

Cosmic Diagram

On Ecke Bonk's Exhibition and Melanie Althaus's Architecture

Eau et gaz. Let me reiterate and borrow Ecke Bonk's own *formula*: "50cc Eau de Forestay, 110gr Auer von Welsbach." Here, Bonk traces two of the coordinates of the Duchampian space. These two elements—which have traversed Duchamp's economy of fluxes to gain their most explicit significance in *Étant donnés*—are resorted to by Bonk to produce an intervention that both re-enacts and extends a Duchampian gesture and which recasts it within a different plane where the French artist's life stories and his work collide and intertwine with the technological artifacts of Carl Auer von Welsbach (the gas mantle or "Welsbach mantle") and their cultural histories. In this regard, Bonk's formula functions as a re-formulation—that is, following the etymology of the word, both a method *and* a form—of Duchamp's and Welsbach's principles. As a matter of fact, the author of *The Portable Museum* and amateur of the epistemology of science has literally placed within the modular rooms of the *Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp* "50cc Eau de Forestay" and "110gr Auer von Welsbach." Thus, if the first part of the title of Bonk's work sounds like the name of a perfume, it is—similarly to Duchamp and his *Belle Haleine*—a means of drawing one's attention to the importance of the olfactory. The water of the Forestay waterfall, in its tiny glass container, and the gas lamp both manifest themselves through their smells. Yet here a first chiasm must be noted. Indeed, in the way they were displayed, these idiosyncratic drops of water and flow of gas first appeared as objects to be viewed. Hence, if the title rather points at their smell, this is only to produce a twist within the economy of senses through which one comes to apprehend Bonk's intervention as well as to de-encapsulate the invisible and unsayable thresholds that divide up language, the senses, objects, and the worlds they inhabit.

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50cc Eau de Forestay, 110gr Auer von Welsbach ... et quelques rayons cosmiques is the first exhibition to take place in the newly built *Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp* (KMD). Designed by Swiss architect Melanie Althaus, the building of approximately 40 x 40 x 40 cm combines a modernist approach to surface, structure, and function with a playful set of references to Duchamp as well as with different approaches to opticality and viewing modalities. All vertical surfaces of the KMD and its top are equipped with viewfinders that double-function as windows. Since they are projecting, not only do they enable the viewer to engage in singular optical experiences with the works displayed, but they can also act as exhibition spaces themselves. Moreover, thanks to their almost anamorphic nature, these telescopic devices mimic the very bodily action of viewing: the KMD gazes at those who gaze through it, and engaging with the works consequently requires particular corporeal movements. But the kind of optical regime enabled by this structure does not merely revolve around such a simplistic dualism (viewing/being viewed). For one can see through it and must break with one's viewing habits, and because viewership becomes a process of constant framing and re-framing, the visual ontology of the KMD oscillates between opacity and transparency, appearance and disappearance, thus highlighting the importance



Ecke Bonk, *50cc Eau de Forestay*, Erlenmeyer bottle, 50cc of water from the Forestay waterfall, Geiger counter, battery, live wires, *Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp*, Cully, 2010.

of its location—Cully on the shores of Lake Geneva—and producing a kind of evolving kaleidoscopic space within the very spatial setting that “Duchamp abandoned for the waterfall” (Bachmann and Banz). Hence if by its size it literally is a model—a miniature “kunsthalle”—from the point of view of curatorial practices, the KMD is also a model for the type of experiments in exhibition-making aimed at other *Kunsthallen*, which attempt at the creation of “a state of permanent constructive conflict within contemporary art production” (Ruf).

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This little detour through questions of space and vision now allows me to go back to *50cc Eau de Forestay, 110gr Auer von Welsbach ... et quelques rayons cosmiques*. In his graceful analysis of Vittore Carpaccio's *Sacra Conversazione*, philosopher Michel Serres resorts to that painting to tell us that space is protean in that it multiplies *sites* and *graphs*. In other words, it generates more spaces and, at the same time, tracings of the latter. Alongside the water taken from the Forestay waterfall and the Welsbach mantle, Bonk has installed two Geiger counters that measure the radiations of the site where they are located. These radiations are different in each and every location and the Geiger counter allows for such subtle measurements, which emphasize the highly specific location of each place within the cosmos; it is as if it could actually draw lines circumscribing the location of the KMD and its multiple ties that connect it to the latter. But again, in an analogous chiasmatic



Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, designed by Melanie Althaus, Quai de l'Indépendance 1, Cully.

movement to that consisting of inviting the viewer through the invocation of the linguistic manifestation of the olfactory dimension of his work, radiations do occur, but one can only perceive them through the *mediation* of the Geiger counter, which, for Bonk, doubles the events. In this sense, he uses this device as a technological metaphor for perception. Let's remind ourselves that the recording instrument developed by Hans Geiger itself functions by provoking *cascades* of ionization. Radiations are thus pervasive and, unlike physical spaces, do not have ends. They are limitless. Hence, within such a continuous flow, how and when do they come to be experienced and how and when does experience translate into an object of thought and consciousness? Radiations *per se* do not reveal their point of saliency. However, real-time measurements of the passages of radiations provide data for a chart yet to be drawn and the presence of the counter within the KMD pinpoint at their localization (one that actually overflows its material boundaries): *graph* and *site*.

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Duchamp's name sits as comfortably in aesthetic narratives as in epistemological ones. From the point of view of the second, his method can be seen as one that—thanks to a historically constituted specific declension of authorship—wittily manages to grant objects unprecedented ontological status. Such an assertion is hardly enunciable in the case of Carl Auer von Welsbach. His biographical data often state that he is both a “scientist” or “discoverer” *and* an “inventor.” This sums up the great anxiety of modern science: if things are invented—that is man-made—they are not objective, whereas scientists supposedly reveal and describe phenomena that have been waiting to be discovered. Historical, epistemological, and aesthetic reasons all play their part in this segmentation of the world's phenomenal realities, the way we perceive them and the modalities through which we apprehend them. The assemblage resulting from the encounter between the constellation of Bonk's objects and the KMD acts as a machine that re-reads the histories of Duchamp and Welsbach, explores the interstitial spaces left out by scholarship, circumscribes their territories, and convokes the artifacts (the water from the waterfall, the gas) that symbolize these stories (Duchamp's stay at the Forestay waterfall and the heterogenesis of both *Étant donnés* and Auer von Welsbach's lamp) and in which they are embodied. Bonk has thus produced a “diagram” (Deleuze) in that his assemblage maps all these components to create, by the same token, a whole new constellation in which thresholds between non-knowledge (Maharaj) and perception are re-negotiated, with this permanent concern as event-horizon: acknowledging the heterogeneity of positions within diverse chaomologies (Joyce/Bonk).

References

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