

A Modern Mockery
Kay Walkowiak's
Performative *Melencolia*

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»Even though I admired the house very much, I always knew that I neither wanted to, nor could, live in it myself. It seemed indeed to be much more a dwelling for the gods than for a small mortal like me.«

Hermine Wittgenstein

Few people were in a better position than Hermine Wittgenstein to put a finger on the intractable contradiction between modernism's universalist aspiration to create designs for a better living for all and the awareness that such design paradoxically enough sometimes entailed a programmatic disregard for the particular interests of ways of life, cultures, and indeed individuals. Wittgenstein's brother Ludwig had worked with the architect Paul Engelmann, a student of Adolf Loos, to plan and build the Wittgenstein House, one of the few modernist buildings in 1920s Vienna.

With the ambivalence Hermine Wittgenstein noted between the »supernatural« pure form of (projected) design and the needs of life as it is lived, that house makes for a uniquely congenial temporary setting for the presentation of Kay Walkowiak's art, letting us experience the modernist structural forces at work in it in what we may call a negative image.

And so the Wittgenstein House serves as the backdrop for a stance that reads the international prewar and postwar modernist style against the horizon of an ideological-strategic missionary endeavor. Thoroughly Western and invested in the Eurocentric vision of a more or less democratic society committed to technology and progress, this endeavor is for its part ripe for a critical rereading of the universalist and ultimately authoritarian gesture with which utopian models coerce people into a happiness not of their own choosing, imposing standards without regard for the unique cultural and economic circumstances of those it culturalizes. Under the pretext of providing better living conditions for everyone, urban planners built monumental housing complexes for millions. Hailed as the emblems of a new era, these developments promised hygiene, order, and hierarchical structures in which the masses would be assigned to clearly defined places—and, ultimately, disciplined. It is no secret that Le Corbusier, a central protagonist in Walkowiak's work, collaborated with the Vichy regime in order to obtain commissions. Less well known is the fact that, as several recent studies have demonstrated, his fantasies about razing entire neighborhoods in order to inaugurate a new era bear a striking and frightening resemblance to the Nazis' eugenics-inspired principles of cleansing.

Walkowiak analyzes the characteristic ideological intransigence of such aesthetic and social models in sober-minded quasi-documentary meditations, using experimental techniques of substitution, play, and paradoxical intervention to point out their limitations and tacit presuppositions. His work thus reveals the potential and necessity of intrinsically motivated processes of appropriation that effectively offer resistance to the rigid discipline urbanist master plans drawn up by imperious architects of Le Corbusier's caliber demand.

In an exemplary study of how the modernist utopia ultimately came to grief, Kay Walkowiak explores Chandigarh, a planned city designed by Le Corbusier, in three filmic essays. Subjecting this iconic project of its time to a re-visiting, a characteristic practice of what has been called »second modernity,« the films reveal the cracks separating utopian aspirations from lived reality.

As envisioned by the design theory Le Corbusier laid out in 1948, which is based on the »Modulor,« an anthropometric scale of proportions, Chandigarh was supposed to implement the ideal »concatenation of natural form, mathematics, and human being.«¹ A drawing that hung above his desk illustrates the Modulor: its first main element is the depiction of a man proportioned according to the golden ratio. To its right is a sort of Fibonacci ribbon, based on a sequence of numbers that may be found in natural phenomena, especially in the growth of plants, and that is closely related to the golden ratio; it may also be represented as a kind of spiral that in turn evinces similarities to the structure of a seashell, the third motif in the drawing. In the government city of Chandigarh, Le Corbusier sought to put this system of correspondences reconciling ostensibly antagonistic entities—man and nature—into practice. Many observers have doubted whether he was successful.

The trilogy—the parts are titled *The City Beautiful* (2011), *Body of Concrete* (2014), and *Modulor* (2015)—captures the city, built starting in 1951 after designs by Le Corbusier and other architects, with a static camera, in a nod to conventional architectural photography. Yet where the latter traditionally privileges the best views in order to represent exemplary and ideal situations, Walkowiak's camera is predominantly guided by a documentarian's critical eye; its static gaze embodies the reflective emphasis on the duration required for unhurried observation and analysis leading to insight, making room for articulation and affording the viewer, too, the time needed to apprehend all the inherent yet latent information in the image. This dilatory quality makes the documentary images a memento mori of a utopian vision that was questionable and is now lost. The ruinous and entropic momentum that always already inhabits perfection now comes to the fore in the porous and soiled concrete faces, the miracle material of yesteryear. And the discrepancy between the architecture's erstwhile pure luster and today's eroding surfaces and paint coats is emblematic of how time wears down utopia; having outlived its original intentions and formal principles, it is left to itself, sunken into oblivion, melancholy, diverted to new purposes, scattered, of ruinous monumentality.² »In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.«³ Walter Benjamin wrote.

