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THE TERMITE AND THE WHITE ELEPHANT

François Piron

One of the main issues within the art world today is specifically related to the persistence of the very term 'art world.' Unequivocal, globalising and homogenising by nature, the term denies the heterogeneous, social chains of production, distribution, promotion, and creation of value surrounding artworks. Within this 'art world' designation, everyone supposedly cohabits, sharing the same conditions and horizons, arbitrarily united by definition of being 'contemporary'. Within this unitary bubble, economic, geographic, sexual or racial contingencies no longer seem to exist. The 'contemporary art world' floats like a tautological fact: the art of today is contemporary art, and contemporary art is the art of today. And although its origins are in art history, it persists hyperbolically within an infinite temporality. This 'contemporary art world' is, by definition, a world: that is, the world; implying there is no other world. And yet, this statement is far from the reality that is lived and experienced by the vast majority of protagonists within the art production chain, those who are at all times aware of those forms of power that grant or deny the right to speak, to prescribe taste, to create centres and margins. Whether claimed or declared, this 'contemporary art world' would appear to serve only those who are willing to establish an aesthetics immune to critique or question. Just as we speak of financial movements in terms of natural phenomena or emotional jerks, this is an ineluctable world, one that leads us to believe in its imponderable nature, and in our inability to envision its control.

Of course, the reality is quite different, and the art 'world' actually includes huge geographic, political, social and economic disparities that are perpetually reproduced and increased, mirroring social structures within society. But if so many differences and contradictory logics are subsumed under the same rubrics, it is because the idea of a single world is still at play, the notion that we participate in the same world and society. This is the main reason the whole art world suffers when it is forced to undergo the critiques that are often only directed at a tiny part of what constitutes it (despite the fact that it is often the 1% possessing 99% that crushes the great diversity of the 99% sharing the remaining 1%). These very critiques are often rendered obsolete by their failure to draw a subtle distinction between the various layers of this so-called art world (a failure, let us be clear, that is caused in large part by a lack of knowledge on the subject) and which, finally, also prevents any kind of self-critical statement by this art world, in the overall failure to dissociate a part from the whole.

Yet, it does not occur to anyone today to evoke in a similar way, for instance, the 'cinema world', and to put in the same category, or to assess by the same standards, a series produced by Amazon with say, experimental cinema. Cinema has historically produced problematic binaries, such as the distinction between fiction and documentary, confining each category to an entertainment or information mission, as if fiction was unable to inform and document reality, and 'cinema of the real' was obliged to stick to the facts. Nevertheless, cinema has managed to establish a clear terminology that draws a distinction between disparate economies as well as the politics of their authors. And it does this without necessarily implying a hierarchy, without endowing the experimental vocation of cinema with a particular virtue, nor underestimating the intelligence of more industrial film productions.

American artist Manny Farber is one of few critics to have connected art analysis to that of cinema, and to have offered a very interesting – if very subjective – partitioning of the 'art world' into two categories, which he names 'white elephant art' on one hand, and 'termite art' on the other. With a biting sense of humour and an ironic insincerity, he develops his ideas around this dichotomy using examples that lend his argument exceptional efficiency. Farber explores his idea in an article that dates from 1962, and so some adjustment is needed to adapt the examples he uses. And yet, by and large, the contemporaneity of Farber's words remains striking: 'white elephant art' is that which is 'involved in constructing a masterpiece,' and is, subsequently, 'as expensive as it is pointless.'[1]

[1] These quotes, here translated to English by Callisto McNulty, originate from a French translation of Manny Farber's text *White Elephant Art and Termite Art* (1962), translated freely by Brice Matthieussent. Thus, they do not appear in Farber's text.

