

A Generic Square-Line System Trouser

A

'A' as 'a', the first letter of our alphabet. So, a starting point, a *here-and-now*.

Now that the work is in front of you, thoughtfully distributed in the space, now you can *talk the work*, element by element, as if it would be a new idiom that doesn't need any paper to be written on.

You can *talk the work* in a way that each constituent becomes a signifier and the work itself becomes the signified, hence constructing sentences you would not be able to construct otherwise.

This doesn't mean that everything is here yet, simply leaning on the floor, hanging at the wall or from the ceiling, passive. It doesn't mean that nothing could be added or interpreted (or misinterpreted). Limited/unlimited, a dualism I will use a lot here.

As Reto Pulfer himself told me, our expression is never bound to the fact that we have limited numbers of letters or restricting grammatical rules. Gaps, questions, stops, doubts, subjective decisions. The entire range of our experiences of the work enable the work itself to be, to become, in its complexness, out of the mind of the artist, in the space, in me or you, in the viewers.

If for Reto the piece is a system that can grow, change and be changed, you are there to rewrite it for him, following his suggestions and then recompiling your own rules.

GENERIC

'GENERIC' as preceding something 'specific'. So, in a sense, still free to be moulded and directed. Still malleable.

This is not intended to be a text *about* Reto Pulfer's work as much as it is a text permeated by the experience of the work itself.

I would like it to be a clear mental image of what this complex practice is. I would like to purely pass it over to you through a series of ordered passages, a set of precise and yet subjective steps: the first, followed by the second, just before the third, then the fourth and so on.

It could be anything. It doesn't need to be my writing, or anyone else's writing. It doesn't even have to be through this very alphabet, or any other alphabet. Anything, but silence.

Actually it could even be *silence*, once it is well alternate by its binary radix: *noise*. It could be a sort of numerical equation able to substitute all previous experiences of the work and transform them into arithmetic signs, or combinations of '0' and '1', or '|' and '-'. A sort of conceptual telepathy, in between technique and improvisation.

Unfortunately that's simply impossible. It is impossible as I would not be able to.

Instead, in between lines, I will refer directly to some of the works that Reto produced in the last years and, even more specifically, to some of the objects and situations you (viewer) are presently subjected to inside the space.

Again, this is because of practical limitations from my side. I am limited by time, limited by space, limited in my ability/possibility of gathering information, limited in the use of written language, limited in my *limited* English vocabulary and so on and so forth, in a paradoxically limitless list of limits.

The natural consequence of this mental attitude brings us to the very same idea of *interpretation*, through which the experience of the *zustände* (or states) of the work could gain infinity.

As already mentioned in 'A', if this doesn't apply to the physicality of the work itself,

it could instead happen in the viewer's perception of this same physicality.

Reto titled the work *Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen*, underlining the 128 possible combinations of 'states' he could play once the work is installed on the ground or on the wall. At the same time though, you (the viewer, the speaker, the performer) are left alone to discover or create your own *zustände*, your own rules, even when based on subjective interpretations, even when supported by idiosyncratic readings of what the different elements of the piece might have meant for Reto himself.

This freedom is obviously problematic and it seems to undermine the apparent systematic nature of the work. Any method is based on repeatability, and the freedom of interpretation seems to betray this very first law.

Here is an important turning point of this GENERIC: the repeatability that interests Reto isn't *scientific* in its modern meaning. It is based on the very same subjective possibility to live/perform the situation again and again, through personal idiosyncrasies, changing it through your subjective perception.

This methodology brings us closer to the ancient practice of *mnemonics* (clearly stated by Reto as a conceptual base for his entire practice), then to the modern concept of *scientific method*. Even if both have an object of reference and are based on repeated experiences of this same object, the mnemonic has an inner performative aspect that links it to the situation of it being experienced and of the subject experiencing it. It is a practice, a living practice.

This performativity is at the very base of my understanding of Reto's work as a model for *living the work* in a determined space and, consequently, produce its limitless *zustände*.

There is something of alchemic happening in between, in the untraceable interstice that divides the physical work from my/your living it.

This brings us back to the beginning of this GENERIC, to the point where I specified that this is not meant to be a text *about* Reto Pulfer's work.

Indeed the best way to understand the work is living it, performing it, talking about it and pointing at it. There is no space for any *about* in all this.

As a consequence, once I started thinking how to explain my recent written and spoken encounters with Reto, his practice and his thoughts, the only way I can express all this, is with continuous *streams of becoming hints*, through which I'm asked to play my own mental game, set the rules and perform my system.

SQUARE-LINE

'SQUARE-LINE' is a system before 'SYSTEM'. So, it is an unconscious ordering.