The trilogy's third part, *Modulor*, arrays shots of interiors at the library, the reading room, the architecture classroom, a natural history museum, and various hallways, foyers, and indefinable spaces to explore the question of how the Modulor manifests itself in concrete and palpable ways. As before, the viewer senses a peculiar temporal and cultural incongruence between functions and functionalities, between human and architectonic bodies. An entire city—overrun by nature reclaiming its right, its library, or at least parts, moldering after what appears to have been a severe case of water damage, its storehouse of knowledge rendered unusable, the carpets stripped from the building and deposited in an improvised waste disposal site on the roof—is transmuted into a graveyard of its former grandeur. Time stands still, but when did it stop?

And whence this ruinous and dystopian aspect, given that an upper middle class still lives and works in the city? Its people have made their peace with the »machine for living in«: it exudes little of the radiance, progressiveness, brightness one might expect and in fact suggests a panoptic and yet impenetrable prison. Forms that, like those in *Body of Concrete*, resemble sculptures, standing by themselves, monumental, disparate, incapable of integration, that no one seems to care for, look after, or maintain, that one cannot relate to in any natural way. To a Western eye, the city as it appears today, though austere beautiful, in some ways looks like an urban housing project that has become uninhabitable, like St. Louis's *Pruitt-Igoe*, which was completed in 1955 and eventually demolished in 1972 as a case of misconceived social housing development, the explosives taking down what years of vandalism had left standing. Still, compared to other cities in India, Chandigarh seems to be fairly livable, with decent hygienic and ecological standards.⁵

Vandalism is also a theme in Kay Walkowiak's work *Minimal Vandalism* (2013), where it is not modernism that comes in for a drubbing but its descendant, minimalism, and by extension, the white cube. Sculptures whose dissonant palette and play with overly functional forms are at odds with the minimalism that recognizably inspired them are set up in a prominent Viennese white cube, allegorizing the minimalist gesture while also deconstructing it with sportive elegance. With focused energy, a skateboarder demolishes these already »impure« forms. The action, moreover, is set at a highly fraught location, one that is in fact a ruin of sorts: until recently the city's premier site of institutional critique as well as avant-garde art and discursive engagement, the Generali Foundation was shut down after a quarter-century in 2014. Vandalizing minimalism, the artist incidentally becomes the unwitting prophet of another burial.

Walkowiak charts the fault lines of modernism crisscrossing the scenes of its colonial expansion in Asia, India, or Japan in the mode of a dispassionate observer—as he emphasizes, his objective is to »take stock«—but with an inquisitive, sensitive, and playful edge. He traces the rift that runs right through a modernism whose shelf life would seem to have expired, but also explores the ways in which such imported forms and colors may be appropriated by a Hindu culture and society in which the caste ranks above the individual. The artist's observational approach yields meditations on the significance of rituals—their imagery, forms of invocation, and implements—in specific cultures, as well as minor burlesques on the dogmas of 1950s and 1960s abstraction or minimalism, which aspired to establish a global visual language but, when transplanted into environments to which they are not native, manifest themselves in idiosyncratic interpretations.⁶

In his own way, Walkowiak seems to be offering a commentary on the rift that opened up between Donald Judd's *Specific Objects* (1965) and Michael Fried's polemic *Art and Objecthood* (1967), though it is hard to pin down his critique vis-à-vis that old dispute, beyond his rejection of the ideological aspect of any ism. It may be that he finds fault with a certain formalism in minimalism, which rejects any form of relationality, of authorial intention and its imprint on the work; Walkowiak definitely calls its raison d'être in question. On the other hand, he would presumably concur with Fried's objection that minimalist (or, as Fried also called it, literalist) art is experienced *in a specific situation*, »one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder«⁷ and thus takes on quasi-performative and perhaps even theatrical qualities. Walkowiak homes

in on the point where viewers interpret things and objects in light of their specific cultural perspectives, initiating transformative interventions and processes of acculturation through a relational interaction with them. See, for instance, *Untitled (Circles)* (2011), a series of photographs of metal pipes, some embedded in cast-concrete shapes, whose purpose is not readily apparent. They are barriers demarcating the premises of sales stalls and the like. The laconic dryness of the functional thing is leavened by the spontaneous and sometimes ironic association of boundaries of all sorts, including those drawn in the museum to »protect« the work of art from contact with life.

