

Abstract Possible

The Birmingham Beat

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Curated by Maria Lind
Amended by Eastside Projects

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Why abstraction today? It has been argued that since the invention of abstraction in the early twentieth century it never went away. This would explain why, at least from the point of view of 1996, there have been no neo-abstract movements since the 1960s. Regardless, abstraction has remained out of sight for quite a while. Having thus been obscured, abstraction can easily appear as an obsolete general phenomenon and redundant artistic tool. However, at this point in time there are several reasons for returning to this familiar trope.

One of the reasons is that as a quintessential twentieth century invention abstraction has embarked on new routes in the twenty-first century. There is a palpable interest in abstraction since the late 1990s, particularly among younger artists and other cultural producers who both reinterpret the legacy of formal abstraction and shape performative — social — versions of abstraction (*abstrahere*, to withdraw). They also engage with abstraction thematically in terms of economic processes. Another reason to look at abstraction today is the special attention placed on the politics of representation, or perhaps better the organisation of the sensible within abstraction. On how something is being shaped or otherwise done, on articulation and the procedures and protocols informing that activity. This formalist focus on the 'how' of things is an approach which recently has resonated in such different places as the so-called 'new public management of neo-liberal governance' and the 'Occupy' movement.

As an artistic and intellectual technique, with multiple expressions beyond the visual arts, one of abstraction's key characteristics is the capacity for

self-reflection. Abstraction as a visual strategy and aesthetic category was first used by the classical avant-garde in the early twentieth century. Although Paul Gauguin contended that all art is an abstraction it is important to consider self-conscious and specific forms of abstraction. Originally abstraction was linked to social and political utopias and yet it is most commonly known through Greenbergian postwar lenses which cleanse it from worldly connections. Such different narratives of the history of abstract art reflect the variety of versions of abstraction which have been at play since its early days. In fact, contradictions, rifts and exceptions are typical of abstract art, even within one and the same oeuvre. To this day abstraction is characterised by the co-existence of ideal and matter, transcendentalism and structuralism — an ambiguity which should be acknowledged and explored rather than shied away from. 'Abstract Possible: The Birmingham Beat' suggests that we pay attention to and reconsider certain crucial aspects, some of which are clearly 'worldly', others which are idealistic and yet others which combine both features, of the phenomenon of abstraction as it pertains to its intriguing resurgence in contemporary art.

The art works in 'Abstract Possible: The Birmingham Beat' at Eastside Projects in Birmingham involve and complicate the three strands of abstraction: formal abstraction, economic abstraction and social abstraction. There is a special emphasis on economic abstraction, on the relationship between art and money more broadly, as well as on the genuinely abstract nature of money and its value under capitalism. The size of the exhibition is determined by the parameters of the space of Eastside Projects and of the budget. The amendment by Eastside Projects is the participation of Yelena Popova and the ESP salons on abstraction.

Abstract Possible: The Birmingham Beat implicates a number of key long term works in Eastside Projects as part of the exhibition itself. Martino Gamper's 'Untitled' (2010), a hinged laser cut powder coated steel book display system made of four panels (red, yellow, white, grey) with adjustable shelves, supports copies of 'Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios'. Jennifer Tee's 'Local Myths' (2010), a Carrara Marble column, rises out of Wade Guyton's floor work; and Céline Condorelli & Gavin Wade's 2008 'Functional Configuration' of hanging light tubes produced as part of the renovation of the building provides lighting and allies with the other hanging works in the space.

Equally in the Second Gallery Gavin Wade's 'Mobile wall system with 41 permanent pole positions on a square and triangular grid (After Adolf Krischanitz)' (2011) is co-opted by Yelena Popova as an integral part of her installation of paintings, props and light. The wall system itself is an adaptation of the twenty six year old mobile wall system from the Vienna Secession and also contains painted panels by Sophie von Hellermann and a silk screened work, 'Bleeding Heart' (2010–2011), by Mark Handforth, works remaining from the exhibition 'Painting Show' (2011).

