

NOIT—2

Burning

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**Sculpture as performance?
Pyrotechnics in contemporary artⁱ**

Stability, immobility and durability – for centuries these were the primary values for classical sculpture and historical monuments in public spaces. Stone, bronze, and later steel, can face the inevitable weathering of the storms of time. During the twentieth century, with the growing use of ephemeral, translucent and liquid materials, as well those less tactile, such as sound, pyrotechnics and organic elements, sculpture freed itself from the topos of the fixed *statua* and, with this, also from the traditional practice of *durata*. Fire, smoke, dust, water, sound, skin-like foils and moving bodies contribute to an extended spectrum of sculptural practices.

On Potsdamer Straße, Berlin, an unusual artistic intervention took place on the first Sunday of September 2013. The busy street was completely blocked for a short time in the morning by an artwork by Andreas Greiner/Fabian Knecht titled *Entladung*, a German word that translates as discharge, or unloading. The artists exploded two windows of the Arndt Gallery, located on the adjoining street, by detonation. A yellowish cloud of fire and smoke escaped through the nosily cracked glass panels – rather like a monster or a strange creature – to cleave its way inexorably to the outside, until it slowly disappeared within the public space. Attending this sculptural situation were invited guests, as well as a few accidental passers-by, uninformed about the happening, plus cars and cyclists held back by traffic barriers. Shortly after the explosion, during the slow evaporation of the smoke cloud, with the strong smell of black gunpowder still hanging in the air, a team of assistants marched up to the building and began removing the slivers of glass and wood that had been blown all over the ground. Within a few minutes, all traces of the action had vanished, and the hum of traffic resumed. Only the two

open windows, with their now empty frames, and a fireman in uniform, hinted at the recent past.

Greiner/Knecht began their series 'Entladungen' in the Tempelhofer Feld of the former airport in Berlin on 1 June 2012. Here, they created an imposing cloud of fire to manipulate the familiar urban scenery for a brief instant, rearranging it with an agitating image. More actions followed, including events on a rooftop on Friedrichsstrasse on 19 February 2013, at Copenhagen harbour next to a busy music festival and, in distinction to the former urban locations, in the group exhibition *Public Abstraction Private Construction* at Kunstverein Arnsberg (20 July 2013). The explosion at Arndt Gallery was the final iteration of the series.

Critically considering *Entladung* provides a means to bring a reflection on plastic thinking, as well as ephemeral and performative criteria. What consequences are there if one confronts this atypical, seemingly theatrical work with the media-specific parameters of classical sculpture? Each *Entladung* was momentarily formed and suddenly disappeared – a process that implies a scenic moment that captures the viewer on a corporeal level. Unlike classical sculpture, this artwork is transitory and only develops in time before the eyes of the 'audience', raising the question: should it be considered as sculpture, action, or even performance?

With the prefix 'Ent-' of the title, the artists refer to a process of negation – the inversion or dissolution of tension and a-priori loaded concentration of inflammable matter. In these works, the charged climax of the event and its completion happen simultaneously. During any electrostatic discharge, a potential electronic difference creates a spark that initiates disruptive discharge, leading to a short, high electric impulse. Lightning is most the familiar form of this. When the electric uniformity field strength between two differently charged bodies is exceeded, a discharge results between bodies. One can see this in Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977).

In the context of the representative nature of memorial sculpture in public space, Greiner/Knecht's work functions as

an ephemeral and immaterial counter model, one that is only temporarily visible. Despite the controlled form of their explosions, the events are shaped by a sudden appearance of a blazing source of smoke within an urban context. They evoke an atmosphere of danger and riot – informed by photographs that are well known through press reports of political conflict, and also of Germany's recent past. These 'time sculptures' – as the artists themselves define themⁱⁱ – are enabled by a moment of destruction: they are alive, albeit brief and elusive.

Since the 1970s Roman Signer, one of the fathers of pyrotechnic sculpture and an important reference for Greiner/Knecht, introduced his explosive pieces to the traditional understanding of sculpture. His ephemeral installations form motifs of dynamic movement and chance, although a high level of technical precision is essential. In *Aktion mit der Zündschnur*

Andreas Greiner and Fabian Knecht
Entladung 01.09.2013

Intervention into public space (time sculpture); view from rooftop across the street, Arndt Galerie Potsdamer Straße Berlin, 2013





Andreas Greiner and Fabian Knecht
Entladung 01.09.2013

Intervention into public space (time sculpture); view from scaffolding across the street, Arndt Galerie Potsdamer Straße Berlin, 2013

(Action with a Fuse) (1989),ⁱⁱⁱ for example, a 20-kilometre fuse connecting his native town of Appenzell with St. Gallen was set on a table and ignited. Signer creates his concept of time-based sculpture through explosion as 'an example of condensed time'^{iv} where, as with Greiner/Knecht, the familiar world begins to totter for a brief instant. Through an unexpected shift, the artwork offers a new perspective on the world.