One would have no trouble pinpointing a myriad of examples such as this that populate institutions, private foundations and all the art places where art aims to assert value as an identifying icon. 'White elephant' art is catalytic, synthetic, centripetal, self-sufficient art, Farber writes, whose flaw is to try and 'frame the action with an all-over pattern.' Identifiable, readable, readily provoking and preferably monumental, it has no problem with displaying conspicuous signs of intelligence or legitimising referentiality, while relying on a photogenic appearance, as well as a stylistic signature that aids memorisation. 'White elephant' art operates by radically distinguishing itself from its immediate environment and by a pedagogy that is based on a patronising attitude towards the public, which must always be 'brought closer' to 'great art' – and the intangible assumption that this must be an educated public in order for it to give its approval to aesthetic conventions.

In contrast, 'termite art' (variously called tapeworm-art, fungus-art, moss-art, centipede-art by Farber) is defined by 'a peculiar fact': 'it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.'[2] Just like termites, this art finds its way through its specific constraints – suggesting that the artist has no other goal than to breach its immediate borders, and turning them into the very conditions of his next work.

Elsewhere, Farber describes 'termite art' as 'an ambulatory creation which is an act both of observing and being in the world, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both the material of his art and the outside world through a horizontal coverage.'

The provocative dichotomy proposed by Farber draws distinction between two artwork polarities. While the white elephant is based on construction, monumentality, and centrality, termite art functions through digging, as well as discreet and peripheral references. While the white elephant asserts, the termite suggests. The former is an act of immediacy, the latter of slowing down. Termite art is an art of detail, of the anecdotal, where the sense of presence replaces that of certainty or conviction; an art of 'dissemination', in the Derridean sense of the word, one that is resistant to the immediate effects of meaning, content, and themes to which artworks tend to be reduced.

About a decade ago, the artist Ian Kiaer coincidentally wrote an essay with termites at its heart. The text, entitled *Magic Architecture* and part of his doctoral

[2] Manny Farber, *White Elephant Art and Termite Art* (1962), www.surfacenoise.info/neu/1230S18SEC1/readings/MannyFarbertermite.pdf

dissertation, is based on the notebooks of architect Friedrich Kiesler, who is regularly invoked in several artworks by Kiaer, including *Endless House Project,* 2004–06 and, more recently, *Tooth House,* 2014. *Magic Architecture* is the title of a manuscript by Kiesler that is dedicated to 'the story of human housing' and repeatedly presents montages of images, juxtaposing human architectural constructions with organic forms or animal constructions. There is, among these collages, a strikingly efficient visual connection established between a photograph of the Colosseum ruins and a cross-sectional drawing of a termite mound, showing the arches created by the insects. Of course, paradox lies in this visual assonance, and Kiesler emphasises the contradictory logic of these two constructions: one resulting from empirical/imperial construction, the other from digging or nibbling away at matter, with its arches the trace or negative of this action.

Applying this example to one of his favourite paintings, *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel, Kiaer points out that in its representation, it is a building that seems to be both in construction and already in a state of ruin by anticipation. For Kiaer, the architecture seems to be less the result of building with materials than with digging – 'something animal' having left behind the marks of nibbling and crawling.[3]

The spiral shape of the tower of Babel was dear to Kiesler, who used its pattern for his *The Endless House* project, creating a unique continuum with the floor, the walls and the ceiling,[4] and thereby breaking with the verticality and the orthogonality of modernists. According to Kiaer, while the spiral denotes the infinite, it also suggests 'infinity without progress.'[5] He thus brings this idea of disruption together with the fundamentally modernist notion of teleology. During his career as a writer, Walter Benjamin strived in a similar way towards a book project, entirely written from quotations ('the Parisian passages' or *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century).* In relation to this unfinished project, Hannah Arendt wrote in her biographical essay on Benjamin that '[t]he main work consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were.'[6]

[3] 'There is something animal about Bruegel's tower which though still in the process of completion, already has the demeanour of a carcass laid bare.'

[4] 'The wall is curved and tried to relate to the floor, ceiling, and the wall in a different way,' in *Friedrich Kiesler: Endless House 1947-1961,* (Berlin: MMK and Hatje Cantz, 2003), p.85.

