

## **The Great Bear (je meurs où je m`attache)**

Katja Strunz

### *The Clock is Forgotten*

Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson wrote in their essay “The Domain of the Great Bear” (1966), that, “The ‘Bear’ vanishes into glacial grids. Time does not pass during the actual moments of these intervals, but is crystallized into the faceted present of the mind. The time of our mind becomes a frozen actuality, while the clock is forgotten.”<sup>i</sup> The text was written in response to the artificial infinity of the Hayden Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History in New York, a point of departure for the authors’ consideration of how present considerations of history ‘derange time’.<sup>ii</sup> Smithson’s preoccupation with time is one that is shared by the Berlin-based artist, Katja Strunz, whose installations of transformed scrap metal, wood, old pages and photographs form a body of work ‘that concerns itself with the delicate resonances of history and time fading’.<sup>iii</sup>

The particular context of Strunz’s exhibition *The Great Bear (je meurs où je m`attache)*, at Mount Stuart, a 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural marvel set in older formal gardens, offered an unusual opportunity for the artist to engage with an eighteenth century garden setting, in which she presents sculpture as ‘something that can be permeated with change and different conditions.’<sup>iv</sup> Strunz’s sculptures connect the contemporary exhibition space at Mount Stuart with the ‘policies’ (pleasure grounds around a mansion) that were initiated by James, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bute in 1716, and significantly developed by John, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Bute, who was a keen amateur botanist and one of the key influences on the formation of Kew Gardens.<sup>v</sup>

Gardens have been a recurring leitmotif in Strunz’s practice for many years, in particular the abandoned gardens that she represented in her 2001 series of photographs of a collapsed greenhouse in Portugal, or in her 2006 exhibition at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York, entitled *Whose Garden Was This*. Her work is closely engaged with the idea of suspended animation, or, as the legend on her recent screenprint on honeycomb panel expressed it, *Aktive stagnation* (2008). The sculpture *Time of the Season* (2003), a kind of clock without hands, made of three oscillating wheels endlessly turning, also expresses her interest in the way in which art may create a kind of pause. In these works, and in the installation for Mount Stuart, Strunz addresses questions of man’s relationship to nature in a way that resonates with the writings of Walter Benjamin, T.S. Eliot and Robert Smithson. Smithson believed that, ‘Actually poets in a sense, formulated the entire landscape view back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It wasn’t architects and gardeners who invented the landscape, it was poets and essayists.’<sup>vi</sup> By way of evidence he cites T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1919) (‘basically about the landscape’) and *Burnt Norton*, the first section of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1927), which he describes as ‘a lament for a neglected formal garden.’<sup>vii</sup> *The Great Bear (je meurs où je m`attache)* maps a chart of correspondences between nature and language, forming a physical

demonstration of the ideas expressed by Eliot in the opening lines of *Burnt Norton*:  
'Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.'

Strunz's exhibition at Mount Stuart is a constellation of several metal objects, two paper works and a photographic work collectively titled *The Great Bear (je meurs où je m'attache)*. For this reconfiguration and development of an exhibition entitled *Faltgestalt*, held at Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Haus Esters (2006), Strunz explains that,

The objects will be placed both inside the exhibition space and outside. I constructed them in a way [so that] they resemble plants, mushrooms or umbrellas, that's why I call them Parasols. The positioning of the objects follows the pattern of the stars called the Great Bear. They do not represent a copy of the Great Bear with exact measurements but reflect more the idea of mirroring the Great Bear into our space, what may be called a mimetical process.<sup>viii</sup>

The exhibition refers to Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933), in which he described language as being an archive of a primordial and authentic mode of mimesis known to ancient man.<sup>ix</sup> Benjamin wrote that 'the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples' (such as dancing and astrology) now only exist for modern man in the form of a residue or sediment in language.<sup>x</sup> He continued, 'We must assume in principle that in the remote past the processes considered imitable included those in the sky. In dance, on other cultic occasions, such imitation could be produced, such similarity manipulated.'<sup>xi</sup>

The mimetical process employed in *The Great Bear (je meurs où je m'attache)* are also in dialogue with Mount Stuart's many astronomical and astrological decorative references, the most striking example being the huge vaulted astronomical ceiling in the Marble Hall, designed by Horatio Walter Lonsdale (1844 – 1919), replete with 'the stars in their courses' and spectral figures each representative of 'the constellations of the Ecliptic.' including the Great Bear.<sup>xii</sup> Strunz's response to the astrological ceiling seems almost fated, given the frequency with which the word 'constellations' appears in writing about her work. The curator Heather Pesanti has written that 'her objects paradoxically communicate both posit an intuitive and abstract language whereby the various forms [...] create constellations whose parts are in direct communication with one another.'<sup>xiii</sup>