After few weeks from our first email discussion, I invited Reto to come up with five titles of books or publications rethinking the idea of collection, archive and personal categorisation.

After few days of silence, I have been asked by Reto to find five different children or adolescents' exercise books, the one we used to have at school, some with squares, others with lines, all of different sizes and makes.

The idea behind this proposal is that, on whichever support/paper you decide to write, this same support/paper changes what you write and how your thoughts evolve. In a sense, any thought is subtly influenced by its circumstances.

The same concept could be readapted to Reto's practice. If every surface doesn't just delimit its content, but takes part in its definition, and if every ambience doesn't just describe a scenario, but contributes in setting up the act, so the work is always a *becoming* of different states moulded throughout the perception of its diverse and coexisting elements. It is a living development.

Reto doesn't simply follow this rule. He lives and produces it over and over again.

Take the work *ZR Öswaus* (a series of fabric, threads, zippers and written papers) in combination with *Ofaz Rad* (a found sofa with wood, wheels, fabric, moss, pastel on paper). Reto combines dissimilar elements two, three, four, five times, always in the same piece, but each time through different mediums: the drawing points at the sculpture, which points at the painting, which points at the writing. As a last act, he physically (could) play all these components, he materially (could) activate them inside a performative moment.

The *states* of the work are equally important and, even more dramatically, equally useless. They are nothing else but fingers pointing at an already existing idea. They are archetypes, mediums to deliver a unique message.

Once again we are driven to Reto's interest in mnemonics. All physical aspects of the work are based on imagined situations, which are then filled with objects and actions. These objects are similar to chemical states of natural elements: one thing and nothing, in a continuous *becoming*. After all how could I really discuss the conceptual difference between water, steam and ice?

Writing is just another of these expressions. It is our privileged position that allowed us to produce a written system, to lay it down into SQUARE-LINE. When this was not the case, when physically there were no possibility to do such thing, all was created and storage inside the mind or, when possible, performed by the orator.

Reto applies the same principles to an explosion of materiality, where each element is independent and the same-as-the-others, where figurative and written components mimic his understanding of what producing and delivering sentences could be.

This richness of shapes and colours brings us back to the limitless nature of the work, through which each viewer (me/you) could undertake his own mnemonic path.

The SQUARE-LINE is another system-not-system, a law made by the collection of fragments of our experiences of the law itself. Even if agreeing on the existence of a grid-guideline (the mental idea of the piece in Reto's mind) the different situations where we perceive it, inevitably change our thoughts and their developments.

SYSTEM

'SYSTEM' is the 'putting in practice' of the mnemonic attitudes. Here is my effort to describe the function of the works you are looking at in the space.

I would start from the *Aquariumspiel* system, the one applied by Reto in *Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen*, to then lose myself into the even more structured ZR system, the concept at the very base of works such as *ZR Autswaus O*, *ZR Potzswaus*, *ZR Boot* and *ZR Öswaus*.

There is something intuitive in the functioning of the *Aquariumspiel* system, something physical and interactive, which brings us closer to our everyday decision-making, to our perception of the navigation of a space.

A bench, a table, a precarious surface on which Reto placed four different images under Plexiglas. On top of these, three movable elements: first of all what he calls the 'aquarium', a large glass rectangular prism open on one side (an actual prefabricated/readymade aquarium). Then two smaller pieces: a ceramic with the shape of a tongue, and another ceramic bit. To complete the spectrum of the work, Reto admits into his piece two other invisible elements, which consist of the possibility to repeat all actions while moving the piece between two different positions in the room where it is installed.

As we saw in the GENERIC, the piece is based on different *zustände* (or states) of the work, which could be experienced through combinations of the elements that compose

it. This could easily explain the title and the most controllable part of the work: four (the four images on the desk) at the power of three (the three different movable elements), multiplied by two (the two positions the piece could be given inside the room), whose result is exactly the 128 different *zustände* of the *Aquariumspiel* system. As I said, this is just the most controllable part of the work, it is not the work in its entirety. It is the rhythm we need to recognize in order to enter the most hidden and free-form aspects of Reto's practice, where it is our own perception of the different 'states' that moulds the rules to interpret the work.

As a matter of fact each element has not only a letter correspondent, but also a numerical value and a mnemonic word attached to it. As a consequence the entire piece could be written down on a piece of paper as a translation of all the elements and their combinations.

Take the four pictures for instance: the first is called 'lift/prozess' and the letter L represents it. The second one is called 'sich erinnern' (to remember) and the letter E represents it. And so on, we have 'bühne/tv/öffentlichkeit' (stage/tv/public) with the letter B and "tarNumgebung" (hidden environment) with the hidden letter N. So, all together, the four pictures create the world LEBN, which sounds like LEBEN, life. Or could be read as NEBL, which sounds similar to NEBEL, fog.

