Vinzenz Meyner

Das Zweikammersystem

Documentation solo exhibition
ProjektLinks/ Galerie DuflonRacz, Bern, 2019

Opening Friday 4th of October
5th October–9th of November
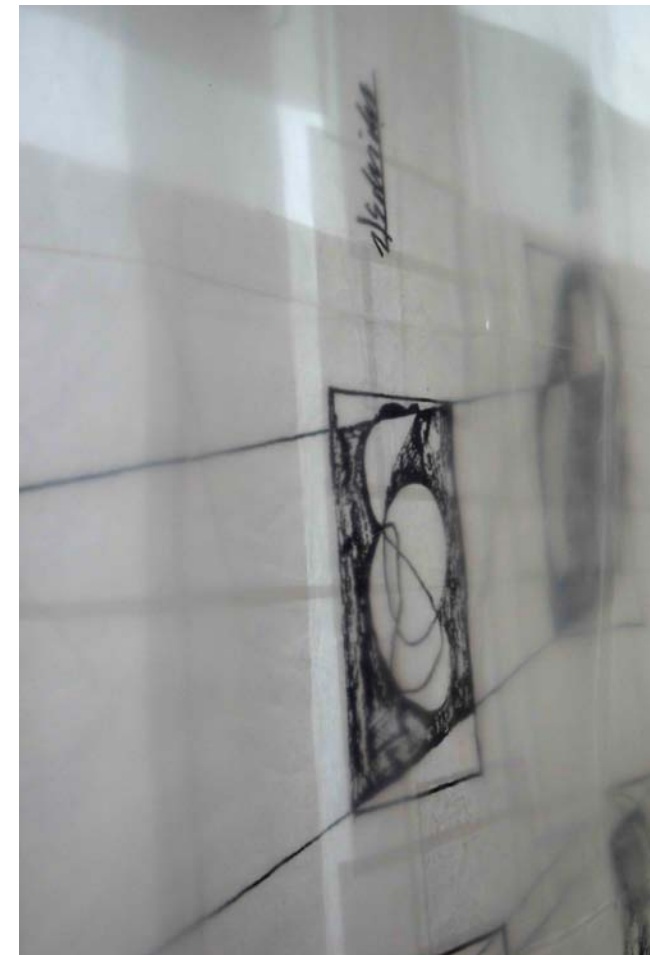
Walk through video: *https://youtu.be/6BFHGtx_OpQ*

Credits:

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Das Zweikammersystem
Exhibition view, ProjektLinks/ Galerie DuflonRacz, Bern, 2019

Ohne Titel (Zeichnungen Ordner 2a: Kopien 10:1)
Sewn plastic, holes, papier mâché, laser print, 210 x 300 cm, details, 2019

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The Bicameral System

SS: If I think about the concept of a "bicameral system" associatively, detaching it from its dominant political meaning, as an architect it reminds me of the layout of Milanese apartments from the post-war period. They had separate entrances and parallel corridors for the staff, which in itself was nothing novel or unusual. However, from the outside these residential buildings appear modern, while on the inside there is a system of dividing space to reinforce ancient social structures. Perhaps I'm thinking about it because the "chamber" as a spatial designation was most often used to describe servant rooms. It therefore implies a small and unassuming space, perhaps hidden away. Although in politics and law, by contrast, the term "chamber" is associated with highly representative spaces.

LH: Yes, that aspect is interesting. From the outside there is a system or a whole, which is however divided within itself, creating and maintaining relationships and hierarchies. Perhaps that also works when we consider the chamber as a political space. It also seems to have two aspects: on the one hand the system, the procedures and processes and on the other hand the actual spaces of the two separate chambers. Although you are right: to talk of chambers in a political context today appears somewhat contradictory, because these spaces always have a strongly representative character. Although there is also the aspect of caucuses, meetings to which only certain initiated people have access. Not everyone has a voice, so an element of seclusion certainly plays a role.

SS: True, the chamber as a protected space or a place of retreat where one can take the time to sit and think.

