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OPENINGS

SUZANNE HUDSON ON KATJA STRUNZ

MAYBE THIS IS APOCRYPHAL and maybe it's not: On first seeing Robert Smithson's crystalline *Untitled*, 1964–65, as a student in Karlsruhe, Germany, artist Katja Strunz put away her paintbrushes and began to make her own prismlike wall sculptures with multiple vanishing points. However, she abolished his mirrored panels to deny reflection and the infinite regress of their facings, and thus made what she called a Smithson "with its eyes poked out." Like most origin stories and oedipal fables, this one is credible in its particulars and freighted with the genealogical implications of its performative blinding. And in relation to the angular cuts and multifaceted surfaces of the currently Berlin-based Strunz's subsequent works, the account would seem to give the game away, were it not for the fact that, despite all her formalist leanings, Strunz's appropriations—which reach beyond Smithson to Constructivism and other avant-gardes (to say nothing of her references to a broader history of forms)—are less morphological than conceptual. Or better, her appropriations are morphological to the extent that they thematize and make concrete the inescapability of literal and material precedent. As she pithily explains, "The die has been cast."

In making her borrowing from art history easy to discern, Strunz activates a recursive structure riddled with the fixed temporality of befores and afters. Heinrich Wölfflin once suggested that "not everything is possible at all times," and Strunz's historicism seems equally axiomatic. It is patent in the case of a text that appears in one of her better-known works on paper, which declaims in no uncertain terms, TODAY IS NOT YESTERDAY. The same sentiment obtains in *Time of the Season*, 2003, Strunz's droll nod to Marcel Duchamp in the form of a motorized contraption of three oscillating wheels locked in endless circular revolution, shown at Doggerfisher gallery in Edinburgh the year it was made. Other projects have been forthright in their utilization of fragments excavated from prior lives: Boats, smashed glass panes from greenhouses, and abandoned East Berlin swimming pools all figure prominently in her recent collages and early, more representational photo-based works. But in



these cases Strunz seems to have poked her own eyes out, disavowing obvious forms of culled representation but retaining an appropriative structure. Most poetic and complex in this vein perhaps is her *Visionary Fragment (für Antoine Augustin Cournot)*, 2005, a bronze cast of two mutually propped and counterbalanced slivers of an abandoned honeycomb—at once a sly gesture toward Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969, and an ossified memorial to the long-dead bee colony.

The ubiquitous living-on of forms in Strunz's work is neither eulogized as so many failed promises nor affirmed as still-wished-for utopian possibility but instead is maintained equivocally as the support for a continuing practice. As "Whose Garden Was This," the title of Strunz's recent solo show in New York at Gavin Brown's Enterprise makes clear, the artist is still working self-consciously in the condition of an "aftermath," all the while confirming that she's not willing to give up the ghost. History is inescapably present in the urban refuse, discarded timber, scrap metal, and old books she mines and in the already failed—or proleptically failed—garden she tends for a passing season. Yet the New York installation also underscored the fact that Strunz's sculptures

are often meticulously ordered when exhibited together—effectively catalogued, with each thing seemingly put in its proper place, even while sympathies across space predominate, reverberating within and gamely articulating it. (The seventeen metal cubes of *Black Wind, Fire & Steel*, 2006, for example, cascaded and hovered in tight groupings, falling from the ceiling and wandering into corners or coagulating into force fields as if by some unseen magnetism. Such phalanxes are evidence of Strunz's "room language," as she calls it, forming "neologistic sentences.") In addition, every element more or less obliquely refers to its own title, to the other elements around it, and to the operations of the site through which the elements, complicit, acquire meaning constellated around the garden and its couched moralism of the Fall.

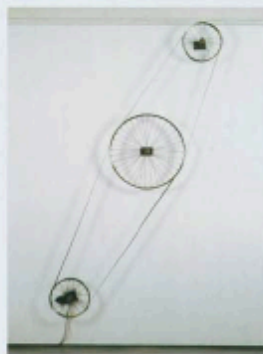
In this regard, any institutional analogy may be pat, but one can imagine Strunz's taking organizational cues from



Marcel Broodthaers's *Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department, Section des Figures (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present)*, 1972, which similarly enlisted various media in a panorama of hegemonic collecting under the banner of an exhibition. Indeed, Strunz's "eagle principle"

for her formalist aggregates—to borrow Rosalind E. Krauss's phrase, coined for Broodthaers's phrase, coined for Broodthaers's collapsing of the aesthetic and commodified in his ersatz museal juxtapositions—extends to avian forms, her sculptures poised as so many iterations of taxonomic specimens pinned to the gallery walls. Many of Strunz's spatial compositions suggest movement arrested in flight, and her iconography flirts with mimesis, legible as enfolded or spread wings. Lightness is paradoxically achieved with the heft of dense materials, including wheelbarrows and metal doors. Despite their rust and patina, her materials effortlessly assume the look of folded paper in *Whose Garden Was This?*, 2005, and *Herbstzeitlose/Saffron Meadow*, 2005. (Meadow saffron may be a perennial that blooms in the fall, but here it references an object more constructive than vegetative, all wedged angles and tectonic plates.) Juxtaposing obdurate materiality with an implausible levity only to roll them both into organic permanence may be Strunz's most viable conceit and is surely yet another sign of her interest in recurring cycles and productive sublation.

For all its rigor, however, Strunz's stark work can also be mordantly humorous, as was evident in *Yesterday's Echoes*, 2006. A mock MTV-style music video cued to a brassy riff on Mendelssohn by composer Hiroshi Nawa, the piece was conceived by Strunz as a sarcastic celebration of her show—



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Opposite page, from top: Katja Strunz, *Herbstzeitlose/Saffron Meadow*, 2005, metal, 89% x 21% x 10". Katja Strunz, *Untitled*, 2005, letterpress print, 9% x 6%". This page, from top: Katja Strunz, *Time of the Season*, 2003, inscribed ribbon, wheels, and motor, 102% x 55% x 5%". Katja Strunz, *Black Wind, Fire & Steel*, 2006. Installation view, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, Photo: Ellen Wilson. Katja Strunz, *Yesterday's Echoes*, 2006. Installation view, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, 2006. Photo: Laura Mitterand.



a makeshift garden party (campy, faux profound, and not a little silly) featuring odd amalgams of candlesticks and Turkish ashtrays. These figurines, in fact, composed a sculpture, also called *Yesterday's Echoes*, made the previous year; appearing in Strunz's New York installation, they

made a central floor-bound clique of little umbrella-like squatters. Needless to say, without the music and wry editing, they are decided, even forlorn reliquaries in their displacement.

In 1968, Smithson wrote "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," which sought less to define than to destabilize terms, rendering them conditional and, at the moment of their emergence, instantly obsolete. Smithson harbored no illusion that either his work or its critical articulation would be conclusive; neither did he wish for permanence nor static, uneroded meaning. In the spirit of perverse generosity or possibly cannily entropic self-defense, he concluded as if in anticipation of future anterior irrelevance: "This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time. Theories like things are also abandoned. That theories are eternal is doubtful. Vanished theories compose the strata of many forgotten books." For Strunz, all this is a given, even if its effects are nowhere a forgone

conclusion. She reformulates the idea of mnemonic resonance as a question of physical ownership, asking, again and again, without really expecting an answer: Whose paradise were these vanished theories and the objects in which they contingently reside, and whose property do they, in their derelict afterlife, become? □

SUZANNE HUDSON IS A NEW YORK-BASED ART HISTORIAN AND CRITIC. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)