 20, 2004, complete transcript posted on <http://ranciere.blogspot.com/2007/09/ranciere-emancipated-spectator.html>, last accessed on March 14, 2009. Part of this quote appears in Claire Bishop, "Introduction," Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London and Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel and MIT Press), 2006, p.16.