The material both speaks about itself and becomes an event. In *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen (Plasticity. An Art History of Change)* (2012)^v Dietmar Rübel explores the growing shift from traditional sculpture to new tendencies of plasticity occurring in the mid-twentieth century that favoured non-art associated materials, process-related substances, raw materials and waste. These elude economic

utilisation, which Rübel considers a rebellious stance against fixed, antiquated socio-political conditions. He refers to Robert Morris' text *Anti-Form* (1968),^{vi} where the artist proclaims that the material of the artwork is not necessarily completely absorbed in representation, but becomes an actor (at times hard-headed and fearsome), freeing itself from the clearly defined, technically perfect objects of Minimalism. Besides mutability, chance and dynamics, the polysensual involvement of the viewer and the temporal marking of space are the leading categories in this re-orientation of media-specific parameters.

Contrary to many other works, the surface textures of pyrotechnic sculptures are not tactile. In 1967 Morris realised *Steam* outside the campus of the Western Washington University in Bellingham, a work where clouds of vapour could be seen escaping out of the ground. Morris described this piece as an anti-monument, as 'the epitome of the ephemeral'; a refusal of 'form' that does not, however, collapse into the sublime.^{vii} The reaction of the material used determines each form, respective of this seemingly formless appearance.

To return to Potsdamer Straße: everybody who was waiting, full of tension and curiosity in front of the building, was literally absorbed and enfolded by the explosive sculpture *Entladung*. The loud detonation occupied the viewer's body, and the vibrating compression waves, the smell of burned gunpowder and the smoke floating out of the windows generated a strong physical reaction, creating, in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty a 'corporeal seeing'.^{viii} On the lead-up to the explosion, the atmosphere around Potsdamer Straße was calm, due to the blocked traffic and to the timing of a Sunday morning. After the climax of the staging, the silence suddenly ceased, as the accompanying team sonorously swept up the slivers that had fallen to the street, allowing the traffic to flow again. Even if some participants had experienced a similar explosion in a different context in the past, perhaps during a conflict, this situation was entirely new. The type of detonation deployed here, and the development of a partly directed cloud of smoke and fire without direct danger, enabled the experience

of an aesthetic moment within the ambivalence of the image. It embraced a fascination with fear, which is suggestive of sublimity, linked to Paul Virilio's 'Art of fear'.^{ix}

As with Morris' *Steam*, *Entladung* offers a counter-model to the traditional timelessness of a monument: it brings its own fleetingness, and subjects the recipient to a specific temporal structure. Could one consider *Entladung* as a memorial to the history of sculpture? Its highly visible poly-perceptivity asks the viewer to no longer surround the work successively: this would be impossible. The speed of the explosion and radical change of shape did not allow people to change their point of view. Only through personal memory and by viewing the many documentary pictures from different angles could one may imagine the three-dimensional character of the work and its plasticity.^x According to Paul Good, Signer gives us time back by drawing the viewers' attention to event-time: a qualitative, not a quantitative form of time. The work of the Swiss artist, as with *Entladung*, is intended to initiate an experience of time that is intensive instead of extensive. It also shapes the experience actively – translating it to a theory of sculpture would imply a temporal volume.

The term *Aufführung* (performance), borrowed from the terminology of Theatre Studies, is rewarding for this consideration of sculpture. Erika Fischer-Lichte's research addresses central issues regarding the performative turn. She argues^{xi} that performances do not only occur in theatre, but also in all cultural fields – in lectures, readings, installations, architecture. For her the performance is defined by the qualities that are ephemeral, transitory, material and unique, involving the physical co-presence of actors and audience, the simultaneity of production and reception, and its character as an event. The performance is presumed to be the epitome of performative: no one participates passively; everybody is subjected to a specific temporal experience.^{xii}

The transitory nature of *Entladung*, its materiality, its uniqueness, its simultaneousness of production and reception, its strong focus on emotions, can only be achieved



