

An Art of Transversal Travels

Anselm Franke

Reto Pulfer’s body of work is a project of fabulation which consists of many chapters, divisions, and episodes. As he has often emphasized, the German term *Zustand* is a crucial concept around which his artistic universe revolves. His works directly refer to or even embody a *Zustand*, and he has curated a series of exhibitions under this motive. But what is a *Zustand*? It is translated into different English words depending on context: when applied to the exterior world, it signifies simply a state of affairs or arrangement, but when applied to subjective, interior or mental reality, it denotes a state of mind, or consciousness. It can also be translated as condition—when re-translated, the German *Bedingung* resounds as conditionality—which is akin to a framing of social affairs through things and the world of matter. *Zustand* is an ambivalent term characterized by an inner tension between arrest and transformation: it suggests a temporary fixation, a bringing to a halt of the transformative flow of time. A *Zustand* may be a situation that has become transfixed or even permanent. A *Zustand* is an eternal present, having spatialized time. But the concept also inevitably invokes transitions from one state to another, a mutability of states, and a liminal realm between them. We can grasp something of the *Zustand* also when leveling out the distinction between content and expression. There might not be an absolute difference between signs and matter—this accounts for a certain “language of things” in the world, and what they communicate with the language is synonymous with their state of being. *Zustand* means to be-in-a-milieu or -medium. Perhaps the being of the animal in its *Umwelt* is a perfect embodiment of a *Zustand*.

One could think of *Zustand* also as a homeostatic and self-regulating system and its negative and positive feedback loops that link the signals of “communication” with the possibility of “control” and in general, the idea of an equilibrium: this was the cybernetic dream of the environment understood as a system—a dream that still survives today in the way we imagine “ecology” (all of nature imagined as *Zustand*). *Zustand* could also be a reactionary, regressive notion of an essential belonging, a stable and eternal ground. But it is not these latter notions that Reto Pulfer explores. Yes, he certainly pays tribute to the way a *Zustand* is necessarily anchored in the environment and the object world, but he reveals in each and all of them a profound fragility and polysemic groundlessness, an opening towards an abyss of mediations that belies all essentialism. To isolate and arrest a *Zustand* in its paradoxical fleeting appearance and install it upon an abyss: we could say that in Reto Pulfer’s work this means to create a fundamental ambivalence that makes it impossible to draw an ultimate dividing line between the inside and the outside, and real and imaginary.

It is worth dwelling on this dividing line a bit to contemplate its impact. Of course all artists are permanently crossing this line: this could even be a definition of the artists’ labour. But without the disclaimer “art” such

a crossing does not only invoke the possibilities of new horizons and “other” worlds, but pathology and illness (or on the other end of the spectrum, sometimes short-circuited with the former, spiritual achievements). “Neuroses or psychoses are not passages of life, but states into which we fall when the process is interrupted, blocked, or plugged up.”¹ To crack this state open means to embrace the work of the imaginary, and its ability to animate our surrounding, as a necessary condition of health. This can be better understood if we invert a common misunderstanding about the relation between the artist and the pathologies of the mind, which share at least their devotion to polysemiosis—the proliferation and play with signs and meanings. But such polysemiosis in art and psychopathology are not so much a transgression or blurring of otherwise normal, stable boundaries. Rather, the transgression and ambiguity are the “normal” state of reality itself. Following the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, there can never be an ultimate division. Psychopathology then is not the inability to draw the right border between world and self, the imaginary and the real, but rather an intolerance to ambiguity, an inability to live with the uncertainties that we encounter at the imaginary-real nexus, which really is an open-ended continuum, a permanent weaving of one into the other.² What we are encountering in Reto Pulfer’s works are materially hallucinated traversals of this continuum.

