

**Ludwig Seyfarth:**

**Mirrors that are not what they seem**

**Sinta Werner's complex work manipulates our perception**

Sinta Werner's art plays with two and three dimensions, with reality and image, physical presence and projection. In doing so, her work brings a familiar source of irritation to bear in misdirecting the viewer's gaze – the mirror image; the ambivalence of which was encapsulated in 1582 as follows: "Some, I say, would have seen mirrors as hieroglyphs of truth, because they are able to unveil everything that shows itself to them, as is customary to truth, which cannot remain hidden. Others, however, deem mirrors to be symbols of falseness, because they often show things in a different way to how they really are."<sup>1</sup>

In architecture, especially that of the Baroque period, mirrors have often been put to use as means of deception. Mirror cabinets make rooms appear where there are none, while mirrors placed opposite each other can turn a confined room into a space that seems to extend into infinity. Our experience of our own mirror image, too, "that dispossession of the image, the permanent temptation to think that I am somebody else," as Umberto Eco writes in his essay *On Mirrors*, "makes the mirror experience an absolutely singular one on the threshold of perception and meaning."<sup>2</sup>

René Magritte brought home this encounter by way of example in his painting *La Reproduction interdite* of 1937. There, a man stands with his back to the viewer in front of a mirror that shows him from behind, essentially producing a reflection which goes against physical reality. In Magritte's painting we "see" a mirror that isn't one. Something similar happens in Sinta Werner's art time and again, as was the case in her installation *Empfang (Reception)*, realized at COMA in Berlin in 2008.

### **Twice the furniture**

Those stepping into the gallery would at first have been under the impression that a mirror, as wide as the wall, had been installed horizontally behind a long reception counter. Yet on closer inspection it turned out that only the frame of this mirror actually existed, for this was in fact simply an opening onto a space behind the counter, furnished with a deceptively real, mirror-

---

<sup>1</sup> Raphael Mirami, quoted after: Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Der Spiegel*.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, *Über Spiegel und andere Phänomene*, (Munich, 1988), p. 38.

inversed replica of the entire front space, with all of its furniture and fixings – counter, laptop, shelves, books, folders and much more – made of wood, MDF panels, paint and cardboard.

Sinta Werner's piece *4xDoublefixed / Classic Aluminium* presented in 2009 did not require quite as much effort in terms of manufacture, but had an equally strong impact. In the historical rooms of Kunstverein Aichach four seemingly large mirrors were placed at right angles to each other to form a cross, fitted into the groined vault and the supporting columns. Ladders, pots of paint, removal boxes or a pair of blue overalls were strewn or placed around the space; it looked as though the installation work for the exhibition had not yet been completed. Yet everything was arranged in precisely such a way that all of the working utensils were reflected in the frames – which were actually empty. The illusion was of course destroyed at the point at the very latest at which the viewers stepped directly in front of the installation and did not see their own reflection. Audiences might have felt reminded of the installations by Swiss artist duo Fischli & Weiss, such as their *Raum unter Treppe (Space under the stairs)* (1993), which looks like a storage or work space. However, Fischli & Weiss carved all of the seemingly real objects in their installation from polyurethane before painting them white, and this is where the installation also differs from *Empfang (Reception)*, in the case of *4xDoublefixed / Classic Aluminium* we find real objects doubled. This in turn corresponds more closely with the installations of Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl, who in 1979 began to re-stage “everyday” spaces, such as a driving school, a supermarket or an auction hall such as could be found in museums or show houses as art works, using real furniture throughout.

What Fischli & Weiss, Guillaume Bijl and Sinta Werner do have in common is that their work creates spatial settings that could best be described as three-dimensional trompe l'œil. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century trompe l'œil experienced its first and most pronounced peak. Painted backs of paintings or deceptively real looking still lifes were especially popular in the Netherlands. While the Italian model, as described by Alberti, understood the image with its constructed perspective as a window opening into a space beyond, the Dutch understanding of paintings was that their surface should act like a mirror, reflecting what was in front of it.<sup>3</sup> Bijl's installations can certainly also be read as imaginary “mirrors” of reality. They both double and at the same time freeze three-dimensional realities within the space of the museum.

