

MONIKA SZEWCZYK
FAUX TERRAIN FOR A FUNKY ZEIT

JERRY PETHICK
12 SEPTEMBER – 11 OCTOBER 2009

PROLOGUE

Things look large when you're a child. When, at age twenty and fully-grown, I returned to the backyard playground of an apartment house in Szczecin, Poland (which I had left at age ten to live in Vancouver), the one thing that took my breath away was how much smaller everything was, as if I had left a Lilliputian and had come back a Brobdinagian. Yet, if I had travelled, like Gulliver, across borders and political paradigms and returned, I would never come back to the same regime with differently adjusted eyes. I left in the dreary days of Communism (which, to be frank, were not so dreary to my pre-teen eyes) and came back to a land of "wild-east-capitalism." Nova Polska struck me as an odd democracy of billboards—they now seemed to outnumber the people.¹ This return was shocking, but then we're quick to forget these shocks, these reality checks. And it was not until another decade or so passed, when I returned to this part of the world to settle in Berlin (thinking there could be cold comfort to be gained from living amidst the residues of regime change), that I was reminded of that bizarre shrinkage of the built environment over time through an unexpected encounter with the work of Jerry Pethick.

I

My most memorable encounter with Pethick's work took place in a warehouse somewhere in Berlin-Mitte (the former seismic fault line of two political systems) at ABC Art Berlin Contemporary, to be precise. On the long view, I perceived a strange freestanding assemblage of what appeared to me as a wacky combination of a scarecrow and a vacuum looking (yes, the appliance felt animate) at a carpet hanging on a freestanding wall. The torqued textile was on an imperfect diagonal (a hilarious allegory of seeing pictures at a fair!); to the right of it hung a more perfect constellation of vinyl records, arranged to spell out the rudimentary shape of a chair in profile, at larger than life scale. When I approached and read the title card—*Kollossus of Kindergarten*—it was as if the artist had understood the perceptual contraction of my childhood play space and built a monument to fill the void. I was not expecting to see his work in Berlin and thought that maybe this was some long lost Isa Genzken, though the materials were of the wrong decade and the air between things was somewhat thicker than it is in her work. Upon reading the title, I experienced one of those small convulsions of the diaphragm that Bertolt Brecht sought with his *erfremdungseffekt*, let out an explosive laugh, and then felt like a bad kid in front of the doyennes assembled to puzzle over this curious construction. Pethick's work managed to look strange, even in this strangest of art situations.

Looking at Pethick's work in land-locked Berlin, rather than in Vancouver, produces new associations. He is less known in Europe, though the reading of his practice offered by Bernd Schulz, the director at the state gallery of Saarbrücken, on the occasion of Pethick's show there in 1994–1995, entitled *Notion of Nothing*, does situate him in a European sculptural tradition established by Marcel Duchamp and the Futurists.² These artists relied on funky combinations of various ready-made and classical

elements and, especially in the case of Duchamp, adored optical devices in the construction of—what may best be termed—windows into virtual dimensions.³ On the Canadian West Coast, I could link Pethick’s sensibility with the works of Tom Burrows (who, like Pethick, also spent many years in England under the influence of Anthony Caro) and of Al Neil (who lived within a fifty kilometre radius of his birth-place but brought a world of Dadaist collage and assemblage-motifs to the art scene), as well as to some of Rodney Graham’s experiments with optical devices. But—and this “but” is perhaps due to a general privileging of talk about pictures at the expense of a more developed discourse around sculpture and assemblage in Terminal City—it is in Berlin that Pethick’s work really began to make sense. And by this “making sense” I mean that his work became a perceptual lens for understanding other artworks as well: not only did the scientific and technological obsessions of some early twentieth century sculpture crystallize in Pethick’s continued search for material expressions of other, further worlds, the particular incongruities of more contemporary practice also gained an unseen coherence. Especially in the case of Genzken, new connections between her more minimal works of the 1990s (epitomized by the stunning “window” pieces) and the more hectic, figurative, and baroque installations of latter years, arose. The charge of creative schizophrenia, levelled at her by some critics observing this “inconsistency of practice,” itself emerged as perceptual paucity.⁴