Andreas Greiner and Fabian Knecht
Entladung 01.09.2013

Intervention into public space (time sculpture); view from pavement across the street, Arndt Galerie Potsdamer Straße Berlin, 2013

by its 'liveness'. Its character as an event creates a strong atmospheric charge and tension. Given this, the perception of people waiting may have oscillated between curiosity and anticipation – even boredom amongst the impatient. Analysing a work from the perspective of a performative act on the assumption of its process-based unfolding, brings a semantic variety of readings, not an a-priori existing understanding as one would experience when looking at a historical statue, where the mind and eye can only move back and forth between physical presence and other possible representations. It is contingent on the individuals participating in this 'time sculpture'. It takes into account the aesthetics of reception and it adds an additional point of view to the sculpture-theoretical based perspective.

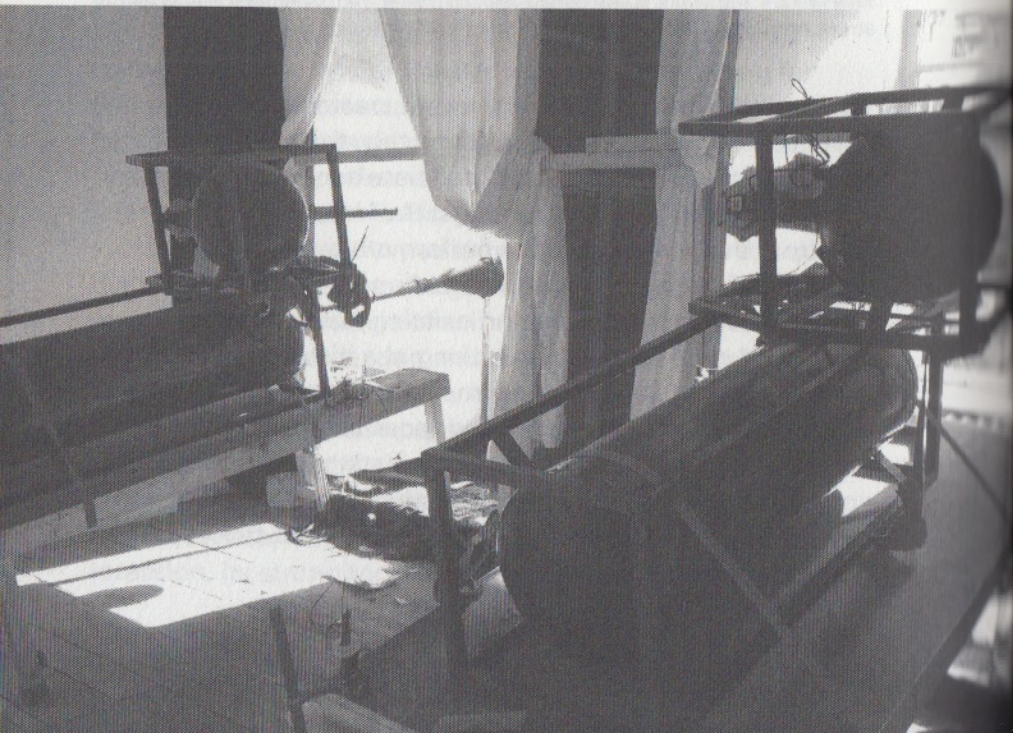
Entladung needs to be understood not only formally as a destructive cloud of fire, but also in terms of its whole process, including the technical support. After the organisational preparatory works, the explosion was announced and invitations were sent out, giving precise information about location and time. The viewers placed themselves across the street from the gallery, as if an audience to a stage. The team had to block the traffic, find the owners of cars parked in the exclusion zone, photographers had to be positioned on surrounding roofs and balconies and, last but not least, the explosive device had to be detonated by a pyrotechnician.

In contrast to the explosion at Potsdamer Straße, nobody attends Signer's actions, other than the artist himself. Amongst the most vivid ways of seeing them is the documentary film *Signer's Koffer*, a kind of road movie made

Andreas Greiner and Fabian Knecht

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Intervention into public space (time sculpture); view from inside of the gallery space, Arndt Galerie Potsdamer Straße Berlin, 2013



by the artist while travelling alone, as he realises different 'sculptural events' inspired by landscapes through which he travels.^{xiii} A few of his works contain humorous undertones, reminiscent of evil mischief – unlike *Entladung* in Berlin. Without a theatrical visual backup and self-representational gesture, Signer acts – often under dangerous conditions – emotionlessly as an executive organ of an experimental set-up where the human being and the object have equal rights. He uses natural forces to undertake temporal processes.^{xiv}

