FLORIAN ROITHMAYR
SERVICE
17th January - 7th March 2015
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MOTINTERNATIONAL Brussels is delighted to announce the first solo exhibition of Florian Roithmayr in Belgium.

Florian Roithmayr’s work explores a concern for activities and relationships that shape environments, supported by his investigation of empathy in various forms of production, including archaeology, conservation or pedagogy. He is known for a diverse practice often emphasizing the process of moulding and casting as both documentary and transitory exchange that leaves subtle traces. Central to these processes is the peeling open of layers to reveal the generative gap between shapes, surfaces and materials that form and yield another. In this hidden and unobserved space, the gesture of contact and touch continues to reappear and proliferate throughout the history of sculpture.

SERVICE refers to the inconsistency between intangible engagements that produce no concrete material results and the substantial inventory needed to assist and sustain exchanges or provisions. The set of actions and solutions to deliver services are often incongruous to any clear outcomes; their speed doesn’t allow language to attach itself to their performance; and their benefits might be postponed indefinitely. The residues left by such activities might often appear slight and indistinct.

The past few years have seen Roithmayr’s practice informed by long periods spent as apprentice in concrete restoration, in car alteration industries or on excavation sites in the Sudanese desert. For this exhibition of new works, Roithmayr draws on these secluded and intimate engagements. SERVICE focuses on the shifting materiality that facilitates and registers actions and solutions to perform the transfer of assistance or the delivery of repair and upkeep, and their combined transitive potential for art. These are slowed down forms of production; they often require intense attention and commitment without any definite aims.

The exhibition presents new works including The Attendants (2014), a series of repeated figure-like sculptures consisting of hollow breastplates that could be part of liveries or uniforms. Cast in concrete and papier-mâché, they emphasize surface and a breakdown of volume, similar to works by late 19th century artists like Wilhelm Lehmbruck or Medardo Rosso. In Endstart (2014), drooping and worn-out shoulder straps are lined up along a wooden rack, seemingly exhausted but still keeping in line; a moment of rest, before they are activated again and employed elsewhere. Made from low-value industrial or discarded materials, they waver between the humble or minimal intervention that positions sculpture as temporary and fugitive. Resigned to act and generate rather than understand, the protagonist in Robert Walser’s novel The Assistant wonders, “What is it that I’m accomplishing? What services have I provided to date? I’m firmly convinced that my lord and master hasn’t yet derived much benefit from me. Could I be lacking initiative, enthusiasm, flair?”. The assistant isn’t accomplishing anything, he knows little of what he is assisting with, he is not aware of the services he is rendering. His dilemma reveals what seems like withdrawal, inactivity or speechlessness to be either an escalation of commitment or the motivation for emancipation. It’s as if by suspending comprehension and benefits, SERVICE becomes the implausible support to register the fleeting nature of transmission and exchange.
Born Rosenheim, Germany, 1976. Lives and works in London

Education
Goldsmiths University, London, 2005
Slade, UCL, London, 2004

2014
Florian Roithmayr: Matter of Engagement, Site Gallery, Sheffield

2013
Florian Roithmayr, Treignac Project, France
BURG, Laure Genillard Gallery, London. With Alexander Heim
Assault, THE SCHTIP, Sheffield

2012
Florian Roithmayr, MOTINTERNATIONAL, London

2011
Sunday Art Fair, MOTINTERNATIONAL, Ambika 3, London

2007
Eventually Everything Happens, Galerie Neue Alte Brucke, Frankfurt
Go I Know Not Whither And Fetch I Know Not What, Galerie Miroslav Kraljevich, Zagreb. With Samuel Dowd

2006
Treasure Hunt, Ateneum Finnish National Art Museum and Taidehalli Art Centre, Helsinki

2004
Solar Dreams, SC Galleria, Zagreb

Selected Group Exhibitions

2014
Annals of the 25th Century, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire
Hey Mr. Poetic, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire

2013
Grand Magasin, French Riviera, London. A project with Nat Breitenstein
The Y, Rowing Projects, London
O Chair O Flesh, Treignac Project, France
£5.34, Carl Freedman, London

2012
Solid On Our Source Planet, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge
AHF Temporary Residency in the Unconscious, V22, London
Centrefold 8: The Circle Of Manias, 176 Zabludowicz Collection, London