The constellation has a metaphorical significance in that it provides a means of locating ourselves within a wider reference frame of space and time. As Eliot puts it in *Burnt Norton*, earth-bound behaviour can be 'reconciled amongst the stars.' In observing a star, we are 'fingering the flux of the world to identify something' as the cartographic theorist John Pickles states. He writes that the pointing finger 'is literally indexical [...] it delimits from the field a point, a place, an object for our attention. It stabilizes a particular meaning from a world of possible meanings.'<sup>xiv</sup> The act of observing stars is also a process of rediscovering man's mimetic relation to the world, of experiencing the

moment of rupture described by Benjamin, when the experience of natural sensuous correspondences passed over into the experience of non-sensuous similarities - and the beginnings of language.

The moment of contemplating a distant constellation is also an experience of wider frame of chronology: while Ursula Major resembles a saucepan in our lifetime, in forty to fifty thousand years, the shape of the constellation will be more akin to a horse. As Smithson and Bochner's planetarium experience attests, in the act of stargazing, 'The time of our mind becomes a frozen actuality, while the clock is forgotten.'<sup>xv</sup> Katja Strunz describes 'the attempt to reach actuality...to make time present' as one of the governing principles of her practice.<sup>xvi</sup> One of her signature works is a prism-like wall sculpture with multiple vanishing points, which were inspired by pieces of paper the artist folded and refolded during lectures as a student of philosophy. Although these sculptures, which are made with heavy materials such as wood and metal, are often described as possessing the delicacy of a paper aeroplane or a moth, for Strunz the final form in which the work is displayed only represents one point in a process. Folded works such as *A drop in time* (2008), are intended to express 'the infinite ways of folding' rather than generate recognizable forms.<sup>xvii</sup> The work is intended to function as a 'hinge' between spectator and form, the dialogue occurring in the relationship between the spectator and their apprehension of the possibilities inherent in the object. The title *A drop in time* further describes the way in which her work engenders a kind of holding space, disengaged from conventional time and space.

The sense of dislocation involved in looking at old photographs is also an important aspect of Strunz's work. For Robert Smithson, photography 'somehow mitigates the whole concept of nature in that the earth after photography is more of a museum'<sup>xviii</sup>, but for Strunz photography offers a possibility of reconnecting with an event that happened in the past but is still somehow still occurring. The part of the exhibition title that appears in parenthesis, '*je meurs où je m'attache*' is derived from a found photograph, which was taken in Nantes, France in March 1929 and shows a group of ten people (two children, an adolescent girl and seven adults), standing in a tree lined public square, dressed in camouflage suits made out of imitation ivy leaves. Strunz is intrigued by the way in which, 'This group of people looks through the camera of the photographer into our time.'<sup>xix</sup> The two children at the front of the group hold up a framed sign, which bears the hand-painted legend, '*je meurs où je m'attache* ('I will die where I am closely connected'). The suits, which the people in the photograph are wearing, are called ghillie suits, a type of camouflage clothing designed to resemble heavy foliage, which was developed by Scots gamekeepers as a portable hunting blind. These costumes, like the parasol form of the other sculptures in the exhibition, are suggestive of a suspension of activity – and of temporary shelter from visibility. The etymology of the word camouflage (from the French word *camoufler* meaning 'to blind or veil') holds obvious significance for an artist who has described her work in terms of aftermath, connoting 'a gradual blindness to the artist's vision, but also the discovery of increasingly new associations and meanings.'<sup>xx</sup> The tree-like clothes also connect to the

transformative space of the Shakespearian forest, a place where fixed notions of gender and of time undergo numerous playful revisions. When Orlando meets a disguised Rosalind in Arden forest in the third act of As You Like It (1599), he tells her, 'There's no clock in the forest.'

