



Collect, Construct, Exhibit, Communicate

Sarah Happersberger about the work of David Polzin

David Polzin collects what other people discard: doorknobs, chairs, and cupboards. In his archive and storage, his so-called „Körperkontaktkunststelle“ (body-contact-art-venue), the products of our consumer culture are heaping up: ice cream scoops, pizza rollers, and stirrers – all made of plastic. The Berlin-based artist infuses planned obsolescence with a new kind of value. Resembling archaeological artefacts, short-lived consumer goods are lined up: grey, brown, and white stirrers, narrow handles with small or large heads.

Showcased in the cabinets of the exhibition and installation *Fruit and Vegetables*, realised by Polzin in Frankfurt's MMK Zollamt in 2013, every object appears as a significant witness to human creativity. Yet, displayed in custom-made cabinets and on carefully measured cardboard backgrounds, what are these objects supposed to exemplify? Which era, which world region and culture do they refer to – and what renders them cultural goods worthy of preservation?

Labels, informing about the origin and year of production of the exhibits are missing, as well as texts elaborating the meaning of their design, materials, and intended use. However, considering the context of Polzin's work, it becomes clear that his intention is not simply to exhibit the curiosities of everyday life. The title of his 2014 exhibition *Furniture and Objects from Germany's Postimperial Era* reveals more about his project. The reference to Germany places the exhibits geographically while they are temporally and socially situated in the 'postimperial era'. Construed by the artist, this era cannot be measured in years. It is rather a fictional time, vaguely situated during the period following German unification. By 'postimperialism' Polzin evokes the annexation of formerly East German territory by the culture and architectural styles of the West: implanting shopping malls following West German models, replacing small stores by supermarket chains, and the construction of terraced housing according to West German schemes. The products of an imaginary era embody the unequal union of East and West, the more or less functional symbiosis of two contrasting social systems and lifestyles.

The artistic realisation of this cultural annexation is exemplified by a chair. Polzin has taken a plastic armchair made in the Federal Republic of Germany and put it over a metal chair made in the German Democratic Republic. The method of the artist is also exemplified by the showcases and spatial displays of the exhibitions *Fruit and Vegetables* and *Furniture and Objects from Germany's Postimperial Era*. All the various and divergent exhibits have been collected, processed or arranged in relation to other objects in order to create new forms.

Neither the sequence of various plastic containers nor the arrangements of stirrers or furniture occur in everyday contexts. A metal floor lamp, a wooden wall panel with animals depictions, and a glass coffee table – the exhibits are neither functionally nor stylistically familiar furniture arrangements. The objects' simultaneous presence in space creates the semblance of a system beyond the individual exhibits' disparate existence.

Despite this resemblance of the serial arrangement of everyday objects to a cultural-historic cabinet, there is a significant difference between Polzin's exhibition and classical museum presentations: the originality of the objects. The exhibits of the artist originate from streets, attics, and other common locales. However, they have been partly modified and also do not refer to their context of origin in their presentation. As authentic as the objects may appear – in their function as cultural artefacts of a fictional era, they are fakes. The publication *Brands, Symbols, Signs from Germany's Postimperial Era* shows poignantly how Polzin consciously blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. The textual and graphic symbols collected in this book represent institutions that have only ever existed in the imagination of the artist. In fact, they are fictional logos for imaginary companies. Leafing thorough the publication, one is easily fooled. The logos do not just appear professional in their concise abstractions, they even evoke entire enterprise philosophies, embodying high quality commercial design. The strategy of the fake is elementary for Polzin, since it enables him to deconstruct museum practices. The artist cites the practices of collecting and presenting of cultural historical museums, yet undermines their claim to originality, and thus encourages one to question the meaning and effects of standard principles and staging practices of museums. Is the originality of the exhibits actually crucial in being able to make definitive judgements about a historical era or a socially relevant development? How does the selection and presentation of exhibits affect the world evoked in the mind of the observer? Is a culture mediated by objects necessarily more authentic if an object acts as its trace and stand-in? And are the exhibitions and showcases not rather locales of construction rather than reconstruction of worlds?