---

<sup>3</sup> Seminal on this topic: Svetlana Alpers, *Kunst als Beschreibung. Holländische Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, (Cologne, 1985).

## Architectonic excrescences

The “mirror” installations in Sinta Werner’s oeuvre have increasingly begun to go a step beyond merely doubling reality. Her recent works also tackle architecture. In her *Imperial Measurements*, executed in 2010 within the context of the *Magic Show* in Blackpool in England, which was part of the Hayward Touring exhibition program, the Neoclassicist architecture of the rooms built and furnished in the Edwardian style seemed to be taking on almost Deconstructivist traits through two mirrors placed next to and slightly facing each other at an angle. Yet behind what again turned out to be empty frames the viewer found a sculptural installation, two to three meters in height and growing out from the walls behind. An allusion to the proliferation of the architectural style, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century spread to almost all of the colonies in the Commonwealth, and which can be seen as standing for the expansion of the British Empire itself, could certainly also be detected in the work. In stylistic terms, the sculptural architecture of the piece seemed to reside between Kurt Schwitter’s Merzbau and the Postmodern departures from the right angle as seen for example with Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid.

The mathematical distortions with which, for example, Deconstructivist architecture plays are usually arrived at using CAD programs. Sinta Werner by contrast dispenses with complicated calculations done on computers and simply projects the digital simulation directly into the physical space where her work is shown. She relies here on simple tricks that have complex effects in terms of her audience’s perception. In her piece *Die optische Abkürzung (The optical abbreviation)* shown at o.T. Raum für aktuelle Kunst in Lucerne in 2013 three narrow, tall aluminum frames were placed in the exhibition space. The frames were covered in a dashed, flashing LED band, which made them look like selection frames in Photoshop. The action usually carried out in the digital image editing program on the computer was thus transposed into analogue reality. The “Photoshop frames” made the entire room seem like a virtual user interface available for digital collaging. Stood directly in front of the frames, viewers no doubt gained the impression that parts of the windows facing the street were being reflected. Yet as had also been the case in Sinta Werner’s earlier installations, what looked like an image or projection was actually a sculpture fitted some meters behind the frames. This distance disappeared, became “an optical shortcut”, when the viewer looked at the work from a particular position in front of the frames. As in the traditional one-point perspective, the construction of the illusion was here centered on a fixed viewing point at which all of the vanishing lines intersected.

The work *45°CCW*, produced for the exhibition *Plato's Third Eye* in Prague's Meetfactory in 2014, was based on the same key principle. Here, the "Photoshop selection" came in the form of a round frame hung in front of a column just below the ceiling at an angle, similar to how a surveillance mirror would be hung. When stepping out of the visual axis or behind the construction, the rotated, digitally altered "image" turned out to be a complex three-dimensional sculpture. As was the case with *Imperial Measurements*, the piece is reminiscent of interleaved shapes in Cubist paintings or conjures up the seeming frailty of Deconstructivist architecture, which is generally designed using 3D programs and its load-bearing stability is calculated in this way, too.

Sinta Werner allows us to see something that turns out to be something different than it appears at first glance. This also applies to *Konstruktion im Augenblick (Construction in the Moment)*, the centerpiece relating particularly to the gallery space in the exhibition *Die Variable des Raums (The Variable of Space)* 2016 at alexander levy. A frontal view of a rectangular frame presenting an enlarged Photoshop selection field standing diagonally in the room results in a roughly pixelated image that shows the section of the window front located behind it. The horizontally and vertically oriented rasterization of the pixels awakens associations with the structure of the window frames, but is, however, distorted in terms of perspective, in an apparent contradiction with the squareness of the windows. The rasterization only appears undistorted when one looks through the frame. Individual pixels are mounted on the surfaces as cardboard squares, and are aligned to the central visual focus, which is reminiscent of the behavior of plants that turn towards the sun. As with the classical central perspective, the construction of the illusion refers to a fixed viewer standpoint. Of all works mentioned above, this installation has the largest point of contact with Sinta Werner's photo collages, to which I shall return.

