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Damaris Kerkhoff | a short record on January 19th – March 02nd 2024

If one wanted to find a common thread in Damaris Kerkhoff's various works, I would point to the fact that in all of them, binary categories are avoided or left completely behind. Instead, the works foreground the transitive; they create interconnections, hybrid and intermediate forms. That applies just as much to the layering of different working methods – concept and expression, positive and negative form, digital and analog – as it does to gender categories. The dissolution of polarities also means that the search for a universal common denominator as posited at the outset of this text, which is rarely a goal worth pursuing, stands, in Kerkhoff's work, for a fundamental ambiguity and thus constitutes an altogether worthwhile endeavor.

One important point of reference in Kerkhoff's work is the vocabulary of minimalism. Standardized shapes such as the triangle, the square, the circle, and the right angle are deliberately employed for their loaded theoretical background, which is both spotlighted and humorously subverted. The artist subjects the precise parameters of minimalism to various manual and material interventions, resulting in a lapidary shapelessness. In consequence of this, her shapes come across as simultaneously comical and tragic, much like characters in a Samuel Beckett play. In part, this is because she uses inexact objects that stand askew in space and appear to be entirely rudimentary in their geometry. She also uses soft, pliable materials such as clay, textiles, and paper, which – visibly manipulated by the artist's fingers or deformed by gravity – are reminiscent not so much of industrial manufacturing as of simple handmade items. Perhaps most importantly, she duplicates, layers, and combines these shapeless shapes so that they inevitably take on anthropomorphic qualities: A double half-circle could be sunglasses, breasts, or buttocks; an L-shaped figure describes an outsize leg; a wobbly T shape recalls a torso.¹ These are form-figures that alternate between abstraction and figuration, between standardization and deviation, between industrial and manual production.² They seem to obey a modernist logic, but they overlay it with aspects that are foreign or even inimical to it, such as tactility, figuration, and theatricality – all the disruptive elements that Michael Fried wanted banished from art, and whose

¹ These bodily connotations were suggested by the artist herself in a conversation with the author in Goch on July 11, 2019.

² The term "form-figures" comes from H. H. Arnason, who used it in the context of Philip Guston and a series of paintings by him titled *The Actors*; see Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 147.

potential Kerkhoff exploits to expand it.

These figures, however, derive their idiosyncratic comedy not only from their shapeless appearance, but also from their theatrical presentation. An important role is played here by the architectural peculiarities of the exhibition venue, which Kerkhoff skillfully employs to provoke interaction between viewers and objects. At the Museum Kurhaus Kleve, for example, masculine and feminine attributes were mounted above the two doorways leading out of the exhibition space, so that visitors had to choose their preference - an ironic game with the conservative architecture of the museum, which also stood in contrast to the collages on display in the room, whose models defied categorization. At the Museum Goch, the stagelike layout of the space was used to play with the boundaries of modernist theory. The form-figures described above - torso, leg, and buttocks - were positioned in the space in such a way that at first glance, viewers were presented with an optically two-dimensional image. The shapes were flat, frontally oriented, and placed on evenly spaced lines. Yet at the same time, this reading was subjected to a severe test: Spotlights were used to produce long shadows behind the figures, so that they inevitably took on depth and corporeality. Furthermore, the ideal planarity of the overall image only persisted as long as one remained near the entrance to the room, in the shallow space behind the first white line. As soon as one walked toward and around the pieces, one was confronted with their "backs," with the supports and technical artifices that made their supposed autonomy possible in the first place. This oscillation - between flat and three-dimensional, abstract and figurative, autonomous and contextual - turns the artworks into actors, capable of changing their aspect and appearance as the viewer's position changes.

When sculptures, drawings, and installations become actors, that also means that they possess lives of their own. They are beings with motives and emotions, a past and a future. As such, they are also part of the artist's day-to-day life: They inhabit the car, populate the studio, lounge around the apartment, present themselves on the street, occupy the garden. Kerkhoff has documented these situations in photographs, creating an album that records not just their idiosyncrasies and transformations, but also their comedic and existential protest. The works playfully define an avant-garde of failure, which regards the heroic attitude of the trailblazer as an inappropriate position and opts instead for physical comedy. The figures are too fat, too thin, too tall or short, too masculine, too feminine, too sexual - they categorically refuse to fit any mold.

In this minimal theater, works rarely achieve a final status; rather, they describe mobile objects that take on temporary roles through their interactions with other works and the exhibition space. A good example is Kerkhoff's drawings, whose creation she compares to the routine of keeping a journal: "I just dash them off each day, one after another." On the one hand, the lines transfer the artist's

gestures onto paper; on the other, they are also akin to the alphabet and refer to the action of writing. The resulting works on paper are initially laid aside; they serve as material that can be incorporated into collages and installations as needed. In these contexts, they undergo a change similar to that experienced by the sculptures. Their interaction with the works around them gives rise to an interchange between abstraction and figuration, between drawing and object, and between the animate and the inanimate. In this way a line drawing hanging off a desk becomes a tongue lapping at the floor; a scrap of paper dangling from a chair embodies the erotic tension between rising and falling.

Damaris Kerkhoff's minimalism is bound up with an existential corporeality that takes in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Georges Didi-Huberman's combination of geometry and anthropology, and Maggie Nelson's bodily transitivity. In this sense, Kerkhoff is writing a new chapter in an alternative art history, whose prominent points of reference include Marcel Duchamp's alter ego Rose Selavy, Agnes Martin's physical drawing, and Sol LeWitt's absurd humor. The postmodern father (Duchamp) is replaced by the figure of the mother, and LeWitt's cubic permutations give way to reflection on the geometric and conceptual possibilities of the sphere and its potential for institutional critique.

Susanne Figner: Minimales Theater