2011
Fifteen, S1 Artspace, Sheffield

2010
2010, MOTINTERNATIONAL, London
Continuous Movement of Ideas, Galerie Nicolas Silin, Paris
Something Blue, Pilot issue, Galerie Neue Alte Brücke at Archive Kabinett, Berlin
AA2A, Camberwell Space, London
Something Blue, Landings Project Space, Oslo
Bubhka, 8fold publications, London

2009
Naom Gabo, Florian Roithmayr, The Russian Club Gallery, London
The Young Visitors To Ruins Do Not See Anything But A Style, Galeria d’Arte Moderna, Turin
What is not but could be if (Part 2), Galerie Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt
What is not but could be if (Part 1), Galerie Neue Alte Brücke at Caribic Residency, Frankfurt

2008
Salon of Revolution, The House of Artists, Zagreb, Croatia

2007
Slimevolume, Hotel Gallery, London; Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt
Electro Harmonix, The Black Mariah, Cork
Eventually Everything Happens, Galerie Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt
Go I Know Not Whither and Fetch I Know Not What, Galerie Miroslav Kraljevich, Zagreb
Die Blaue Blume, Grazer Kunstverein, Austria
When Something Becomes Nothing, S1 ArtSpace, Sheffield
Ice Trade, Chelsea Space, Chelsea School of Art, London
Aspen 11, Galerie Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt

2006
New Contemporaries, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool; La Rochelle School, London
Toyama X, Toyama International Contemporary Art Exhibition, Tokyo
The Galleries Show, Extra Cities, Antwerp
Glass Bead Game, Vlima Gold, Berlin

Residencies

2014
Fellowship in Contemporary Art, British School in Rome, Rome
The Institute for Enquiring Minds, Desk Space, Munich

2013
Convention X, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire
Installation views, **MOTINTERNATIONAL Brussels, 2015**
Florian Roithmayr, SERVICE

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Florian Roithmayr, SERVICE

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Florian Roithmayr, *SERVICE*

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Florian Roithmayr, SERVICE

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Florian Roithmayr, *SERVICE*

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Florian Roithmayr, *SERVICE*

Installation view, MOTInternational Brussels, 2015
Works
Florian Roithmayr,
*The Attendants*, 2014

cast concrete and papier-mâché, pigments, gesso, steel, 244.5 x 122 x 46.5 cm
Florian Roithmayr,
*Envelope, Crusted, 2014*

towels, moving blankets, cast concrete, 244,5 x 122 x 22,5 cm
Florian Roithmayr,
_Ambit, Abrupt_, 2015,

aluminium frame, 300 x 264 x 6 cm
Florian Roithmayr,
*Endstart no.01, 2014,*

cast concrete, plastic tube, variable dimensions
Florian Roithmayr,
*Endstart no.02, 2014,*

cast concrete, copper, cardboard, variable dimensions
Florian Roithmayr,
*Endstart no.03*, 2014, cast concrete,

wood, mixed media, variable dimensions
Florian Roithmayr,
Cavities, 2014

plastic mesh, 110 x 46 x 18 cm
Florian Roithmayr,
*Axillae*, 2014,

plastic mesh, 20 x 77 x 12 cm
Florian Roithmayr,
*Exclosure (Sweeping The Guide)*, 2015,
sandbags, dimensions variable
Florian Roithmayr,

*Peel*, 2014,

oil-based screenprint on IGEPA CARIBIC white 90 g/qm, mounted on mdf, 57 x 84 x 3 cm

(edition of 8 + 2AP)
Florian Roithmayr,
*Stripped*, 2014,

oil-based screenprint on IGEPA CARIBIC white 90 g/m², mounted on mdf, 57 x 84 x 3 cm
(edition of 8 + 2AP)
Additional Text
Florian Roithmayr | The authority of other scientists

‘we can know more than we can tell’

I was told two things before I visited Florian’s show at Site Gallery: that he was a) working on tacit knowledge and b) building a concrete wall inside the gallery. I didn’t connect the two and, to be honest, thought more of the wall than I did of philosophy. I knew he was working with a ‘concrete beautician’ and I imagined one of those gigantic installations you couldn’t ignore, an artwork that immerses you in its sheer presence and physicality. A statement on modernism, perhaps, and art: a great, blank wall of concrete, both barrier and support.