[5] Ian Kiaer, *Endless House: Models of Thought for Dwelling*, doctoral thesis, (London: Royal College of Art, 2008), p.67–68.

[6] Hannah Arendt, in Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn and Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p.47.

The refusal of teleology, of construction, are thus by no means the rejection of the project as a process or a movement, but, as pointed out by Hannah Arendt, this fragmentary activity is about 'prov[ing] [the] *raison d'être*' of this process without providing a solution. This is the meaning of historical materialism according to Benjamin, who explains: 'The first stage in this undertaking [of historical materialism] will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.'[7]

Kiaer compares this definition of the role of quotations in Benjamin's project with the activity of termites, which appear to be similarly involved in a cycle of tearing and re-arranging fragments. Benjamin describes these fragments as 'the rags, the refuse,' which he 'will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.'[8]

This sentence resonates with what Ian Kiaer creates in his studio. Describing Kiaer's exhibitions proves particularly difficult: the vocabulary that comes to mind is evasive, consisting of 'almost', of 'a little bit', and of other halftones or approximations, which could – accurately but vaguely – evoke subtle suggestions of wearing out, of paleness, of movement, of swelling or deflation. The materials he uses and arranges in space at first seem messy or even nonchalant, like someone sorting through items left in personal storage, sifting through the contents, stopping half way through in a pensive state, as they rediscover items that spark memories or ignite new associations. Recalling an exhibition by Ian Kiaer amounts to drawing an inventory that resembles a flea market stall or the debris recovered from a wasteland: plastic sheeting spotted with paint marks; a polystyrene plate, a rubber ball; a pillow; a chair seat; dismembered cardboard boxes; pieces of plexiglass laid against a wall. These non-precious or even crippled materials, which appear to be left to decompose, are the kind that should make art enthusiasts, constrained by etiquette and accustomed to the well-behaved artwork, shrug their shoulders. As they are presented on the floor, laid against or taped to a wall, they seem to whisper like the writer Robert Walser: 'I wish to go unnoticed. Should one nevertheless want to notice me, I for my part won't notice the noticers.'[9]

[7] Walter Benjamin, in Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p.461.

[8] *Ibid.*, p.460.

[9] Robert Walser, *Girlfriends, Ghosts, and Other Stories*, translated by Tom Whalen, (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), p.169.

In fact, it is paradoxically because of their disability, their weakness and their precarious nature that each of them deserves special attention – objects which would otherwise remain in anonymity and indistinction. Most of these work materials originate from the street, they have been retrieved by the artist for a texture, colour or cutout property, or for a scratch, a groove, a crease, or any other tenuous mark that attests to its use and/or its wear. This election and preservation are carried out according to both aesthetic and social criteria: the industrial materials evoke the world of labour and its acceleration, as well as the world of objects and their obsolescence. In the studio, these scraps undergo sedimentation until they find a use again through material assonance, a colour coincidence, an affinity that is tactile, visual or, more broadly, poetic – in other words, a rhyme is revealed by Ian Kiaer, through touches or touching up, through arranging and placing within the space, evoking the characters whose portraits he strives to realise.

This has indeed been both the meaning and the paradox of Kiaer's work since the late 1990s. It is the work of a sculptor and a painter that is almost free from sculpting or painting. More specifically, it is work that could be described as that of a portraitist who never represents. In his work, Ian Kiaer tells stories and evokes figures, those of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Konstantin Melnikov, Curzio Malaparte, Friedrich Kiesler, Bruno Taut or Paul Scheerbart. He makes no secret of these historical study subjects to which he is durably attached.

However, rather than constructing a narrative to invoke them, he lays out, places, and disperses a network of arranged objects, objects which do not refer to the accepted knowledge of their subjects in the manner of a rebus, but instead propose a constellation of allusions or hypotheses.