II

Pethick’s work demands logical leaps. It tends to irritate with its funky combinations, especially those who lack the will to tolerate the coexistence of disparate aesthetic constructs, spatial and temporal dimensions, or competing ideologies. Trying to come to terms with Pethick’s practice must, I believe, begin with the realization that he was deeply invested in the notion of realism, but

not in reality in the singular. In this, he was aided by an expanded notion of the *faux terrain*, which he rescued from an essay that he came across in his research on panoramas—those perennial zones of dimensional illusion developed in a century (the nineteenth, of course), which witnessed a great acceleration of space-time collapse. Pethick begins his own text in the Saarbrücken catalogue with a section entitled *Faux Terrain*, wherein he clarifies:

I had used the words in a title of a piece [*Homeship/ Faux Terrain*, 1990–92] that referred to the copied landscape of Venice, California, which was the subject of the large array, which in itself is a fake landscape illusion. The reversal of the idea of faux terrain, pertaining to the actual objects in the foreground of a Panorama and not the attempted illusory scene was a new perception and one nicely documented in [Christopher] Rawlece’s book.⁵

Jerry Pethick wanted to get rid of the deceptive function of *faux terrain*, its role as the camouflage, and to elevate this barely perceptible space-filler to an autonomous dimension. This newly “material space,” to borrow another of the artist’s titles, is perceptible both in how he used the air between things and in some of the weirder things that he constructed.

So much of his work is both on the wall (in the space of the picture) and on the floor (a sculptural matter sharing the third dimension with the body of the viewer). The transparent air in-between—an awkward yawning gap to some eyes—becomes almost solid if the viewer invests in the act of looking. The temptation may be to conclude that the *faux terrain* is actually gone, as there is no smooth transition between the second and third dimensions. Yet, the heightened, psychosomatic palpability of the gap,

which is invisible as such when it takes on material form in the classical panoramic environment, tends to render invisible space virtually concrete. Pethick's assemblages force the viewer to imagine what is *almost* there. This requires some work to register in the imagination and this work puts the viewer alongside the sculptor as a moulder of his or her universe.

In light of this imagined presence of emptiness, the sculptural feature of the photo-arrays and lens arrays, which entered Pethick's work circa 1986, initially seemed to me to be inconsistent with his sculptural program, as I understood it. Did they give away too much of the apparatus that Pethick seemed to have wanted to activate in his viewers' psyche? Considering his sustained deployment of optics as sculpture—in works such as *Roof to Heaven Too* (1986/1988), *Out of the Corner of the Eye* (1990), or the aforementioned *Homeship/Faux Terrain* (1990–1992)—what comes to the fore again is a certain clumsiness, a blockage of illusion, an irritation. The viewer must work again, but in a different way. Compelled by the promise of a cohesive single lens perspective, one might stand at a precise distance and, with some squinting, reconstitute as a blurry singularity the figure (be it the Grand Canal in Venice in *Homeship/Faux Terrain* of 1990–92 or the industrial factory in Volklingen Scarab of 1995) that has been multiplied and registered repeatedly on the myriad photographs. But the automatism of this impulse—the will to perceive a cohesive image like a single lens—proves problematic. It is certainly less satisfying than the sculptural delight of the multiple lens device, which is better looked at than looked through. Not seamless illusion, but another sense of “virtuality” is at stake here.

III

Pethick was clearly fascinated by array photography and holography—technologies that are at the heart

of three-dimensional modeling and constitute the building blocks of virtual reality environments. His interest thus aligned with intensified scientific research, of the sort that is often dismissed in fine art as progressivist naivety, or as thin air. And yet, for him, the emphasis was always on concretizing such “almost there” spaces, not as illusions of the given reality but as worlds unto themselves. I think this is also why he was drawn to cartoons, which are relegated to kids' play and to fantasy, but which have a political purchase that can shift our perception of reality. He seemed to seek out knowledge in places, which the critical establishment had abandoned, deeming them colonies lost to a megalomaniacal culture industry that seeks ever-more-perfect illusions for the confusion of the masses.