My actual visit was fleeting. I was with Dorothy, my 90-year old grandmother and we had people to see and places to go to in Sheffield. I remember being quite excited to see the wall, walking in with her to look, past the front desk and into the gallery. The far wall (the widest wall) had been covered in concrete, quite light in colour, but rich and complex in tone. Two men were standing on ladders working the surface. I remember plastic sheets and ropes. Beside me was a long trestle table covered with tools and materials. Sara, the curator, had arranged for Florian and myself to discuss tacit knowledge at some point. She introduced him; the man on the right came down the ladder, took off a mask, said hello and shook my hand. The other man stayed up, I can’t remember seeing his face.

As I talked to Florian, my grandmother went to have a look at the gallery café. When we left she said that it was good of them to let us in between shows. I didn’t tell her that this was the show, not because I didn’t want to have a conversation about contemporary art but more because I was still thinking about the show. Weeks later, on the last day of the show, once Florian had gone back to London, I visited again. No one saw me drop my bags, stand before the monochrome wall and run my hand down the cool, marbled surface.

‘depersonalised knowledge is not possible’

After working with Florian over this last year, exchanging emails, drinking and eating together in Sheffield and London, swapping books and papers, visiting his studio and appearing together at Wysing Arts Centre, I am still making my mind up about the exhibition and his work. Certainly, my first thought, that the wall was an immersive experience, a statement to stand in front of, was wrong. If anything Matter of Engagement was a satire of the big scenographic installations that dissolve the boundary between artwork and spectator. Matter of Engagement was not a spectacle. The wall, when it was finished, became another wall, in a gallery, made of brushed concrete. It absorbed spectacle.

One could construct a reading based on the aesthetics of concrete, or manufacture an interpretation from its site-specific placement in Sheffield. The perfect concrete wall in an industrial city, itself rebuilt in modernist concrete by post-war planners. Once a strong socialist city, perhaps the strongest in England, it has long since adapted to a post-industrial economy composed of postmodern people. There is a quiet metaphor in this simple tactile wall, which does not overpower or call attention to itself beyond generating a faint impulse to touch it and feel its perfect surface. A faith in modernity and a belief in an everyday beauty, available to all.

However, this is not a concrete wall, but a simulation of a concrete wall. The man on the other ladder, Viorel, was a professional ‘concrete beautician’, a craftsman employed by builders to finish concrete so as to make new buildings appear perfect. This is because concrete does not always pour correctly: there will often be imperfections in its surface. Viorel’s trade is to rectify this and create an illusion of uniformity. The installation wall was built on wooden slats attached to the real structure of the gallery. It was non-structural, little more than a skin. One could thus extend the reading to suggest that Matter of Engagement is a comment on postmodernism fetishising modernism, the consequent loss of the Real, made all the more poignant in concrete due to the ubiquity of the medium. One could say that ghosts were present in the gallery.

‘the whole and not the particulars’
One could say many things: about ghosts, modernism, art, architecture, reality, craft, surface, beauty, aesthetics. They are all here. Yet we tend to read what we find on the surface of things. Perhaps this is a difficulty of reading in the twenty-first century: there are so many surfaces to choose from. While there may be something to the interpretation I’ve given above, it’s very much an interpretation that has more to do with me than anything else. I’ve treated the blank concrete wall like a mirror, using it to reflect my own concerns back at me.

This is, of course, fine. This is what critics often do and I am entitled to write what I want. I let Florian and Matter of Engagement into my own mental space and allowed it to influence the typical architecture of my thought. I haven’t entered the gallery and given myself over to the artwork. I don’t mean this in a Romantic submit thyself to the power of art! kind of way. I simply mean that I’ve thought at the wall and not with it. The products still remain valid and even interesting in their own right, but they do not answer the responsibility I have been given here, as someone who has a) worked with Florian and b) been given a platform to write about him.

Herein lies the central characteristic and also the difficulty of Matter of Engagement (and, indeed, the rest of Florian’s work with which I am familiar with): it is justified by its own philosophy. As a result it takes time to engage with, time to read, learn about and challenge. As a result it does not, and will not, resolve. His sculptures are not machines to think with, because that would suggest that they provoke a fixed routine or impel towards an end. The only way to ‘resolve’ them is to spend less time with them, dismiss them, or, as I have above, project a reading onto their surface and move on.

Of course, we have every right to use them in this way, for our own purposes. That they allow themselves to be read in this manner is a credit to their utility. As such they are diametrically opposed to the gigantic installations I mentioned above, the immersive kind that seem to collect in capital cities and festivals. These sculptures disrupt space, dominate the viewer and so do their thinking for them. As a result, they do not have any thoughts beyond their own physical form. In Arnold Aronson words, such works ‘suggests an art form that is struggling to define itself within contemporary society’. They only speak of themselves.