The 'mimicry of the camouflage suits, the mimetical moment of reflecting the Great Bear', and the botanical themes present in the sculptures in the exhibition, emphasise man's vital connection to nature.<sup>xxi</sup> Strunz's Mount Stuart exhibition points to the natural world as a conduit to heightened sensual experience, where time present and time past can be experienced simultaneously. Michael Taussig writes that the moment of sensing the similarities between oneself and a natural form 'opens up a tactile experience of the world in which the Cartesian categories of subject and object are not firm, but rather malleable [...] Observing subjects thus assimilate themselves to the objective world rather than anthropomorphizing it in their own image.'<sup>xxii</sup> This act of recognising ourselves within the scheme of the natural world is also a renewal of repressed connections to the magical correspondences of plants and constellations.

These correspondences are apparent in the two constellations of steel cube forms mounted on the gallery wall entitled *Behind the rose* (2007). The two arrangements of six and seven cubes descend downwards, as if reflecting the cycle of life and the 'fall' that comes with the change in seasons. The reference to the rose is also significant, as it is a flower 'which flowers in early morning' and fades 'in the evening of our age'.<sup>xxiii</sup> In Eliot's *Four Quartets*, roses are a symbol of life, as contrasted with the yew tree, as a recurrent symbol of death. In *Burnt Norton*, he states 'only in time can the moment in the rose-garden, / The moment in the arbour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at smokefall / Be remembered; involved with past and future. / Only through time time is conquered.' At another point in the poem he uses the analogy of the rose-garden as representing a Frostian 'road not taken'. He describes how, 'Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden.' The title of Strunz's sculpture, *Behind the rose* conveys a sense of decay waiting to engulf the flowers: a sense of death or at least the sleep of winter. Robert Smithson once wrote that, 'on the edge of memory, art finds a temporary foothold.'<sup>xxiv</sup> Strunz's work is both a kind of collaboration with entropy, and at the same time, an expression of the possibilities that may exist within a single footstep.

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- <sup>i</sup> Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson, "The Domain of the Great Bear", Art Voices, Fall 1966, reprinted in Jack Flam, Robert Smithson: The Collected writings, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp.26-33.
- <sup>ii</sup> Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson, "The Domain of the Great Bear", ibid., pp.26-33.
- <sup>iii</sup> Kirsty Bell, "Katja Strunz", frieze, Issue 121, March 2009.
- <sup>iv</sup> Moira Roth, "An Interview with Robert Smithson" (1973), reprinted in Robert Smithson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), p.82.
- <sup>v</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl was a close friend and adviser to Augusta, dowager Princess of Wales, who founded Kew Gardens in 1759. Andrew McLean, ed., Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, (Bute: The Mount Stuart Trust, 2001), p.41.
- <sup>vi</sup> Moira Roth, "An Interview with Robert Smithson" (1973), op. cit., p.89.
- <sup>vii</sup> Moira Roth, "An Interview with Robert Smithson" (1973), op. cit., p.89.
- <sup>viii</sup> "modern art is the garden , where suspicion can still be in flower", Barbara Kuon in conversation with Katja Strunz.
- <sup>ix</sup> '...language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour and the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.' Walter Benjamin, Reflections. (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.336.
- <sup>x</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933), ibid., p.333.
- <sup>xi</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933), op. cit., p.334.
- <sup>xii</sup> Andrew McLean, ed., Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, op. cit., p.21.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Heather Pesanti, "Katja Strunz", Life on Mars, 55<sup>th</sup> Carnegie International, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2008), p.307.
- <sup>xiv</sup> John Pickles, A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-coded World (London: Routledge, 2003), p.3.
- <sup>xv</sup> Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson, op. cit., pp.26-33.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Katja Strunz, in conversation with the author, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Katja Strunz, in conversation with the author, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009.
- <sup>xviii</sup> William C. Lipke, ed., "Fragments of a Conversation", reprinted in Jack Flam, Robert Smithson: The Collected writings, op. cit., p.188.
- <sup>xix</sup> "modern art is the garden , where suspicion can still be in flower", Barbara Kuon in conversation with Katja Strunz.
- <sup>xx</sup> Heather Pesanti, "Katja Strunz", Life on Mars, 55<sup>th</sup> Carnegie International, op. cit., p.307.
- <sup>xxi</sup> "modern art is the garden , where suspicion can still be in flower", Barbara Kuon in conversation with Katja Strunz.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, (New York: Routledge, 1993),.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Alan of Lille, quoted in Umberto Eco, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), p.59.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Robert Smithson, draft of "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", Smithson Papers, AAA, roll 3834, frame 589, quoted in Ann Reynolds, Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003), p.295.