### **The mathematization of space**

Sinta Werner crafts the potential inherent in the construction of digital images and spaces into the "old" analogue world, so to speak. Yet in comparison to the smooth, colorful world of so-called Post-Internet Art, for all their outward perfection her constructions made of wood and other materials possess a certain "old school" charm, as Andreas Koch stated in conversation with the artist. Yet this charm, as well as her analytical ingenuity and awareness of art history, should not be confused with nostalgia.

For Sinta Werner not least demonstrates the extent to which digitally constructed spaces still – or, one could say, once again – depend on classical single-point perspective and its mathematical model of space. The continuity and validity of which was, of course, radically cast into question by Modern art. The latter celebrated “the end of scientific perspective”, as art historian Fritz Novotny once stated in a book on Cézanne. When in 1924 Erwin Panofsky analyzed “perspective as a symbolic form”, an era that could be symbolized by a perspective came to an end, namely both in the arts and in terms of scientific understanding of space.

Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky read vanishing lines not as indicating spatial depth but as a surface pattern. In his view, this perspective had framed the world as a cube and transformed it in such a way that this cube now appeared on the plane as a pyramid.

Whenever classical Modernism addressed perspective, it did so in order to question it as a means of representation and turn it against its “normal” use. A prominent example of this can be found in De Chirico’s abstracted town square scenes. Devoid of inhabitants, they now seem to have anticipated digital 3D spaces with squares and triangles. In Paul Klee’s prospects of rooms, the perspectival framework takes on a life of its own, as objects dance on the vanishing lines like musical notes gone wild in a score.

Surrealism rehabilitated perspectival space as a stage, but only in order to toy with it. Alongside the cold, smooth and highly detailed naturalism that brings to mind current computer graphics, we find further means of representation in the works of Salvador Dalí that point towards a digital future. The soft clocks in his *Persistence of Memory* of 1931 or his *Raphaellesque Head Exploding* of 1951 seem to foresee the effect of digital morphing, whereby one object transforms into the other. The coordinates of space are warped.

Outside Surrealist circles, perspective was scorned in the 1950s. The Western art world was ruled by abstraction. Only Nazis and Communists went for representational depictions of objects, while “free” people made paintings that were decidedly flat and ignored illusion.

The major revival of Renaissance perspective only came with virtual reality. Peter Weibel, one of the most famous champions of Digital Art, sees the path towards computer culture as having begun with the artificial perspective employed by painters, as here “the mere representation of an object was superseded by the construction of an object, which could potentially exist only in a virtual sense, meaning in a purely mathematical realm (...) The virtual space of artificial perception began to perforate natural space.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter Weibel, *Inszenierte Kunstgeschichte*, exh. cat. MAK (Vienna, 1989), pp. 117.

The “perforation” of space or superimposition of real and imagined spheres, recurs in Sinta Werner’s installations time and again. The fact that this causes breaks and collisions only in the viewer’s perception is due to there being no fundamental difference between analogue spaces and digitally constructed ones. The mathematical model of space relevant for digital calculations is analytical geometry, which was developed by René Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and “bases the transformation of spatial relationships and those between planes on relations between numbers, which means it anticipates digitalization and the mathematization of space, best illustrated by the Cartesian system of coordinates, in which every event in space can be pin-pointed on the X, Y and Z axes. This system of coordinates forms the basis of our current computer graphics and animation.”<sup>5</sup>

Digitalization and mathematization of space being “anticipated” is not however a precise wording. The digitization of space is based on its mathematization, which took place through the one-point perspective, and on Descartes’ theory, which hinges on that angle of vision.

A historical outline of the post-Descartes visual process shows oversize eyeballs reminiscent of those screens placed directly in front of the eyes nowadays that in combination with data helmets and gloves make it possible to immerse oneself in the sphere of virtual reality. However unlike traditional perspectival space, the illusion of cyberspace is not created for a single eye, but binocularly. The coordination of hand movements is very important in this respect and is also featured in.