Practices of constructing and mediating artistic and cultural objects in the context of exhibitions, museums, and treasure cabinets have figured in earlier works of David Polzin as well. In *Velten I*, a 2008 installation, a shrine plays a central role. Inside a paper room, protected from unwanted guests by a barrier, a gatehouse, and an intercom, a relic is displayed on a pyramidal structure. An alleged bough from the burning bush, from which God appeared to Moses, is exhibited in purple lighting, mounted in a box wrapped in transparent film. The limited access as well as the relic and special lighting evoke the staging designs traditionally used in churches and the treasure chambers of great cathedrals. Assuming their authenticity, the remnants of holy sites and persons are exuberantly exhibited in ornate containers, jars, and chambers. Polzin's work exemplifies how the aura of formerly mundane materials is not just enhanced by a specific style of display, but created by it in the first place. A visitor may not value the tiny object to a similar extent, may even overlook it, if it were merely exhibited among many other objects, without special lighting in an openly accessible space.

The notion of the aura in modern art is a recurring theme in David Polzin's work. His exhibitions and installations allude to the aesthetics of the White Cube with their white walls and their hermetic artistic spatial bodies. As if in a sanctuary, as which Brian O'Doherty described the gallery space of modernity, the exhibits are removed from everyday contexts in *Furniture and Objects from Germany's Postimperial Era*; not even labels disturb the timeless presence of the artistic appearance of the furniture and objects. The lack of annotation immediately implies that the exhibits in their cabinets and compartments in their specific arrangements embody a work of art and are not to be taken as individual objects that have not been granted sufficient room to unfold their effect.

Panic Room (2008), Polzin's final project at the Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin, is entirely devoid of objects. The white walls of a complex of rooms with numerous corridors are patterned by narrow slots; no artworks are visible at first glance. His display pays homage to the tradition of Yves Klein and his seminal 1962 Exhibition of the Void. However, his work focuses neither on questions of abundance and void nor on the effects of objects and gallery spaces. Polzin is more interested in what O'Doherty's description of the White Cube overlooks: the visitors. The slots in the walls create a panopticon, a system of surveillance that turns the spectators into an object of other visitors' gaze while simultaneously empowering them to themselves act as spies. By entering the *Panic Room* they become subjects of an experiment, observing behaviour in artistically designed spaces. However, Polzin is not satisfied with merely observing visitors strolling around and contemplating his work. He has deliberately conceived the space as a glaring white labyrinth to impede any sense of orientation. He requests visitors to insert their hands into the slots on the wall, invoking an uncanny feeling – it is inconceivable what is going to happen next. This unease turns out to be unfounded once one finds out that the hands merely serve as models for drawings, yet this is still bound to create an experience of a claustrophobic nature.

A similar play with the conventions of visiting an exhibition was also part of *Fruit and Vegetables*. To observe the showcases of stirrers and other objects, visitors had to face unusual conditions. At the entrance to the exhibition, a porter requested visitors to hand over their passports before they were individually hauled into wooden containers. Boxed up, visitors were then carted around the exhibition space until they lost any sense of orientation; only brief stops enabled them to observe selected isolated compartments with various arrangements of objects. In contrast to a conventional exhibition visit, visitors were deprived of the freedom to decide which exhibits they wanted to contemplate in which sequence or duration. The loss of self-determination, however, entailed a consciousness of the temporal and spatial conditions that are taken for granted in Western museums. The reflection on exhibition practices, collecting, conserving, researching, exhibiting, and communicating is a central theme of David Polzin's work. He collects, restores, and presents everyday objects in order to enable an approach to a sphere that cannot be experienced in this form within our space-time-continuum. At the same time, he creates spaces and exhibitions that problematize our habits of reception and perception in a museum. His calculated breaks with the norm encourage a closer examination of standardised exhibition design and behavioural norms within museum spaces.

In multi-part projects such as *Furniture and Objects from Germany's Postimperial Era*, but also in individual architectures, Polzin reveals the potential powers of museums and curators. Through selection, editing, and display of exhibits, they have the power to generate, structure, and transform real and fictional worlds in the heads of visitors – and they are able to manage the spatial, physical, and temporal relationship of visitors to the exhibits by guiding their perception and thus invoking specific experiences. As recipients of David Polzin's work we can be curious about the ways in which the artist is going to deploy *his* powers to evoke strange worlds in our heads and provoke extraordinary aesthetic experiences.

Sarah Happersberger, 2015