LH: In German, the media has coined the analogy of the darkroom, or "dark chamber" (Dunkelkammer) in the context of political events behind closed doors. In a darkroom there is little to no transparency, e.g. concerning voting behaviour or the interests and affiliations of individual members. In this respect we might ask ourselves whether the chamber is even a good model for political institutions. Although if we think of the English word "darkroom" in other contexts, it is precisely obscurity or darkness that enables openness.

SS. Yes, that's a good point. It's interesting that you mention the darkroom. I was just thinking of the camera obscura. This primitive form of the camera is basically a chamber, Latin camera. But perhaps the connection is more than a linguistic one for me, because I have been inside a camera obscura. The almost completely enclosed space serves to capture and depict the surrounding environment. In a darkroom these impressions can then be developed into photographs.

LH: The exhibition title also includes the term "system". Maybe it is worth looking at that more closely. To stay with our two chambers for a moment: for me the system fundamentally refers to the fact that there is a relationship between the two chambers, which does not need to be rigid or fixed. Something happens between these two chambers. They are not strictly separate from each other. Perhaps we could speak of a third space, a space in between, a space of interaction, which exists by necessity in a system like the one we are discussing.

SS: Thinking about the concept of the system and its place in architecture, I would argue that it is relevant to construction above all. As you mentioned already, it is about the relationships between the parts necessary for construction. In architectural theory we speak of "tectonics", a term coined by Gottfried Semper. It is not just about truthfully visualizing the constructive system, but also about coherently representing the relationships between the individual parts, the dis-

tribution of forces, in the finished building. I am also thinking of Fritz Haller, who designed the USM modular construction sets, an adaptable and extendable system of USM furniture, standing in a USM building…

LH: Although I find it interesting that in your USM example the individual building parts are predetermined. The system is designed on the drawing board with the idea that all sorts of things may be built with it. The system is designed to enable. But from the moment this structure is created, a lot has already happened, certain things are defined in advance and remain unchanged.

SS: Yes, absolutely. A system that wishes to create an objective basis or equal conditions is not free of values. After the creative process, the parts are fixed and there is a dependence. I can only use these exact parts, in the case of USM even only by using tools created especially to add or remove from the system. Fritz Haller was of course not the only one to develop universal systems in the 1960s. There was a general tendency to strive for universal validity in design. This is partly connected to the fact that business models at the time were becoming increasingly global. The increasing administrative effort involved led to a search for all-encompassing solutions. In addition, many architects during this time were inspired by the ideas of cybernetics – the theory of the regulation and control of dynamic systems served as a model of thinking to reorganize work spaces.

LH: There is a strong idea of progress in all this. To create structures that function universally. Efficiency. Growth. It is worth noting that at the same time structuralist theories were booming, which also centre on systems. The focus moves away from the individual object and essentialist thinking. Instead, the question becomes how things behave in relation to each other. What structure or system is behind it? To what extent do such structures determine social possibi-

lities, e.g. concerning gender roles? Another typical question is about the creation of meaning. From a structuralist perspective, meaning is not inherent in things themselves, but socially constructed. At the time, this triggered a significant shift of perspective. When we begin to look at things this way, the system becomes dynamic. There are many interactions and interdependencies that perhaps lead to a less hierarchical view of things. Later, poststructuralist thinkers began to question the status of structure itself and to question these objectivist, universalist explanations, which we also find in fields like ethnology at the time.

SS: And if we break that down to the level of individual human beings, then these ideas of seeing oneself as just one part of a bigger systems also appear liberating. You gain perspective, can let go of certain things. Equally, it can be oppressive. We can never get out of it. How to intervene in the order, break out of it, create chaos?

Blue Rose, Red Carnation

LH: The image on the invitation carton shows us two plastic sleeves; the one on the left contains a blue rose, the one on the right a red carnation. As Vinzenz explained to me, a blue rose cannot be cultivated conventionally, it can only be produced through genetic engineering. This is done mainly for the Japanese market, where blue roses are presented as valuable gifts. One aspect that interests me is the fact that the economy of these roses, a highly expensive and exclusive product, is based on something that does not in the first instance function within a capitalist logic: an existing cultural practice of gift giving. Such practices certainly include some economic aspects, but they function – or perhaps we should say, used to function – outside of an actual commodity logic. There seems to be a reversal: cultural practices are transformed into a product logic. The blue rose is artificially created and produced at great expense, which is worthwhile because there is this non-capitalist cultural field which one can develop and profit from.