In contrast, Florian’s works are spaces to speak within. The following quote from Roger Poole’s 1972 book Towards Deep Subjectivity expands this:

Philosophical space is not only, then, a personally won space to think in, not only a transformation of existing thinkers’ systems into one’s own, not only the refusal of false alternatives and the search for a viable statement of problems, but also a space of research and reflection. What marks it off and distinguishes it from the pressurized spacelessness we normally have to ‘think’ in is its attribution of freedom both to the agent and to the analyst.

You may ask how one of Florian’s sculptures achieves this, and of course, they cannot do this for you. They are not machines. Furthermore, one should not take the sculptures as the finished article, the completed product of labour. As I failed to discuss with my grandmother, the making of the wall is the work, just as this essay is part of the same. All occupy the same philosophical space, created by Florian in collaboration with others such as Viorel, myself and anyone reading this. That is why I speak of responsibility, not in a self important way (like grand installations are self important) but out of loyalty to labour, really, to the sharing of work, both physical and mental. To the integrity of material.

‘we cannot choose explicitly a set of new values, but must submit to them by the very act of creating or adopting them’

Like science, Florian’s work is part of a dynamic investigation which moves and connects, destroys and builds. The methodology is not unusual: he forms relationships with people, learns from them, exchanges knowledge, orchestrates projects and produces work in his studio. Unlike scientists, Florian is not results driven: his sculptures are not statements or end products, as with some of the art I have criticised above. If engaged with as I am suggesting, they are more like fragments of reasoning, sculptures to think with. As such, I would argue that Florian works in a representational tradition and is creating a model of cognition.

There is a link between his work and contemporary theories of reasoning, specifically those which see the brain as embodied in
not just the body, but also the world. As Andy Clark’s seminal 1998 text Being There suggests, humans have evolved to lighten their cognitive load whenever possible, ‘to diffuse achieved knowledge and practical wisdom’ via a flow of idea which ‘criss-cross’ between brain and world. A very practical example of this is leaving an empty bottle of washing up liquid by the door to remind you to buy one when you leave the house. The argument is that this is not an aid to memory but is, in and of itself, cognition embedded in the environment.

Florian’s sculptures are not aids to memory or recontextualisations of things that have already been made. They are embedded thought, examples of physical language that invite realisation via cognition. That is their greatest achievement, but also a handicap: not everyone is able to or willing to engage with such works. They lack the immediacy or ‘shock value’ that many want of art. Labour, instead, is spread through the work in a collective ownership of reason, distributed across the process of making and via critical works such as this. As such, they are ethical pieces, which encourage the spectator to gracefully climb out of the thought-scaffolding we have constructed within our capitalist, spectacle-driven world.

But once outside, where do people go? The work is concerned with process, so spectators become collaborators, but what do they collaborate on? Aside from the ethical implications of this in relation to art and labour, where does the work take us aside from into process? The answers to these questions are necessarily subjective as that is the nature of our engagement with the philosophical space which Florian has constructed. This can, perhaps, be best explained by a quote he sent me about clay, which he himself translated:

It’s precisely not the worker who gives shape to the clay, rather the clay takes on the shape of the mould it is pressed into. The worker initiates this mediation, but doesn’t accomplish it: the mediation takes place on its own once its conditions have been created. The worker comes very close to this operation, but he does not know it; his body pushes the operation forward, willing and allowing it to accomplish itself, but this technical operation never becomes a representation of his work. The essential component is absent, the active centre of the technical operation remains hidden.

My own collaboration with Florian has led me in two directions neither of us could have anticipated: a) into writing about science fiction (specifically the characters Spock from Star Trek and Michael Valentine Smith from Robert A. Heinlein’s Stranger In A Strange Land) and b) writing about utopian aspects of Gosplan, the Soviet State Planning Committee and its relation to Friedrich Hayek’s knowledge problem.

Both have been personal reactions to Florian’s work, especially his treatment of tacit knowledge, a concept taken from Michael Polanyi’s writings, most notably 1966’s The Tacit Dimension. The reader will note that I have included quotes from this book as subheadings in this essay. Polanyi’s thesis is subtle and wide-ranging and is concerned with the space between representation and knowledge. Riding a bike or recognising faces are classic examples of ‘tacit knowing’ (tacit, by the way, means unspoken, unvoiced). What is it, after all, that allows you to recognise a face? Some of this can be made explicit, but most of that knowledge is latent and hidden from our language soaked consciousness. Similarly, given a person’s physical dimensions it’s possible to construct a mathematical equation which will explain to them how to balance on a bike. Of course, such an equation would be useless to that person. They will have to learn how to balance by doing. As with faces and bikes, so with the beautification of concrete: a skill, a craft, an art cannot be learnt solely from books or YouTube tutorials. It is transferred in the spaces between words.

