

## ***Mathahood***

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,  
All the king's horses and all the king's men,  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

English nursery rhyme, c. 1803

Three brilliant minds get together: a filmmaker, Georges Perec, a philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, and a writer, Jorge Luis Borges. They compete to see who can offer the clearest description of the complex truth of life. Perec says: It is not the parts that determine the whole, but the whole that determines the parts. To which his fellow countryman Deleuze adds: The manifold is not just that which has many parts, but also that which is folded in many ways. And unfolding is not contrary to folding, but follows the fold to the subsequent fold. The Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, for his part, explains that in one country the art of cartography achieved such perfection that the map of a single province took up the space of a city, and the map of the country that of a province. When even these maps no longer proved satisfactory, a map of the country was created that was the size of the country itself and corresponded to it point by point. Which of the three won? None, because all three forgot to factor in themselves.

“There is counting, things are counted, and in this counting he who counts is already included.”<sup>1</sup> This, according to Jacques Lacan, is what the statement of the truth should be – truth that arises from a misperception, an erroneous understanding. Not, however, a mistaken understanding of the true scope of an intrinsically existing and preexisting truth; rather, misperception and erroneous understanding must be added to the truth itself, since it is only with them that the truth comes into being in the first place.

But Lacan's declaration also contains the idea of the flow of time reversed and of retroactive causality – in other words, the notion that effects can precede their

causes and subsequently reveal them like the past. An excellent example of this is the short story "The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway,"<sup>ii</sup> by the American literary scholar Philip Klaas (1920–2010), who became famous as a science-fiction writer under the pseudonym William Tenn. Originally published in the October 1955 edition of the sci-fi magazine *Galaxy*, the story is about a well-known professor of art history. Coming from a distant future, the year 2487, he uses a time machine to travel several centuries back into the past, in search of the painter Morniel Mathaway, whose works are celebrated in the 25th century. When the professor finds Mathaway, he is surprised to discover that he is a talentless, megalomaniacal and – with good reason – completely unknown artist. The professor happens to have brought along a catalogue from the future that documents the artist's extraordinary work. The wily Mathaway quickly grasps the situation. Stealing the catalogue, he uses a ruse to purloin the time machine and makes off with both into the art historian's future, where he settles in as a highly regarded artist, while the professor stays behind, stranded in the past. In order not to interfere in the course of history yet to come and to avoid putting the artist's future fame at risk, the professor assumes Mathaway's identity and tries his hand as a painter by reproducing paintings he remembers from the catalogue. In the process, the art historian creates the very works by Mathaway that appear in the catalogue from the future. The story makes the fact that he could not have done so without having seen the paintings turn in an endless causal loop, against temporal linearity: The subject is confronted with something that occurred in the past that he would like to change. He goes back to the past, intervenes in the event and discovers not that everything is unchangeable, but rather that it is only thanks to his intervention from the future that the past event will have occurred – that is, that it will become what it already was from the beginning. The subject's original illusion is simply the result of his failure to remember to factor in his own action.

This phenomenon of conditional dependence – isn't it always inherent in the reciprocal relationship between the production and consumption of art? After all, a viewer in his or her present visualizes something that was created by an artist in the past for future viewing. In this way, an artistic work could be understood as a facsimile of a distant – but already past – future, as a pre-memory that looks

back on a time that has not yet even really become. It is in this that engaging with art offers the opportunity to experience a future past that makes the lived past seem more understandable and that can bring us into a present in which we have not yet been.

Process and time, the whole and its parts also mark the respective end points of the axes of a system of coordinates of artistic practice across which Ben Greber's sculptural works and installations span, without however ever remaining in one place or maintaining one specific form for very long. Greber conceives his three-dimensional objects dynamically, as processual sculptures – with this process comprising (in equal measure conceptually, physically and formally) both construction and deconstruction, each in relation to an entirely distinct time that is inherent in the works themselves and originates in the early representational, object-ive,<sup>iii</sup> works. These were based on an unrelenting fascination with basic human needs and how they are determined by an increasingly technologized world of things. Using mostly commonplace, not very durable materials such as cardboard and paper, Ben Greber created mostly monochrome objects meant to recall devices from our everyday lives. But the functionalities of these quasi apparatuses were always only imaginary, and despite their apparent familiarity they remain ultimately alien to us – and not only in their peculiar rescaling.