I imagine bumping into Jerry Pethick at a screening of *Avatar* (2009)—and he would surely have gone to see this film were he around today. Here, the talk would likely turn towards plans of how a viewer might better occupy the space—not so much of the paradisiacal Pandora—but of the 3-D glasses that we were all asked to give back at the end of the screening. Here again, the devices that determine shifts in known dimensions become dimensions in themselves. Barbara Fisher already articulated this tendency when she wrote, in reference to Pethick's fascination with Albrecht Dürer's infamous instructional print on perspective from 1538, that “the screen, or veil, is itself the place of the materialization of certain perceptual realities and distortions, including, as we have seen, that of the three-dimensional volume.”⁶ And Pethick also says as much in his analysis of the same engraving in his booklet *The Further World*, which additionally speculates on the work of Johannes Vermeer and on El Greco's *Cardinal Fernando Nino de Guevara, The Grand Inquisitor* (1600), which shows this prince of the church—or the first Big Brother, as Pethick called him—in round spectacles.

Why this fascination with screens and spectacles? We have already established them as the closest thing we can grasp to the kind of virtual dimension that Jerry Pethick wanted to evoke. But this must, I think, go hand in hand with recognizing anew Pethick's commitment to the practice of speculation. Pethick's extremely close readings of Dürer, Vermeer, and El Greco (which are nonetheless more expansive than hermetic) demonstrate the rigour of his speculative practice, as does his most ambitious and concrete elaboration of a cartoon via the *Time Top* project.⁷ I take his will and his ability to form conjectures without firm evidence as perhaps his most important legacy. The task now may be to continue this process of supposing.

IV

There is another side to speculation, of course: the word has, of late, gained a rather bad reputation in association with collapsed financial markets and real estate bubbles. We joke (darkly) about these things as being all too “virtual,” additionally abusing the real virtues of that other, funny word, which cannot be dissociated from Jerry Pethick's practice. Ironically, speculation is also somewhat abused in the realm of art. It is often associated with thinking that slips into sloppy analyses, an alternative to the rigour I perceive in Pethick's use of it. But exceptions to this denigration of speculation exist. If artists and their audiences do not become fellow speculators, if they do not hone this skill for purposes other than profiteering from highly abstract financial transactions or property deals, then they run the risk of submitting to a virtual reality that is not of their own making.

In our day, the great cipher of speculation seems to be the screen. Yet, if our material space is teeming with screens—projection screens, silver screens, flat-screens, touch-screens—we seem to be partially blind to their role

as mere allegories of other dimensions. Or, worse still, we may simply be fulfilled by their plentitude. Are screens *the* quintessential commodities, which are out of our hands and yet seem to control our alienated reality? They are out of our hands, but increasingly touchable. Perhaps the difficulty of recognizing the nature of our alienation lies in our inability to understand what we can truly manipulate.

V

In his writing, Jerry Pethick recognizes several looming global problems—pollution, population density, sedentariness—but sees the exploration of simulated space as a partial and exciting solution. His technological optimism is matched by an approach to the notion of the commodity that cuts against the grain of critical frameworks, which avoid commodification at all costs. In *Spatial Realms*, the second section of his Saarbrücken catalogue, he writes:

The idea of being able to use space as a tangible commodity that could be manipulated similarly as a sculptor works with the mass and form of material, has intrigued me since the early '60s, after spending time making sculpture, and further developing an interest in the few artists that seem to have been primarily interested in actualizing space in their different ways.⁸

He then cites Duchamp's and Umberto Boccioni's work and writing as inspirations. The attitude pervading his work and writing is one of the assumed malleability of both real and virtual realms: “Perhaps in the future,” he continues, “illusion will help to avoid increased numbers of people trampling down the wilderness.”⁹ Illusion is not a blinding force but a controlled method of perceiving the world, of creating reality. For Pethick, the key to such rigorous speculation was always a matter of understanding perception as a combination of sensation and memory,

particularly the neurological paths of eidetic memory, which are particularly vivid recollections of childhood. These cognitive processes become tools for conditioning the mind for more active imaginative activity. In delving into his work, it becomes clear that Jerry Pethick's approach was more constructivist than critical. (Or, it may be said that his constructivism supplied an implicit critique of the very contemporary notion that our minds are fully controlled by commodification.)