There is something bewildering and intriguing about making “states of mind” a subject matter, treating them like objects both scientific and poetic. On the one hand, we could imagine this to be a dream of a mad scientist, a sci-fi projection of mutability and engineering: states of mind would then possibly become objectified, materialized, modulated and manipulated. This would be the stuff of conspiracies—and who tells us that it didn’t happen? But from within a certain state of mind, how does one even know? And what would the status of such knowledge be, and of imagining ourselves into different states of mind? What does it mean to step outside of a certain state of mind, suddenly seeing it from a distance like an observer? The dream of the mad scientist is bought at the price of willfully ignoring the scientists’ minds’ implicatedness in the observed. The very concept of the *Zustand* then raises this problem of an observer-perspective and its immanence. There is hence the romanticists’ flight of the imagination, whose subject matter also is states of mind, but through the opposite vector: not detachment, but immersion. Speaking of “states of mind” or “states of affairs” in the plural already implies this mobility, this ability to move and morph from one into the other: at the extreme, this is the romantics’ dream of the empathetic soul.

But there is another way of thinking through such “states” beyond the opposition and the pitfalls of the “objective”

1 Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 3.

2 James Morley, “The Texture of the Real: Merleau-Ponty on the Imagination and Psychopathology,” in *Imagination and Its Pathologies*, ed. J. Morley and J. Phillips (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

and the “subjective,” detachment or immersion: through autonomous “affects” and “percepts.” These concepts have been suggested by Gilles Deleuze: “Percepts are not perceptions, they are packets of sensations and relations that outlive those who experience them. Affects are not feelings, they are becomings that go beyond those who live through them.”³ Affects happen to us; we actualize them in our feelings, actions and states. Yet if we are looking at the singular powers of affects and percepts, the very definition of what a “state” is begins to change—perhaps just in the way Merleau-Ponty’s inversion in relation to the delineation between reality and the imaginary demands. It is a realm not just “in between,” but of a deeper stratum of reality. No longer identifiable as situated in specific persons and their datum (in space and time), what we are then encountering in these singular powers is more like a “pure” state, a set of qualities outside spatiotemporal coordinates and the interiority of an individual capable of accounting for them and itself.

The experimental polysemiosis in artistic creation means also to think in terms of specific media and specific milieus, and the conjunction achieved through percepts and affects therein: this in itself requires a thinking-through-mediality, in the medium of the *Zustand* or “pure” state that allows one to create unexpected juxtapositions and transversalities. This is one way to characterize the work of the artist: not so much to actualize a specific quality in sensations, feelings and actions embodied by particular creations, but rather to free it from such actualization. Perhaps this is what is alluded to in the title “The sculptures are as of yet loose, unformed adjectives” [die Skulpturen sind noch lose ungeformte Adjektive] he comments on the *First Chamber*, 2011, in the series *Die Kammern des Zustands* [The Chambers of State and Condition], 2009–2015 [page 200].

Affects and percepts exist autonomously and in a process of autonomization and singularization: They conjure up a world that does not need a subject to internalize them. Percepts have the power to populate real and imaginary milieus in perfectly lucid and yet hallucinatory fashion with non-existent, past or future figures and societies (not limited to humans). This is clear also in Reto Pulfer’s sci-fi novel *Gina*: there is no pre-existent inner life and an independent external reality, no coherent subject called “Gina” by contrast, her interiority is pure exteriority, which also means that she is many: “It’s a strange business, speaking for yourself, in your own name, because it doesn’t at all come with seeing yourself as an ego or a person or a subject. Individuals find a real name for themselves only through the harshest exercise in depersonalization by opening themselves to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them. ... *Experimentation on ourself is our only identity.*”⁴

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 137, translation modified.

4 Deleuze, as cited in Daniel W. Smith, “‘A Life of Pure Immanence’: Deleuze’s ‘Critique et Clinique’ Project,” in Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Smith quotes from two texts: Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 6; and Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Barbara Habberjam

Reto Pulfer does call his installations “immersive,” but I think there is a crucial difference to the aesthetics of, as designers say, “conditioned” environments, which work like envelopes that seek to eliminate the distinction between external and internal through overwhelming sensory stimulation. To be sure, many of Reto Pulfer’s works rather literally invite us to enter the work and become fully enveloped by it: this is certainly true of the tent-like structures that act like “themed” spaces of various “states.” But while the dominant aesthetics of immersion stages the fantasy of an unmediated experience, Reto Pulfer’s work is a poetic *reflection* about what it means *to-be-in-a-medium*. Yes, this reflection is brought on by way of mapping inside and outside onto each other; but in the process, gaps are revealed rather than them merging into one. This gap is not the gap of alienation, of a subject estranged or otherwise at odds with the external world. Rather, it is the creation of a limited condition—a liminality of the subject itself, an exteriority that is not identical, that is created in permanent confrontation with what it is not. Perhaps this limit-condition is what Reto Pulfer invokes in *Gina* as “the cleft”: “The cleft, which actually means chaos, because from that gap something emerged that always sabotaged its own discursive representation, so we had to call it chaos. [...] The cleft became chaos out of its inability to remain the intermediate zone it was. Even more so because it had to have a name and consequently had to be subjected to a system of meaning.”