SS: The rose doesn't even need to be blue to make that connection. The red rose, too, as the flower representing romantic love, for example in the context of Valentine's Day, contains this absurdity. A practice of gift giving connected to this elemental emotion of love, which is instrumentalized for profit.

LH: True.

SS: This is a fascinating image in itself. There is something extremely artificial about the red rose, in the way it is for sale for example at the train station, readily gift wrapped. But through this aspect of gene manipulation with the blue rose, the image becomes even stronger. Something is industrially cultivated – the natural is manipulated to create exclusivity.

LH: Although the artificiality of the blue rose is also somehow natural in the sense of biological, organic. The supposed clear distinction between nature and culture – something is either artificial or natural – begins to blur.

SS: It is interesting in principle to observe how we often perceive everyday things as natural even though they might not be. A beautiful landscape is often cultivated – almost everywhere human beings have intervened in some way. All these plants and flowers that we place in our living rooms and offices are to an extent natural, but also very artificial, like an image of nature. The orchid as a prominent example has a remarkable story. While the tropical orchid used to be a status symbol in Europe, because of its rarity, today it is a mass product that you can find in any supermarket. Looking at images of hothouses in the Netherlands, it's difficult to tell whether they are digital renderings or real photographs. And yet, the flower as a piece of nature is meant to make our homes feel more comfortable.

LH: Yes, it seems to have been reduced entirely to symbolism. The actual plant fades into the background. It is interesting that this symbolic charge is so strong in relation to flowers, in particular. An art historical perspective might also be interesting here. After all, literature and the visual arts have always worked with these myths.

SS: That includes flowers that transport messages in paintings, but also the more trivial convention of which flower is associated with which kind of event. The carnation for example is a popular flower for mourning, but also a political statement. The history behind these interpretations would certainly be interesting to research.

LH: One lead might be that in contrast to the rose the carnation is very widespread and thrives almost anywhere on earth. It grows

in many different colours, is relatively inexpensive and suitable as a gift for many occasions, because the different colours also have different meanings. While the rose requires a high degree of care and nurture, preening the rose bush several times a year, the carnation just grows. It therefore seems quite fitting that the Left, or rather the early labour movement, chose this flower as its symbol. In this context the red carnation primarily signifies a sense of belonging. To wear something beautiful which at the same time has a political component, signifying allegiance to a group.

SS: Which was also a subversive act. Claiming allegiance by wearing a flower.

LH: Through something commonplace.

SS: And something traditional. We have been adorning themselves with flowers forever. Flowers have a decorative function: beautifying ourselves, and the spaces around us …

LH: Yes. Here too there is a link to existing cultural practices, in a different context. The availability, the range of colours, the practice of wearing flowers, the history of the colour red … a multiplicity of influences contribute to establishing the myth of red carnation equals labour movement.

SS: If we look at the image on the exhibition's invitation carton in its entirety, we see not just two flowers, but also two plastic folders, the type for filing things in ring binders.

LH: Exactly. I also find these folders fascinating. For me they refer to the question of conservation and preservation. To make something accessible within a system.

SS: I'm assuming you're not thinking of conservation in the conventional sense, the compilation of a herbarium for example?

LH: Yes that's right. Conservation in an expanded sense. To feed something into a

system of knowledge always implies determining a status quo. That happens the moment the blue rose is filed in the binder. A status quo is preserved, a new data set generated we might say. We collect or produce data and thereby feed a system. Ordering, categorizing, assigning key words. The binder with the collected data sets then perhaps becomes a data set itself. It becomes part of a library, from which in turn new data is generated and systematized.

SS: And with reference to the ring binder, full of plastic folders with standardized holes to fit the system, we might draw a parallel to the USM-Haller building kits we discussed above, and the ideas resonating in it. Ring binders, or folders in a wider sense, are a fixture of administrative work. They define norms, usually DIN A4.