US digital graphic designer Ivan Sutherland is widely considered the inventor of virtual reality. Sutherland developed the program Sketchpad, which allows users to draw 2D graphics onto a computer screen directly using a light pen, as early as 1962. In 1966, Sutherland began working on simulating an interactive 3D environment that did not require a screen and changed according to the movements carried out by the user. He himself said that the basic idea is “to present the user with a perspective image which changes as he moves.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Florian Rötzer, Peter Weibel (eds.), *Cyberspace. Zum medialen Gesamtkunstwerk*, (Munich, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Sutherland, “A Head-Mounted Three-Dimensional Display,” in: *Proceedings of the Joint Computer Conference*, 1968, 33, p. 747.

## The distorted and folded grid

This is precisely what does not happen in Renaissance perspective, for the image does not move in unison with the viewer. Instead, it requires you to adopt a particular viewing point in front of the structure in order for the illusion of three-dimensionality to be achieved. The fixation in front of an art work was already put into question both during the Mannerist and Baroque eras, when various oblique perspectives were tested, which could lead to bizarre distortions. Yet the viewing position continued to be predetermined, even if it differed from a straight-forward frontal view. Those wanting to see the skull on the ground in Hans Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) distortion-free need to look at the piece from the side, an angle from which nevertheless everything else in the painting will appear anamorphically warped.

The two viewing positions lead to a doubling of the image reality of sorts. This artistic trope saw its greatest efflorescence historically in the illusory spaces and mirrors of Baroque art. The boundary between image and space and between two and three dimensionality is here constantly put into question. Space is no longer a uniform, rectilinear box, as it was in Alberti's perspectival construction, but appears distorted and folded in multiple ways. It was no coincidence that Gilles Deleuze described the "fold extending into infinity" as "the characteristic feature of the Baroque era"<sup>7</sup>.

Sinta Werner extensively employs the principle of the fold in her photocollages, which are centered on the architecture of an era that seems to be as contrary to Baroque as possible: Modernism, characterized as it is by functionalistic concerns. Analyzing the geometric rationalism of that era with artistic means is rather fashionable at the moment, with its design elements being taken apart and rearranged like pieces from a construction kit. But this is not the path Sinta Werner's reflection of Modernist architecture takes. Instead, she enlists doubling and semblance to bring back spirits to haunt these places, where rigorous, uniform grids seem to have obliterated all possibility for their emergence.

The starting point for these works is always a typically "Modernist" building with a structure based on the regular repetition of modules. In her *Überschreibung des Himmels (Overwriting the Sky)*, this is a high rise building in London surrounded by scaffolding and covered in a tarpaulin. The wind pushes the tarpaulin against the scaffolding in such a way that its structure becomes apparent on the fabric. Sinta Werner evenly folded the photo following these outlines, yet her

---

7

Gilles Deleuze, *Die Falte. Leibniz und der Barock*, (Frankfurt/ M., 2000), p. 11.

folded pattern is not confined to the building but extends to the edges of the photograph. She then photographed the folded picture, and made only four creases in the paper of the resulting photograph. All of the other folds can however still be seen in the second image.

What we see is then not a real building in a real environment, but an almost paradoxical enmeshment of physical reality and pictorial semblance. The subtle play with doubling and intermeshing of several layers and spaces is taken a step further in *Dekodierung der reflektierten Oberflächlichkeit (Decoding of the reflected Superficiality)*. Here, Sinta Werner folded the photograph of a London parking garage along the grid structure that dominates the building's outward appearance in such a way that the paper received an even structural articulation, akin to that of the concrete facade. Sinta Werner then photographed the photo treated thus and bearing the creases from being folded once more, then printed it and folded the second photograph again. The resulting work exhibits shadows that do not exist on the real facade, but really do exist on the paper. An irritating game of deception is created through the twofold folding process and the photographic image, which drags the representation of the physically and spatially existing structure into a paradoxical spiral.

But is such a “Baroque-ization” of rationalist Modernist grid architecture really as paradox as it might at first seem? After all, it's all a question of perspective – as always in Sinta Werner's work.