It is at this limit of meaning that poetry is situated: both like an emergent force that is used as gear, and like a structuring device that provides orientation. For Reto Pulfer, it is undoubtedly a zone of proximity and becoming, but also one of ordering and accounting. It is a zone where trip-like travels and forms of mobility become thinkable, but never in the phantasmatic detached manner of the scientist who remains unchanged. Rather, traveling and traversing “states” means to morph and be morphed. It means to take measure of our human ability “to be in a milieu,” and, though more as a subtext, also to exit it. The release of affects and percepts in this topography (rather than their actualization in persons and concrete relations in a “state of affairs”) is what he alludes to by calling several recent installations a “dehydrated landscape.” “Dehydration” is a form of intensification that fixes the flow of time for an instant, and reveals all liquid processes as geological transformations and sedimentations, just as in ceramics, like the silico-borate or sanidine of the glaze after the gloss firing.

Words appear in Reto Pulfer’s work in titles, in drawings, in short stories, in novels. There is a lot of wordplay and creation of new names, especially in his system of titles with their abbreviations, such as the use of ZR for the presence of zippers, as in *ZR Silberesel* [ZR Silver-Donkey], 2010, or in *ZR Autswaus O*, 2008 [page 250], or as in *Thyme Change Theme Park (TCTP)*, 2005–2010: “Thyme like time and change like coins. Studio material and process experiments, transitory sculptures and ephemeral found documents are displayed on four tables in the shape of the letters T, C, T, P” [page 194]. The peculiar thing about this wordplay is that it draws

and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 11. Emphasis is Smith’s.

as much from Swiss-German and its highly peculiar vernaculars (*Chlopf-Täfu-Licht-Schacht* [Drumming-Panel-Light-Shaft], 2008, or *Ougsbraue* [Eyebrow], 2008 [page 21 and 146]), as it does from Lewis Carroll (where: snark = snake + shark), children’s languages, secret languages, but also decomposition of hierarchical meaning and genealogies and mathematical desubjectivation, as in Mallarmé or Artaud.

And then there is space: taken possession of, turned into a visual envelope, a cartography with multiple pathways, delimiting an environment, a space of action within a milieu. Within such a milieu, objects create a syntax that acts as “a set of necessary detours that are created [...] to reveal the life in things.”⁵ We cannot look directly, at eye level, at signs and see them signifying. In order to see them signifying one does need that detour. Or a “small second exit” for “deceased souls” like in that tent called *ZR Blechschublade* [ZR Tin-Can-Drawers], 2009–2011, that quotes this “superstitious element [...] found in certain architecture of the Alps” [page 55].

The immersive spaces created as tents, created from hand-dyed and hand-sewn fabrics, recycled bedsheets, paper and wood, are not unlike spaces of “profane intoxication”: these rooms also disguise themselves “before our eyes [...] like an alluring creature in the costumes of the dispositions.”⁶ Autonomized, singularized affects and percepts create the basic materials of a mnemonics, an intensive rather than extensive architecture of memory. And a memory that does not belong to anyone.

For Reto Pulfer, a *Zustand* and its installation is one and the same thing: a situation becomes a spatial arrangement becomes a disposition or Zustand. If a title of a work lists 128 “states” (such as *Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen (PMG)* [Game of the Aquarium in 128 Arrangements (PMG)], 2007), then that literally means there are 128 corresponding ways of installing the piece [page 262].

