

Close-Ups in the Test Tube of Society

In her installations, Ursula Groser makes use of a formal language whose vocabulary can be characterized as coming from an organic source. The organic is omnipresent in her work, as simulacrum, as actually alive, or simply as an implied principle of organization. Organic forms and materials mostly appeal to us directly and evoke various reactions in us depending on their appearance and/or physical presence. Organisms are a fundamental form of organization found in nature. Living organisms consist of molecular configurations formed and held together through cohesive forces. Structures are based on the automatic connecting of cells; their existence requires an ability to grow and transform. In her art, Ursula Groser takes advantage of the process quality of organic structures as well as their self-referentiality. She employs organic design strategies, utilizing installation arrangements as a means to represent and communicate critical observations on the state of society. On the one hand, she is interested in the relationship between the individual and the masses, the (im)possibility of an “ontological individuality” in the (post-)capitalist age as well as the—gender-specific—social conditions that determine this individuality.

How can the relationship between the individual and the masses be described and represented without slipping into stereotypes? As a strategy to do this, Ursula Groser has chosen to move back and forth between the macro and the micro levels, between that which is only discretely visible under a microscope, so to speak, and the level of social processes. Due to its predetermined state, the micro level—the world as a form of organization of preprogrammed cells—is per se politically neutral and therefore

perfectly suited to critically cast light on the conditions and processes of the macro level without falling into the trap of being pedantic. In the wall installation from 2009 *Netzhaut* (Net Skin), for example, we encounter a cell-like structure in the process of growing. The structure reminds us of images of organic cells and is itself an image of a network whose nodes and lines symbolize a membrane-like network of relationships in a state of tension. One could understand the image as an abstraction or else as a representation of individuals (nodes, nails) and their reciprocal cohesive forces (stocking material) forming the masses. The mass ornament becomes the ornament of the network, a pictogram-like representation of the forces, order, and tensions among the entities. In Groser’s work, this pictogram-like ornament is not of a purely visual-symbolic nature, but rather it is expansive and enlarged to human dimensions so that a physical experience of the network becomes possible. The spatial installation *In Reih und Glied* (In Line, 2005) equally exemplifies the artist’s intention of connecting micro and macro levels, visualizing a subtle critique of the “equalized” state of society. The exhibition included spatial configurations of cell structures and concepts, whose arrangement revealed a preference for playing with dualities: a light and a dark room, the double coloring, the conceptual reduction of the aims of the French Revolution (and also of the bourgeois Enlightenment), *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, to the first two, which in turn appear to be mutually exclusive on a fundamental level. In the video *Evolutionäre Zellen* (Evolutionary Cells), which was part of the installation, from what is originally a chaotic mass, uniform white “cells” form loose rows. In a state of constant multiplication, these gradually connect to

one another in concentric circles. The cells change their colors and grow lethargic, yet synchronized and rhythmic, before we zoom into a deeper level on which the same process relentlessly takes place again. The design principle for the video *Übertritt* (Crossing, 2009) is similar. Yet the artist now leaves the abstract micro level, this time introducing people to illustrate the formation of the synchronous mass. The flow of passersby in front of the camera becomes more and more dense over time until it ends up as a dark, threatening black mass, which in the end seems to absorb the viewer as well.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written at a moment in history when fascism was carrying out its last atrocities, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno observed that the Enlightenment was not only inseparably linked to social freedom, but also, in its generally dominant form, threatened to flip over into its opposite: mythology. This diagnosis was not only a response to the dogma of fascism, but also, and especially, to the consumer society in the United States, which following the end of the Second World War was just beginning to implement its conception of free market capitalism on a global scale. Horkheimer and Adorno recognized that, on the one hand, increasing economic productivity would produce the conditions for a more just world, but, on the other hand, it would also grant the technical apparatuses and the social groups in control of them superiority over the rest of the population. For “the powerlessness and pliability of the masses increase with the quantity of goods allocated to them.”¹ In the section on the culture industry, this pliability is shown to exercise its power psychologically through town planning

and mass media (film and radio): “But the town-planning projects, which are supposed to perpetuate individuals as autonomous units in hygienic small apartments, subjugate them only more completely to their adversary, the total power of capital. Just as the occupants of city centers are uniformly summoned there for purposes of work and leisure, as producers and consumers, so the living cells crystallize into homogenous, well-organized complexes. The conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm confronts human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of universal and particular.”²

Is actual subjectification possible under the domination of the Enlightenment? Groser poses this question in the video *Aus dieser Haut komme ich nicht mehr heraus* (I'll Never Get Out of This Skin, 2009)—and practically negates it. The work came about through the collaborative performance of fifty participants, whose task it was to draw themselves from memory on the surface of a milky transparent glass panel. The video captures the attempts at self-portraiture and the subsequent visual erasure of individuals—a symbolic act of a desired subjectification. The evident attempt of the participants to represent themselves as individuals with their respective physical attributes takes on a light playful quality, yet it is an undertaking that is simultaneously doomed to failure. In another installation *Pasted Story / Pick Me Up* (2006), the artist presents a tongue-in-cheek attempt at female emancipation from the role of housewife, which is still to this day assigned to women in conservative bourgeois circles. Episodes and situations from daily life around the house, the housewife's universe, are represented in sequences resembling comics. The artist herself is the protagonist in all the scenes, which show her systematically trying to follow the good advice from various self-help books. In the end, there is no resolution, no release from the situation and definitely no liberation of the subject from the socially predetermined constraints.

Ursula Groser does not aim to formulate unequivocal

statements on certain topics; she rather intends to create an autonomous artistic space where socially immanent structural changes and conditions are transcendent and where these can be perceived in a condensed form. As a means to this end, she makes use of a strategy of design based on spacial installation, juxtaposing the various elements (which can also be perceived as individual works of art) in suspenseful, sometimes surprising relations to one another. The resulting configurations exhibit a discursive quality gained from the “organic” link between cognitive and aesthetic experiences, and open up new ways of seeing supposedly familiar subjects

Notes:

1 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002), p. xvii.

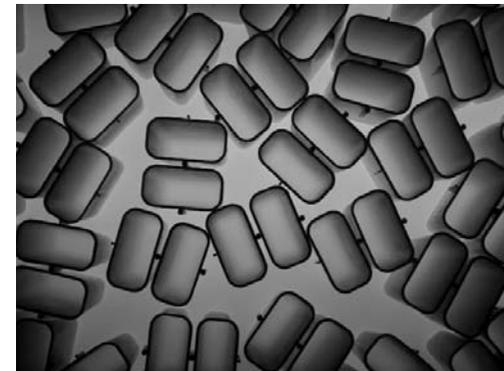
2 *Ibid*, pp. 94–95.



In Reih und Glied

Rauminstallation 2005
Stadtturmalerie Innsbruck

installation 2005
tape



Evolutionäre Zellen

Fotografie 2005

photography 2005
tape