LH: Yes, somehow all these norms are simultaneously systems that enable. But they also prescribe a lot. Another aspect occurred to me: we could think about what happens if we place the two plastic sleeves on top of each other. Let's assume the paper inside is transparent and we only see the two flowers. If we place one on top of the other, something seems to happen. Knowledge develops its own dynamic, a new systematic emerges. The point of view changes. The independent becomes interdependent.

SS: Two images merge into something new. There are overlaps, new images are created. Or commonalities become apparent.

LH: Exactly! A collected knowledge emerges. We see commonalities and differences, we can categorize. Or perhaps the opposite: everything could blur.

SS: But actually, the image also works if the paper is not transparent.

LH: You're right, it works anyway. As soon as we place the folders on top of each other,

we can at least imagine that they are no longer independent. We are operating within a system of interdependencies where the meaning of one folder also influences the meaning of the others. Individual elements become a system.

SS: Separate folders become a binder.

LH: Of course this doesn't necessarily need to produce a shared logic. Although we can certainly imagine and think about it that way. But for me, I think the decisive thing is that we encounter a system in which everything is determined by interdependency and a history which is not inevitable, but also not completely coincidental. It is something in between: contingent, historically grown. Meaning is not given ahistorically but is created by the continuous overlay of things in history. This is the perspective I find exciting.

SS: This approach in turn is also valid with regard to the chamber. Either we consider the chamber that we are in as given. We focus on the present. On the contemporary meanings of the blue rose and the red carnation, for example.

LH: Or we look at the chamber from the outside.

SS: As a model. Which allows us to reflect on interdependencies, while also exploring alternative possibilities by intervention in the model.
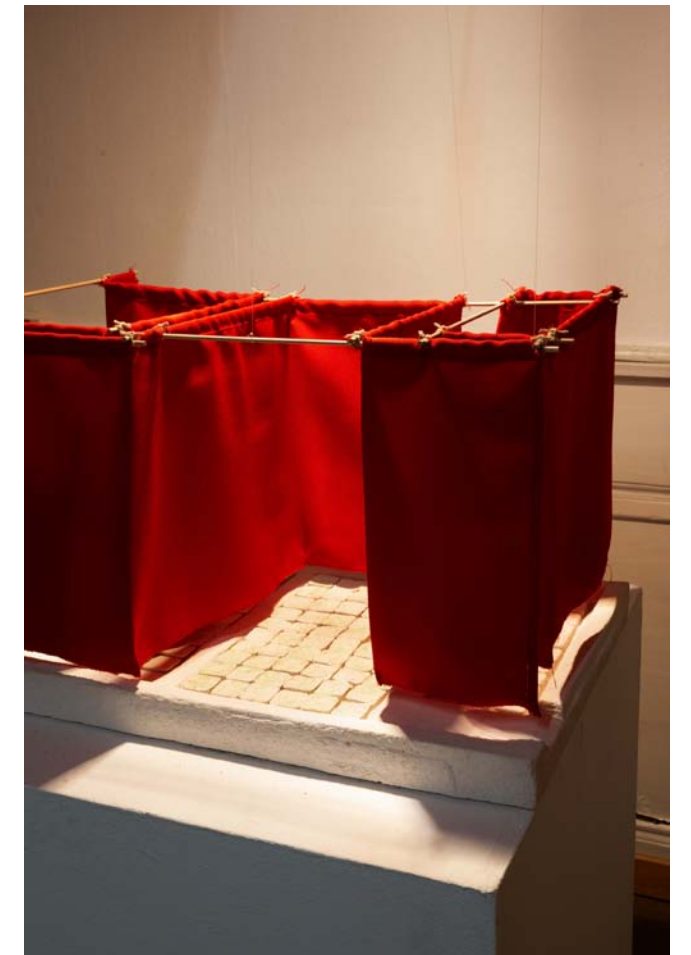
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Projekt Links (1:10)
Plaster, plaster stones, curtain fabric, wood, hemp string, 60 x 38 x 33 cm, 2019

Projekt Links (1:10)
Plaster, plaster stones, curtain fabric, wood, hemp string, 60 x 38 x 33 cm, details, 2019