Combining the detail selected by the artist with a circular object added in the composition, the photographs with their varying contexts, though seemingly desultory and infused with the poetic air of the everyday, evince a certain formal virtuosity and beauty. Similar concrete relics appear in one of the sculptural pieces *Untitled* (2014), for which the artist recreated concrete foundations, arranged them in a circle, and connected them with another metal pipe—the result looks like a circular handrail or a kind of jungle gym ripped from its moorings; or one might think of the skeletal structure as the framework for a tent, a sort of primitive hut for the nomadic subject, small and easily movable from one site to another, a form that seems to have been uprooted but is in fact not predestined to put down truly solid roots. The functional indeterminacy opens up a space for possible imaginary applications. The artist makes a sculpture out of found elements—or we might say, the *bricoleur* constructs a provisional shelter. Such sculptures are nomadic because they are characterized by the potentiality of the temporary abode, but also because their functionality can shift—they are hybrid forms between a purposeless, dysfunctional, formalist sculpture and a possible scaffold for a serviceable dwelling. Walkowiak thus accords to any form an agency, a capacity that renders it an object, a thing, rather than letting it be mere »pure« form.

The poetic and sometimes comedic quality results, on the one hand, from the indeterminate assumption or hunch on the beholder's part that certain objects are conceived or even remembered in association with an unclear or estranged functionality, and on the other hand, from the *détournement*, the repurposing or appropriation, that is common in countries like India, where Walkowiak undertook extensive research. In Chandigarh, the artist roamed the city in search of forms of such *détournement*: people setting up places to sleep in certain corners of the residential development or driving hooks into the walls to hang shopping bags on; a man has laid out blankets on the floor to make a home for himself and his dog, though he still looks displaced, like a stranger, an intruder, the last surviving member of an extinct species. The flâneur-artist comes upon such scenes walking through the city, a psychogeographer capturing what might seem to be marginal details in precisely framed pictures. Bringing the unintentional into focus, he creates in-between spaces in which contradictions manifest themselves—contradictions between organic structures, usages, cultural idiosyncrasies on the one hand and »civilizational« measures purposing modernization, recolonization, etc., on the other.

There are evidently ways to assimilate the ostensibly foreign to the native. In *The Ritual* (2015), for instance, the artist sets up a stele on the bank of the Ganges that looks like a minimalist rectangular cube painted in the constructivist style. If it were black, one might believe it to be the mysterious monolith landed on earth from outer space with the mission of helping the first humans or humanoid apes along on the path toward civilization. The analogy may be intentional: the monolith from Stanley Kubrick's legendary *2001: A Space Odyssey* was already on the artist's mind when, in an earlier work, *Ritual Union* (2013), he laid out a black Suprematist-constructivist square on the ground. Not coincidentally, apes are also the protagonists of another film, *Stimuli* (2014), where they tinker with monoliths of a different kind—panels painted with abstract patterns that might be vehicles of culture—and likely wonder what they could possibly be for.

Early modernist abstraction was wedded to the spiritual in art as an anchor of absolute validity. The monolith, by contrast, appears before us as an enigma, challenging us to solve the riddle or problem, standing as an embodiment of the spiritual as such. In *The Ritual*, the faithful converge on the river to bring sacrifices to the deity, to worship and behold his or her countenance. The artist writes about his film: »We see a minimalist sculpture by the Ganges, installed before daybreak at a site that attracts many devout visitors. The object, though alien to the setting, draws no skepticism from the pilgrims, who soon integrate it into their morning rituals and adapt it as a religious object. The unscripted scenes of quotidian ritual actions play out amid the bustling crowd: butter candles are lighted, censers are swung, the sculpture is daubed with colorful pigments and festooned with sacrificial flowers. Within mere hours the object's monochrome surface bears rich decorations, and a minimalist sculpture has been transformed into a sacred object in whose presence *darshana* is sought and perhaps experienced as well.« *Darshana*, the manifestation of the god, is experienced in the (ritual) image, which mediates divine communication with the believer. The film documents the syncretistic forms of assimilation that no alien element can withstand; it must not remain alien, ultimately also for the sake of the strategies that allow spirituality to survive. This approach to the object is no doubt facilitated by the Hindu awareness that everything is in flux, undergoing unceasing transmutation, and that the world of things is forever open to interpretation that reveals its inexhaustible potential.