EPILOGUE

Against what kind of space might Pethick's constructivism be cast? In posing this question, we may be struck by (or stuck on) the fact that the milieu, which figures in his photographic arrays, rarely relates to life in the city; his titles also do not invoke the urban reality. Instead, we find rural, pastoral, or domestic spaces and plenty of reference to the illusory space of art. Might the *Time Top*, which he submerged in the Burrard Inlet, treated with a low electric charge to speed up the accretion of crustaceans, reclaimed from the sea several years after his death in 2003, and situated in Vancouver's False Creek foreshore, be understood as an exception to this programmatic disregard of the city? Or does it emphasize that, throughout his career, Pethick's work has been an attempt to render the city strange?

Sci-fi and spherical, this big, odd form (derived from an eponymous cartoon strip drawn in the 1930s by William Ritt and Clarence Gray) occupies an urban area that has seen its fair share of real-estate speculation and surreal doubling. Indeed, the design and construction of False Creek North has been transplanted en masse to Dubai as

a model of medium-density development. If the speed at which this entire new neighbourhood has sprung up is disorienting, it is by no means unheard of. It bares comparison with the (almost) contemporaneous transformation of Berlin's new business district at Potsdamer Platz and its government complex along the Spreebogen.¹⁰ The latter developments, like much of False Creek, give me the distinct sense of walking around in a computer rendering. And perhaps this all-too-palpable virtuality is not paying off. In contrast, the former site of Berlin's Soviet-style Volkspalast, which itself was built between 1973 and 1976 on the former site of the Prussian-era Stadtschloß, and which was demolished amidst great debate between 2005 and 2007, awaits a different architectural approach. Rather than experimenting with more postmodern, visibly digital vernaculars, the site will be devoted to a meticulous reconstruction of the Stadtschloß. In effect, thirty-three years of history are meant to disappear. Ironically, three-and-a-half thousand tons of the steel reclaimed from the socialist relic have been shipped to Dubai to aid the construction of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, which owes its name to the UAE President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who bailed out what has been known as the Burj Dubai after the burst of the world's financial bubble almost prevented its completion. Today, pieces of the destroyed people's palace may be climbed to view the virtual Vancouver below.

We live in strange times. Faux terrains are everywhere, but invisible. Now, perhaps more than ever, Pethick's work, which proceeds against the grain in this invisibility, deserves our close attention. Further speculation may yet burst some bubbles.

NOTES

1. See Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, which was first published in 1726 under the title *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*.

2. To this field of association we might add aspects of Dadaist and Surrealist sculpture and assemblage.

3. Bernd Schulz, "Foreword," in *Jerry Pethick: Notion of Nothing* (Saarbrücken: Stadtsgalerie Saarbrücken, 1995): 5–6.

4. In reviewing some of Genzken's work to test the connections I perceived, I came across this sentence from a young London reviewer of her Whitechapel exhibition in 2009 (where the earlier and the later works were combined): "The second half of Genzken's exhibition is a bizarre hodgepodge of materials, mannequins, wire, and photographs on the floor, plinths, and walls and is in total contrast to the pieces downstairs [the window pieces]. Contradiction is no bad thing but was there no art made by Genzken in the decade between which the works were made that could have eased us into this personal schizophrenia?" See "Ashley Eldridge-Ford on Isa Genzken at the Whitechapel, London," *The Saatchi Gallery Online* (9 April 2009) http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blogon/art_news/ashley_eldridge9-ford_on_isa_genzken_at_the_whitechapel_london/5536. (Accessed 16 January 2011). It strikes me that this course of a career where there is a seemingly yawning gap between two systems would interest Pethick. Furthermore, he might recognize an affinity between Genzken's window works and his own fascination for such intervals between perceivable dimensions; and, in her later more baroque assemblages, he might recognize his own penchant for treating images as objects and objects as pseudo-pictorial material.

5. See Jerry Pethick, "The Tenacious Image," in *Jerry Pethick: Notion of Nothing* (Saarbrücken: Stadtsgalerie Saarbrücken, 1995): 56.

6. See Barbara Fischer, "Jerry Pethick: Bias Arrays," in *Jerry Pethick: Notion of Nothing* (Saarbrücken: Stadtsgalerie Saarbrücken, 1995): 35.

7. Scott Watson, *Jerry Pethick's Time Top Project* (Vancouver: Concord Pacific Group Inc., 2007).

8. Pethick, 57.

9. *Ibid.*

10. The latter is the name of the bank of the River Spree between the Central Station and the Reichstag.