‘fragments of a yet unknown coherent whole’

I am sure I ignored Viorel when I visited Site Gallery with my grandmother. It was Florian whom Sara called down from the ladder, and it was Florian who took his mask off and shook my hand as we arranged a time to meet over a drink. Florian was clearly ‘the artist’ whilst the other person, I assumed, was just ‘a worker’. It is Viorel who now moves through the centre of Matter of Engagement. He is present in our conversations, not in an explicit manner or in a ghostly way but maintained by the work that Florian continues to do, with me, and with others, here, now.

During Matter of Engagement the real work was not the finished wall but its construction in the gallery, which was a means of
exhibiting the flow of tacit skills between himself, the apprentice and Viorel, the master. Even this, in his own words, somehow too ‘clean’. It captured little of the intimacy, little of the time they had spent the year before, working in Germany, sleeping in the same shipping container, drinking schnapps at night and hot tea in the day. When the show finished in Sheffield, the wall, or rather the concrete skin was peeled off and thrown away. In terms of value however, their joint labour continues, not as anything spectral, but in the abstract. During the residency at Site Gallery it was mirrored amongst the exchanges Florian undertook with the artistic, educational and manufacturing community of Sheffield. I am one of those exchanges. Since then it has become embedded in the work he has produced, most notably in the papier-mâché sculptures such as The Attendants (2014).

My personal collaboration with Florian has been very focused. Much of it explores words and ideas in a general effort to agree, to come to harmony. Our conversations have been about the relationship of learning and method to life and practice. We have never framed these conversations, it is as if we had decided, tacitly, that we will work on this area: on how to live ethically, through work. There is a recognition, I think, that those areas we do not discuss: family, love, sex, friends, popular culture, ideological politics, can be filled out in the future, should need arise. I sometimes wonder whether these aspects are sublimated elsewhere within Florian's work. We do not go near them, instead we focus on questions: what is the purpose of the work? How should one work? What is hidden? What is tacit?

Questions of art are secondary. There is never the question of who are you? Never the question of identity. That does not seem to be an important question. This could be because our white, male, late-30s western European identities have not prompted an investigation into this topic. We have, of course, discussed privilege and have commented on class, accessibility and wealth. Once we met in late summer outside a pub near St. Pancras whilst I was waiting for a train back to Sheffield. We sat outside because the sun was shining and ordered two beers in tall glasses. I remember a man asking us for money as we drank those beers, deep in conversation. We said no, and the man responded in anger, accusing us of living a life of luxury whilst others had nothing. Before we could respond he had left, screaming and swearing. There are aspects of this accusation that are true. We probably did have more than him, and have likely had more than him for most of our lives.

There is a huge amount of our collaboration that is traditional. We have discussed the paradox of an economic system that keeps artists and writers financially impoverished despite their cultural riches. Two men on the cusp of middle age, asking each other, why do we make sacrifices to do what we do? There is a sense, always unspoken, that the conversations are deserved. That this is work for which sacrifices are made. That this is a reward. This is perhaps smug and the collaboration could be accused of self-justification. I imagine the man who asked for money as we discussed ‘unspoken things’ in the sun would agree.

It’s hard to work out what you deserve from collaboration or indeed from art. The answer is definitely not ‘as much as possible’ but definitely more than what you are able to get. I have learnt that from working with Florian. I have found the experience educational and ethical and am glad to have had the time to engage with his work, a process which has not yet ended. Indeed, there is no sense of ending, no conclusion, no certainties or rest with his work. He views this as positive, life affirming, essential. I respect the reserves of restraint he has to keep going.

What is it, that he works towards? In The Tacit Dimension Polanyi discusses hidden questions and breakthroughs which gradually make themselves known in a certain direction, from the proximal to the distal; from elements that seem unconnected to eventual coherence. I suspect Florian’s sculptures are all connected in such a way. There are statements of method and ethics that have not yet revealed themselves, or have not yet become spoken, if indeed they can be. These are beginnings. The promise is just this unknown, distal whole, carved in grace.

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