Supreme Forms (2016) presents a variation on the two-color stele: a series of concrete casts, half in the material's native gray, half gilded. The gold alludes both to the alchemical process—the genesis of individuality as well as the holy and sacred—and to the aspect of monetary or exchange value, to what underlies worth of any kind. Uniting two materials—the precious metal as an ingredient of precious artisan craftwork, sacred architecture or painting, an element that has long played a vital role in old cultures; and concrete as the signature staple of the industrial age and of modernism in particular—the work represents a clash of two stances. Not coincidentally, the shape of the objects also recalls gold bricks, like those for which Marcel Broodthaers invented a contract stipulating the sale of one kilogram of fine gold in bricks to finance his *Musée d'art moderne. Département des Aigles*. One clause of the contract he drew up notes that »the purchaser is free to have his ingot or bar melted, so as to obliterate the mark, or to burn the letter of identification in order to enjoy fully the purity of the substance and the freshness of the original intention.«⁸ Elsewhere Broodthaers acknowledged that he was »very fond of gold, because it is symbolic. I look at gold in a disinterested way; gold is like the sun, it is unalterable.«⁹

In *Divine Monochromes* (2016), Kay Walkowiak examines the late-modernist painting of the 1960s with a view to questions of craftsmanship, originality, chance—transposed to the India of fortunetellers. The work reads like a synthesis of multiple appropriations, taking its cues from Marcel Duchamp and Gerhard Richter as well as Le Corbusier. The artist paints colors on small cards, a reference to the palette of sixty-three hues Le Corbusier compiled in 1959, a richer extension of his 1931 color collection. The color sample cards are readymades of a sort, stuffed in envelopes and handed to a fortuneteller who works with a parrot as his medium. In a prolonged and monotonous unchanging ritual, the parrot repairs to its cage and emerges again to pick a card, producing four series, with the first cards in each said to be the artist's luckiest colors, the second draw being the second-luckiest, and so on. Bafflingly, there is no drawing of inauspicious colors, though one suspects those might be the ones the bird shuns. The work revolves around the theme of fate or chance, around what one might call »planned spontaneity«—»planned coincidence« is the term Richter coined, primarily with a view to his color-chart paintings, which he started making in 1966 and has since created in countless variations (their number is only constrained by the number of color sample combinations one can think of). Disavowing the claim to originality, Richter sourced most of his motifs from photographs and copied them in gray, the hue that came closest to nothingness, also in order to avoid the dilemma of having to make a choice among motifs concocted by his own imagination or choose colors to be combined. Similarly, the color-chart paintings aimed to implement a »deskilling,« with the hues to be selected and combined arbitrarily, without the intervention of skill or intention. Walkowiak adapts the gesture by taking the palette from which the color concept in Chandigarh was derived and then having the parrot do the painting, as it were: the animal makes the choices, whereas the artist, interpreting the result by translating the patterns into digital pigment prints, merely executes them.

Walkowiak's entire oeuvre is defined by his determination to call the canon in question on a very fundamental level while inquiring into its constituent factors. The vehicles for this undertaking are quotation, exaggeration, ironic refraction, performative juggling—all in all, deconstructive operations toward the delineation of a stance on what is, for now, uncertain terrain. The artist's techniques are guided by his deep-seated skepticism of canonizations and master narratives in art and architectural history and effectively propose the dismantlement of dogma through forms of paradoxical intervention: play, surprising juxtaposition, *détournement*, displacement, digression. These prevent dogma from attaining genuine power by eliciting laughter or at least amusement. Humor is employed to prompt flashes of dialectical insight.

In *Nomads* (2011), a cycle rickshaw ferries a large white cube through a city, to the bafflement of bystanders. Without firm attachment to any place, it is carried along for a while, not a weighty heritage but in fact a fairly light movable piece that will be dropped off somewhere along the way. Someone, sometime, will know what to do with it. The video suggests how Kay Walkowiak's work is the scene of an encounter between saturnine melancholy and a performative lightness, a cheerful embrace of perpetual change and nomadic existence.

- 1 Niklas Maak, *Der Architekt am Strand: Le Corbusier und das Geheimnis der Seeschnecke* (Munich: Hanser, 2010), p. 114.
- 2 Cf. Sabine Folie, ed., *Modernism as a Ruin: An Archaeology of the Present* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2009).
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York and London: Verso, 1977), p. 178.
- 4 »Machine for living in« is how Le Corbusier described the house and, in particular, the modern residential block he championed. Also known as *Unité d'habitation* or »housing unit,« it is characterized by serial production and widely regarded as the ancestor of the prefabricated housing block.
- 5 See the essay by Daniela Zyman in this publication, pp. 31–43.
- 6 See the essay by Arno Böhler in this publication, pp. 45–53.
- 7 Michael Fried, »Art and Objecthood,« in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 125; and see also Donald Judd, »Specific Objects,« in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), repr. in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 114–17.
- 8 Marcel Broodthaers, Paragraph 7 of the *Contract. Proposed by the Financial Section of the Department of Eagles (Contrat proposé par le service financier du Département des Aigles)*, n. p. (1987), part of a posthumously published set of documents related to a project he designed for Galerie Konrad Fischer in 1971 under the title *Musée d'art moderne. Section Financière. Département des Aigles*.
- 9 Ibid.