Over the last fifteen years, a plethora of examples of formal abstraction, both geometric and expressive, have been visible in exhibitions, site-specific installations, publications, and other projects. This work often seems to buy into the idea of unproblematic aesthetic enjoyment, ultra-subjectivity and certain visual codes which are taken at face value, as style rather than structure and ideology. But in addition to the many cases in which geometric abstraction in art and design today becomes a lifestyle indicator, artists contemplate and engage with the legacy of modernist abstraction, also formally, as the result of highly specific artistic and ideological trajectories. One of the questions raised by 'Abstract Possible' is exactly what it means to revisit these trajectories from today's point of view.

And yet, as these works show, abstraction is more than a formal construction. The concept of abstraction has — within a Marxist framework — also been applied to all relations within a capitalist system. As of late, this has been extended to the logic and distortion of scale engendered by the post-Fordist/late capitalist economy. Working conditions, and conditions of production, are other pertinent points of reference here. The abstract nature of modern finance has been addressed by theoretician Sven Lütticken, whose text 'Living with Abstraction' moves between abstract art and an increasingly abstracted world. He discusses how abstraction is implemented universally through capitalism, drawing connections, for example, between the abstraction of social and economic conditions and those mechanisms that turn abstract concepts into code. All this is happening within a culture and an economy in which we literally 'live under abstraction', although the economic recession has more recently called such abstraction into relief. In which case we have to acknowledge abstraction as omnipresent, not unlike the ideal of transparency in liberal democracies. What then is the potential of abstraction in such a contested territory?

The use of strategies of withdrawal among artists and other cultural producers is an easily observable phenomenon in today's art world. This kind of abstraction is a conscious method of obscuring and entering the art terrain 'at an angle', often with the aim of creating more space for manoeuvring through self-organised initiatives. Artists seem to need a space apart today, through 'withdrawn' initiatives in the field of cultural production. These developments have been discussed in terms of 'strategic essentialism' as well as 'strategic separatism'. Sometimes it seems to be a reaction to pressures of spectacularisation and access, at other times it seems to draw on specific art historical developments. Perhaps we can begin to think of these abstract and opaque strategies and tactics as an indication of a different 'post-postmodern' critical paradigm challenging the enlightenment trust in transparency? Or is it yet another phenomenon obscuring our view of the world?

'Abstract Possible' is a research project that aims to explore notions of abstraction, taking contemporary art as its starting point. Since 2010 the project has developed in four cities: 'Abstract Possible: The Trailer' at Malmö Konsthall in Malmö (Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, Goldin + Senneby, Mai-Thu Perret, Wade Guyton); 'Abstract Possible: The Tamayo Take' at Museo Tamayo in Mexico City (Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, Yto Barrada, Jose Leon Cerillo, Matias Faldbakken, Claudia Fernandez, Liam Gillick, Goldin + Senneby, Wade Guyton, Gunilla Klingberg, David Maljkovic, Mai-Thu Perret, Seth Price, Walid Raad, Emily Roysdon, Salon, Bojan Sarcevic, Ultra-red, Anton Vidokle); 'Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test' at the White Space in Zurich (Wade Guyton and Tommy Stöckel) and 'Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies' in Stockholm at Tensta Konsthall, Bukowskis auction house and the Center for Fashion Studies, the University of Stockholm, respectively (Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, José León Cerrillo, Yto Barrada, Matias Faldbakken, Priscila Fernandes, Zachary Formwalt, Liam Gillick + Anton Vidokle, Goldin + Senneby, Wade Guyton, Iman Issa, Gunilla Klingberg, Dorit Margreiter, Åsa Norberg + Jennie Sundén, Mai-Thu Perret, Falke Pisano, Walid Raad, Emily Roysdon, Tommy Stöckel, Mika Tajima, Haegue Yang). A further iteration is planned at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart in Stuttgart. www.abstractpossible.org