This interest in the sculptural reification of temporal processes led Ben Greber to use a series of exhibitions as occasions to present an object in various states until a final state was achieved that he deemed satisfactory. Reification and de-objectification began to promote each other mutually in a practice on the edge of self-annulment that does not try to balance contradictory aspects, but instead sees them – in their juxtaposition of the irreconcilable – as a possibility of no longer needing to commit to anything. This enables a creative stopping of space and time. And it does so not in order to explain the world or to create distance that allows viewers to keep coming back to the well-known or familiar, in the sense of aesthetic self-conception; rather, the works situated here produce a threatening over-proximity. After all, they are aimed at life itself and flow around that which is closest to us: In spatial terms, around the inner core (who or what am I in this

world?); in temporal terms, around the unique and irrevocable decisive moment that legitimizes birth and death, when it is no longer a question of signs, symptoms, allusions or riddles, but rather when everything is what it is and nothing stands for anything else anymore – the moment when there are no further references and all accounts are settled.<sup>iv</sup>

Around 2016 Ben Greber began to reverse his body of existing representational, object-ive sculptures. In the course of phases of progressive dismantling, the pieces were abstracted to a point where one could only still surmise certain remains of form, function or surface, which pierced through the mask of a superficially new autonomous formal language. An archeology of the future, in a sense: From an existing artwork, an abstract condition is exhumed that seems to have fallen from an era that will have been. The overarching theme of these new works became the lost relationship to the world of things: The reduction of the essent (*das Seiende* – everything that is, has being) to its superficial qualities and distinctive characteristics. The representational, the object-ive, only emerges as a distant echo, as an artifact-like sediment, the remains of a figure that, reduced to material, can be archived in systems as an available commodity ... only in order to then be dragged back to the light again, perhaps forensically, in subsequent perceptions. And yet each thing or fragment is also always tautologically its own memory module, which preserves certain attributes of the objective object and the processes it has undergone: Groups of abstract works that, while they all relate to the same original project, each try to tackle a different aspect of its components, whether in terms of their content or form.

Even though, in the process of abstraction, Ben Greber leaves recognizable traces of the original forms, functions and content, and the preserved titles point to their former object-ivity, the pieces resulting from this reductive activity always appear detached from their source in exhibitions. In this they seem to be heeding an early discomfort experienced by the artist: "... to live in an environment in which everything is finished and completed – so that there is no longer any room for creating anything new. – That everything is and nothing becomes" (Ben Greber). In the context of this way of thinking alone they are perhaps not really anything

more – nor, for that matter, anything less – than autonomous information carriers, which these components of the original work effortlessly bring into view as a whole in the exhibition space: The (simulated) option of different possibilities, which, strictly speaking, are variations of one and the same possibility that always remains a phantom.

On the trail of this phantom, Ben Greber's practice has become increasingly refined into a reverse seriality, an inverted regress. At a certain level of abstraction, beyond the autopsy of what was, the works begin to execute a fascinatingly impossible maneuver of appropriating disappropriation, which we can only follow intellectually. For, it seems as though they were being sucked in, as if through their own navel, in order to then – no longer orientable (whether up, down, front, back, inside, outside, right, left, before or after) – drift unbounded in space and time: *post hoc ergo ante hoc* – that which comes later causes that which came before. The phantom reveals itself to be an unsolvable paradoxical concept, and those who attempt to follow it may feel reminded of one of the most profound sentences in film history: "Once you're a parent, you're the ghost of your children's future." Or in figurative terms: The artwork is the ghost of its viewers' future.

The fact that Ben Greber's most recent works thus contradict physical laws of space and time – in particular the second law of thermodynamics, which concerns processes and the principle of irreversibility and states that the greatest possible disorder can only always increase and never decrease – reveals them ultimately to be a powerful defense of both the creative capabilities and possible courses of action of artistic world-creation and, above all, of freedom in the visual arts.

Yet it would be a mistake if art could do whatever it wanted in the lawlessness of intellectual understanding, in the imagination. Even if the specific value of art today is not merely "disinterested pleasure" (Kant's "interesseloses Wohlgefallen"), since art can be practical insofar as it is able to set in motion the negotiation of practices through which people seek to (re)determine their activities in the extra-

aesthetic realm, art continues to strive to succeed as art and inexorably faces the possibility of failure: Every certainty in art has a moment of uncertainty. Art only ever succeeds exemplarily – and each artwork is concerned with realizing, in a paradigmatic way, what art is.

And so art may only do what it must: It must expose itself to disorder and thus always accept the risk of failure. For if art does not do this, it is not free and remains dependent on attitudes, judgments and identities that it has been prescribed and that it simply repeats, without giving them a new, different, expression.

*‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’*

*‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’*

*‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’<sup>vi</sup>*

*Marcus Lütkemeyer*

i

Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 20.

ii

William Tenn, "The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway," in *Galaxy* (October 1955), 44–59.

iii

Translator's note: The German word used here is *gegenständlich* (from *Gegenstand*: object), which encompasses the notions of representational, objective, realistic, concrete, palpable. My use of a hyphen in "object-ive" and "(de-) object-ification" is intended to underscore the reference – inherent in the German term *gegenständlich* – to a real object.

iv

See Umberto Eco, *Das Foucaultsche Pendel* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2003), 816f.

v

*Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan (USA, 2014).

vi

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) (<http://birrell.org/andrew/alice/IGlass.pdf>), 81.