In the foreword to his famous poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* / A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance (1897), Stéphane Mallarmé describes his poetic method: 'Everything takes place, in sections, by supposition; narrative is avoided.'[10] 'Reading the poem,' Jacques Rancière suggests, 'reconstitutes not history, but the virtuality of history, or the choice between the hypotheses it proposes to us.'[11]

[10] Stéphane Mallarmé, preface to *A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance,* translated by A. S. Kline. Available at www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/MallarmeUnCoupdeDes.php

[11] Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, translated by Steven Corcoran, (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), p.2.

Similarly, in each of his exhibitions, Ian Kiaer proposes a constellation of fragmentary elements that are both allusive and subjective. In the sense of an elementary story as well as of a materialist history (in the Marxist sense of the word), Kiaer has a material concept of history and portraiture. Dedicating oneself to a figure consists in producing a portrait of embodied ideas rather than building a monument. This does not involve the reconstitution of a story, but rather a reconstruction, in the manner of termites: by nibbling away at materials and accumulated fragments.

Which stories does Ian Kiaer refer to? His portraits are those of architects, but less in the sense of professional builders than of thinkers and poets who have realised constructions on paper, and sometimes only for their own use and needs. Indeed, Kiaer is interested in the virtuality, the potentiality of architectures, which reveals the twist and turns of history, its impasses or dead branches: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and the French Revolution; Konstantin Melnikov and the Russian Revolution; Curzio Malaparte and fascist Italy; Paul Scheerbart and Germany during WWI.

Kiaer chooses architectures that turn their backs to the world. The studio-tower built by Melnikov is an ivory tower and prison in which the architect is forced to withdraw, just as Malaparte's house, overlooking the sea and almost invisible from shore, constitutes a place of refuge, an observation post chosen by the writer for his internal exile in fascist Italy.

The 'alpine architectures' of Bruno Taut and his 'Glass Chain' peers combine a modernist utopia with the Baroque style of an extraterrestrial Neuschwanstein, and seem to express the impossibility of living on earth following WWI, especially in ravaged Germany. Bruno Taut thus continues the work of his mentor, the writer Paul Scheerbart, whose single architecture thesis developed a kind of concrete utopia that the war immediately erased from history.

The example is worth further exploration. Paul Scheerbart is a German writer of the last third of the 19th century, whose remarkable work shifts between the technical fictions of Jules Verne and the symbolist deadpan hoaxes of Alfred Jarry. At the turn of the century, his writings, novels and short stories, became more political, pretending to praise militarism or being ironic about the figure of the architect as the archetypical patriarchal genius. Around 1910, he published twin books, *The Gray Cloth* and *Glass Architecture*. In the novel *The Gray Cloth,* an architect, who only designs glass buildings on the peaks of mountains, travels the world by airplane to look at his constructions from the sky, and to militate in order to prevent humanity (and more specifically women) from competing with his architectures with the colours of their clothes.

Instead, he tries to convince women to wear a grey uniform (with 10% white) in order to achieve what appears to him as a total artwork. Published concurrently, *Glass Architecture* is a thesis that could well have been written by the fictional protagonist of *The Gray Cloth.* In a hundred paragraphs, which are by turns peremptory, enthusiastic, lyrical, evasive or excessively detailed, Scheerbart describes the way in which his glass architecture revolution will change the world and humanity. The book is fascinating for its ambiguity, its paradoxes, its perceptible and yet indiscernible irony. Scheerbart's propositions are rooted in social and hygienist thinking, demonstrating that he is familiar with the unsanitary conditions of contemporary workers' housing, and the links between industrial development and the miasmas spreading diseases. However, he does not turn away from the most recent technological innovations, such as the ability to build glass surface buildings from steel structures. Anticipating the development of functionalist glass architecture more than twenty years before its emergence, Scheerbart nonetheless proposes a very different aesthetic and ethic: coloured glass domes and rotundas similar to multicoloured temples, located in parks and gardens, where nature is reflected in the shimmering of the glass panes and the lighting. While Scheerbart is concerned about many surprising details, including the circulation of purified air and natural light, or the positioning of pieces of furniture and objects within his architectures, he does not mention the way they would be inhabited, and no human presence contaminates the crystalline perfection of his pavilions.