Tricks. We are already inside Reto's mnemonics, where at every step we (the viewers-performers) could reinvent our own rules and transform the 128 states of the work into limitless readings.

The 3 moving elements also have corresponding words: the rectangular prism, called 'aquarium', is A. The tongue looking ceramic, called 'ort' (place), is O. And the last piece, called 'zustand', is Z. So we have AOZ, abbreviation for *Die Ausserordentlichen Zustände*, an exhibition curated by Reto in the past. Each position of a moving part (A, O, and Z on a photo L, E, B, and N) has a numerical value, which then functions as our decimal system, in smooth progression.

Again, it is just about recognizing the system that could name all the states. If then this system is based on numeric or alphabetic values, this is just a practicality.

Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen has 128 states, but once the game begins, once you (the viewer) start performing it, it is more about the succession of states and all the gaps created between them, in the same way as our verbal expression is not bound to the limited number of letters of the alphabet. It is a system that can grow and change itself, where the participants can perform and change the rules.

The ZR system follows the same principal through even more imaginative and personal paths. The works that follow this system are vortexes that suck the viewer inside a balance of formal and conceptual elements. Due to the fact that here Reto uses more explicitly the rules of mnemonics, it is even easier to get lost through all the different roots.

The result is an explosion of shapes and colours subjectively interpreted through Reto's personal reading of their significance. Fabrics, paper, a found sofas and elements sewn together, all combined to create a universe of significance, so tactile and yet so analytic.

At the base of the ZR system there is the idea of *zipper*. A *zipper*, as we know it from any of our clothes, is an element constructed by two parts: one is provided with a *slider unit*, while the other is blank, joining the first and simply allowing the strips of fabric to connect. Reto named the first one Z and the second one R.

The base of the system consists in the idea that only the Z+R part could be combined to create another shape, another meaning. This is what Reto called the 'Z-is-followed-by-R' rule, and by following it any combination could be made.

Once again, as for *Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen*, the use of words and the consequent creation of texts is intrinsically linked with mnemonics: a letter is incorporated into a word, which is linked to a physical object. At the same time, writing (like drawing or performing) is just another tool for pointing at the functioning of a certain system, in this case the ZR.

Reto offered me an example: he uses the world CHAZ to indicate a Z physical element (so provided with a *slider unit* end), whose round edge recalls the curve of the letter C. At the same time the word *chaz* could be understood as the Swiss for *cat*, layering once again signifier and signified.

Following the ancient rule of mnemonic (the more difficult the imagined story is, the greater the possibility you have to memorize it), the ZR system is a labyrinth of subjective references and, at the same time, an infinite source of hints for the viewer.

The SYSTEM is the making of the ‘viewer as the performer’ and the making of ‘the work as the instrument to be performed’. Once again you are invited to lose yourself in the work and live it as if yours.

TROUSER

‘TROUSER’ is the final step. It is the moment where me/you (the viewer) will try to *live-the-work/wear-the-work*.

The last time I saw Reto was also the first time I met him personally. We were in the East of London, next to a small but vibrant Afro-Caribbean market.

On the street you can find all sorts of things: meat and fish, vegetables and fruits, exotic gadgets and cockney specialities. It is an intrusive environment, where the roles between actor and spectator are always blending; and yet it is difficult to ignore the clashes between your position of temporary-passer-by and the pulsating *stream of life* of the market.

Just now I realise that we could not have chosen better place for our first meeting.

During our conversation (the noises of the street were constantly audible through the windows of the space we were in) Reto told me about his desire to create new works with different qualities of fabric. He also told me how he was constantly looking for different shapes, colours and materials to obtain new combinations of objects.

What impressed me the most wasn’t his obstinacy in researching different stocks of textiles. His capability of using unexpected and original materials, unpredictable colours and shapes, was already demonstrated by his works with the ZR system. What stunned me instead was his aspiration to think of a work that would overcome the quality of the materials, overcome their physicality, aspiring to become part of the viewers’ life. A tailored piece of cloth, which is life in itself. Not just a mnemonic system left to the interpretation of the viewers, but something that could be part of the viewer’s own life, as woven in items, as a trouser or a shirt, moulded on his/her singularity.

After a while we went again on the street, just to find a lot of small stools selling all sorts of fabrics and paper patterns for tailoring. A nice coincidence.

This closes my attempt to *live* Reto’s work through my limits and my idiosyncrasies, to *wear* it, to get inside of it as part of my own personal experience.

The best of it all is that, in a few days, by me changing it could well change all over again.

Francesco Pedraglio
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