The chorographical sequence of *Entladung* was additionally underscored by letters made out of red small light bulbs, spelling out the name 'Variété Wintergarten' (Musichall Winter Garden) on the façade of the building below the gallery – one of the last remaining traces of Berlin's past of endless ballrooms and stages.^{xv} Today, Potsdamer Straße has been resurrected, and contains the core of a new vibrant art scene. Similar to the Aristotelian arc of suspense, the sculptural narration of *Entladung* moves from explosive culmination to final dissolution. The interior of the gallery, like a hidden backstage area, contained the technical equipment that facilitated the work: two cartridges and funnels on plinths. As in a theatre, they were laterally framed by white drop-curtains and by a porch reminiscent of an old peepshow box. In the interior, the broken glass, pieces of wood, twisted wires and oozing isolation materials were evidence of the impressive artistic act whose explosion through the burst windows allowed a clear view – a reminder of the world as *fenestra aperta*. Was this an opening of the 'abstract' white cube by blasting, thus an opening to the 'real' world?

Analysing the pyrotechnical work of Greiner/Knecht in relation to Signer brings two different perspectives to a specific form of temporality and materiality. A sculptural analysis would take into account the unusual plasticity, the moving surface texture, the placement within a certain space and the three-dimensional appearance. Here, sculpture no longer has to be considered as a primarily tactile, static or clearly shaped object; rather it can be an open, partly auto-

generative action. What changed modes of perception are linked to this shift from the typical semantics of eternity in sculpture?

Alternative forms of temporality based on the aesthetics of reception, the creation of tension by the *mise-en-scène*, processuality, moments of chance and a fleeting moment come to the fore; a process that includes the waiting, the action (ignition), the burning, and the final afterglow. The performative character allows the works to be usefully discussed under Fischer-Lichte's term *Aufführung*. The temporally enfolded work addresses the viewer on different perceptual levels; that is – the senses of hearing, taste and smell, as well as sight. Moving beyond the oracular understanding completes and enables a deeper approach to these 'sculptures in the expanded field'.^{xvi} The physical transformations of these 'sculptural events' allow the material to talk for itself.

ⁱ This text was initially delivered as a paper at the conference *Pyrotechnic Sculpture* at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, in November 2013.

ⁱⁱ Interview with the author, Berlin, October 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ This action continued throughout 35 days from September 11 to October 15 1989. The fuse was divided into parts of 100m, each time accompanied by a small explosion. See http://www.peterliechti.ch/filme/roman_signer_zuendschnur/, accessed 24.3.2014.

^{iv} Paul Good, *Roman Signer. Hätetest des Schönen*, Cologne: Dumont 2009, p. 90. Signer himself speaks of his works as events or installations rather than actions or performances.

^v Dietmar Rübel, *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen*, Munich: Silke Schreiber 2012

^{vi} Robert Morris, 'Anti-Form' (1968), in *Artforum*, 6, No. 8, April 1968, pp. 33–35.

^{vii} Robert Morris, 'Steam' (1995), in Nena Tsouti-Schillinger (ed.), *Robert Morris. Have I Reasons: Work and Writings 1993–2007*, Durham & London: Duke University Press Books 2008, p. 61.

^{viii} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung (Phenomenology of Perception)* (1945), Berlin 1966: Walter de Gruyter & Co., see for example pp. 178–82, 334.

^{ix} Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*, London: Continuum, 2003. For the sublime see also Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1756).

^x Both artists are especially interested in the 'frozen' moment of photography, which, according to them, makes the action more powerful and intense than a video, where explosive effects are too familiar to us.

^{xi} Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Die verwandelnde Kraft der Aufführung', in Erika Fischer-Lichte et al. (eds.), *Die Aufführung. Diskurs – Macht – Analyse*, Munich: Fink 2012, pp. 11–23.

^{xii} Erika Fischer-Lichte/Jens Roselt, 'Attraktion des Augenblicks – Aufführung, Performance, performativ und Performativität als theaterwissenschaftliche Begriff', in Erika Fischer-Lichte/Christian Wulf (eds.), *Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie. Theorien des Performativen*, vol. 10, 1, Berlin 2001, p. 252.

^{xiii} *Film* by Peter Lichti, 1995.

^{xiv} Good states that Signer is a primary, but not an intellectual player. Good, p. 93.

^{xv} Originally, the well-known music hall was located at Friedrichstrasse.

^{xvi} Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30–44.