In installation art, the “object” becomes “a variable of a situation,”⁷ emphasizing an object-related self-reflective “*Gestalt*,”⁸ possibly leading “to a remembrance of the social dimension in all subjectivity.”⁹ And yet this dimension cannot be contained in quotidian understandings of the “social,” it is the realm of affects and percepts and of “possibles,” of yet-to-be-invented medialities and milieus. “Installed” object-situations become aligned as scenes, dispositions, modes of subjectivation—the installation of a *Zustand* becomes a gestural “exhibition of

5 Gilles Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 2.

6 Walter Benjamin, *Protocols to the Experiments on Hashish, Opium and Mescaline 1927–1934*, trans. Scott J. Thompson, 1997. Quote from “Second Hashish Impression” (January 15, 1928), accessed June 21, 2016, <http://www.wbenjamin.org/protocol1.html>.

7 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1999), 41 (my translation).

8 Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 274.

9 Ibid., 272.

a mediality.”¹⁰ “What is created under the umbrella term ‘installation’ is not so much works but models of the possibility of works; not so much examples of a new genre but ever new genres.”¹¹ What that means, in other words: the “object” is a marker of a possible milieu, a rhetorical device in an argument about a contested mediality, and recursively, it creates the space for a possible genus, or “state,” that “installs” itself in processes of subjectivation that are not limited to the human alone.

This is what the experimentation with life-forms and animals in Reto’s work is alluding to, from whales (which are referenced in all works whose titles include “waus”—as in *ZR Spotwaus* [ZR Whale with Spots in Spotlight], 2009 [page 103]), to snakes (as in *Reusperschlange* [Coughing Snake], 2015 [page 168]). Life-forms: it is also the frozen morphologies in his ceramics that he alludes to in the novel *The Eccentrics*, when he speaks of a “few hybrid, flying sea slugs that had been morphed together with mushrooms and mosses while in flight” as “biological experiments”: “[They] had conjured these cute and refreshing, imaginative and contemplative new creatures as if from a raw material. It was as if these creatures had been fired like ceramics.”

And in *The Eccentrics* again: “The Cult of Memorylessness was based on relinquishing the personal in order to tune into a collective, eccentric and special mood.” And then “Walking as if Losing Oneself.”

Here as elsewhere the hallucinatory nomadology of Reto Pulfer’s universe is insisting on being led astray, refusing to subject the world to the logic of the “Bildungsroman” that alone allows one to make sense of the self and its interiority, and instead giving itself to multiplicity: “A herd of bedraggled hoofed animals rode around, panting aimlessly; the *Most Material Form* of the concept of *Walking as if Losing Oneself* glided through the playing Eccentrics as *Extraordinary Breeding*, between rhino and horse, with shaggy, *finely matted*, weeping-beech-like fur-hair. The animals resembled nothing we knew so far—eerily, they seemed to have an intention in their eyes. They had five legs, because that was better for getting lost and made it more difficult to walk in a straight line. *Walking as Getting Lost*, here as a herd.” “Walking as if Losing Oneself”: Here and elsewhere Reto Pulfer recalls Swiss writer Robert Walser’s restless wandering in the exteriority of language whose words roll off reality like drops of water on waxed fabric and nevertheless cut deep through it, as if losing oneself. Walser’s meditations on “states,” too, form what Reto Pulfer calls a “non-hierarchical circle of equal ideas,” and he too is haunted by freely floating affects and percepts and everything that nevertheless falls outside the always “narrow conceptual framework.” That is, unless one invents for each life form its designation, its milieu: “These special sea slugs, which have been bred and cross-bred in flight with mushrooms and mosses, appearing in the most tranquil of colors and with shaggy appendages,

10 Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–59.

11 Ibid., 14–15.

even adorned with furs and capricious, bright threads, were given the botanical name *Nudibranchia phantasticae ceramica orebibianii*.” Asked in an interview about the roles of animals in his work, Reto Pulfer answered: “We have not yet mentioned penguins: just as whales they change (literally speaking) from being a flying bird to swimming and from being a mammal at land to sea.”¹² So much about the art of transversal traveling.

¹² Reto Pulfer, interview by David Lewis, “Some Whales and Some Ways of Installing a Sculpture,” *Mousse Magazine*, no. 21 (November 2009), 45–48.