He only imagines them viewed from the sky – like gems irradiated with light on the surface of the earth – as if they were intended for an extraterrestrial gaze. He conceives the utopia of an architecture destined for another world, peaceful and devoid of the poverty and vermin in which he suffered.

Scheerbart indeed never saw the only pavilion built according to his principles. It was presented at the architecture exhibition at the Werkbund of Cologne in 1914 as the war broke out and when the writer, in despair, poverty, starvation and suffering from gangrene, died.

It is with the most tenuous links that Ian Kiaer evokes the world of Scheerbart: the ochre reflection of a stain of rust on a plastic sheet that is placed next to a small copper cube; the flakes of silver paint on a translucent plastic dome inflated with air; the miniature reconstruction of the Werkbund pavilion made of gold plexiglas bevelled tiles; a stained pillow laid on a polyurethane rectangle evoking the bed of Scheerbart where he was confined in his illness.

In Kiaer's exhibitions, there is never anything central or centred to catalyse the gaze, but instead there is always an arrangement, a combination of forms, drawing a kind of arabesque line for the eye between the wall and the floor, suggestively constructing hypotheses that are more emotional than intelligible. And again arises an analogy with what the philosopher Jacques Rancière finds in Mallarmé: 'against an immediate understanding of the lines spread out before the gaze, Mallarmé in fact placed a singular rampart: not the great wall of hermetic words, but, on the contrary, the supple line of the phrase which slips from grasp. [...] The arabesque works to dispel the illusion that the poem is about describing – to enable the recognition of – a person or a story, an object or a feeling.'[12] This definition sheds light on the way in which Ian Kiaer proceeds to reveal without representing, to evoke without describing, and to compose through arabesque arrangements an 'ambulatory' syntax which, as in Manny Farber's termite-art proposition, enables 'an act both of observing and being in the world.'

If a common thread can be found between the work of Mallarmé and that of Ian Kiaer, it is through a reflection around what Mallarmé calls 'restricted action', resulting from the 'crisis of verse' that he experienced in his time and which, in many respects, is comparable to the 'white elephant art' crisis that we are currently facing. The crises are due to the recurrent and predominant desire for immediacy, readability and communicated meaning, which attacks termite art, and declares it hermetic and elitist, due to its silent refusal of spectacle. Mallarmé, who was well aware of a similar crisis in literature at the end of the 19th century (and which he described as 'universal reportage'), responded to it with the notion of 'restricted action'. This does not mean the reduction of ideals in the creative act, but first the awareness of its scattered and *disseminated* nature, and second, that this ideal is not to be found in generalities and grandiloquence, but rather in minute details. The restriction of action is, in this sense, less its reduction than its concentration, as underlined by Jean-François Chevrier in the introduction to his exhibition *Restricted Action Modern Art According to Mallarmé*, when he writes: 'Restricted action first refers to the poet's necessity to concentrate his activity on the scene of writing.'[13]

For a long time, Ian Kiaer used to add the word 'project' as a suffix to the titles of his pieces, but he more recently swapped this for 'endnote'. 'Project', he argued, enabled him to elude certain categories, like those that would inscribe

[12] Jacques Rancière, *ibid.,* p.2.

[13] My own translation of the quotation by Jean-François Chevrier (text has not been translated into English).

his work within painting or sculpture. Simultaneously, it also kept the work in movement, in a state of incompletion, similar to architectural models, in a model-space that is precise and yet unfinished and 'evasive.'[14]

Kiaer's decision to now focus on an 'endnote' – alluding to both a footnote and the last note in a musical arrangement – echoes the termite, the Mallarmean and Benjaminian activities of having 'nothing to say' outside of the act of arranging fragments, reterritorialising writing in the margins in order to concentrate one's poetic intensity, and challenge any illusion of transparency.

[14] 'Tainting and Evasion: A discussion with Ian Kiaer,' in *Ian Kiaer, Tooth House*, (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2014), p.14–15.