

## Structure and Hybris

An interview with Alon Levin, by Mihnea Mircan

**MM:** We have recently discussed your work in relation to an art-historical category theorized by classical aesthetics – the sublime. But while the abstruse calculations and permutations your pieces and texts are based on invoke either the incalculably large or the immeasurably small, hence the mathematical sublime, the way in which they thematize structure and collapse points in the direction of what you called ‘postponed modernism’. Do these notions, the sublime as continuously rearranged proportions and modernism as perpetually unfulfilled promise, as structure of destruction, map each other in your work?

**AL:** I am interested in man’s eternal pursuit of order; not the *ideal of order*, which renders things absolute, resolved and static, but in the *actual process* of organizing things, which inevitably falls short. It is the predestined collapse of order that creates room for further re-organizing, expansion, and growth. I am afraid of the concept ‘Sublime’: afraid of the Sublime that obliterates criticality, of that state of blissful suspension where things float in a nebulous space beyond reason and above humanity... , as a rationalist all this makes me very cynical. And I am afraid of cynicism too, because it neither is an adequate answer to the question of the Sublime, nor is it a good reason for making art. Instead, I prefer to look at the destruction (and deconstruction) of orders and systems not with a sense of doom, where the elements are finite, and can only be rearranged endlessly, but rather with a sense of excitement, because somewhere among the ruins there is the potential for the authentically new. This idealism, to trust in the possibility for the new to emerge once more, is the kind of Sublime I *can* believe in, a Sublime that overwhelms but, paradoxically, is actually quantifiable. Like the Googolgon: a polygon with 1-followed-by-one-hundred-zeros sides – though it *appears* as a perfect circle, it *can* in fact be measured, quantified.

Postponed Modernism takes a collapsed system and looks within it for the new. The new structures and promises need not to

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lead to a given end point, need not be linear or congruent with the past, but evince the possibility of a continuation of progress, the kind I associate with a quantifiable, earthly, or *lower level* Sublime.



*A History of Economic Thought or the Execution of Progress*, 2006 / 2008  
*Shifting Identities – (Swiss) Art Now*, Kunsthhaus Zürich, Zürich, CH

**MM:** *A History of Economic Thought or the Execution of Progress* could be said to monumentalize error, or surplus, or the relationship thereof, like a disparity at the very heart of economic advancement. Hoping this is not too literal, I would discuss it in tandem with Tatlin's *Tower to the Socialist International*, whereby *A History...* might be said to embody a economic utopia, a drive that propagates its own scale and re-charts the world in its own, improper system. Must the world adapt – must the gallery be rebuilt, again and again, around your work?

**AL:** Things grow. There comes a time when the continued growth of a thing expands beyond management and it becomes too gigantic to consume. In such cases, its components can no longer be tracked and the thing cannot be comprehended in its entirety any longer. It becomes meaningless as a whole; something that has outreached its purpose. To continue expansion, re-organization is necessary and – in the physical world – structural reinforcement is required. Eventually this reinforcement begins to exceed the thing itself, to the point where the original thing becomes secondary. From this point on, the necessity of reinforcement redefines the context, and in so doing it transforms the initial thing into a mere monument in commemoration of its prior being – a celebration of the past. The new necessities, on the other hand, become a symbol of triumph and the promise of a better future. Eventually, the continual growth of these necessities also reaches its limitations. New support structures for these support structures must be built. While old limitations are surpassed and rendered irrelevant, new limitations will be found, again and again.

In the case of an artwork in a gallery context, space is the predominant limitation. But since the limitations inherently stimulate creation of new necessities, they facilitate the redefining of the context. Because the work compensates for the limitations of its space, it overcomes and, in effect, goes beyond these limitations. That is to say, the work does not intend to be site-specific, it rather attempts to specify a site.

**MM:** A few months have passed since our initial exchange, and, in the meantime, your work 'Another adaptation of the object to the ultimate form of perfection in the attempt to celebrate the center and not the middle' has "specified", as you say, the space at Stroom Den Haag. I think it also incorporated, quite admirably, our absolute need to project meaning: it invited a play of associations and made all possible at the same time. I have not been able to decide whether this is a Panopticon looking unto itself, an inverted tower, a scaffolding for an absent construction, a meditation on education, looking at how

the child moves from a stage of corporeal autonomy to becoming a part of the social body, observing norms and being rewarded with the benefits of art. All these and many other possibilities encouraged and held each other in check in the most diaphanous way; what is your take on how these play out against or with each other?

**AL:** I am tempted to simply say it is everything of the above and even more, or maybe just wish it could be, infinitely, everything organized in the order I want things to be, but unfortunately it is not. As obscure the title is, it nevertheless declares most literally, that it is not more than an adaptation in an attempt. A primal moment in a process in which a thing is not yet defined, and where multiple principal potentialities of what it could be still exist. Yet I do not wish to reduce the object to its elementary being, nor do I think I can. It is not a process of simplification that I am interested in, I am concerned with the possibility of connections and associations that I wish to specify. By giving order to things, not necessarily an order that stems from a logical system, but a structure so that its idea exists as long as things are positioned as I placed them. I do not need to refer to a specific object or to an idea, I only need objects and ideas to exist in reality. And since there is an infinite number of objects and ideas out there, my work maintains an existence specified by its assigned order.

In the accompanying exhibition reader I wanted no text, but visual notations only. There is a collection of things that serve as a guide to the work, not as things to look for in the work. These are images I decided to include, although there could have been other ones. It is a list of things in the following order: A sun-projecting tower, the European parliament, the Pyramid in Astana, the unfinished Ryungyong Hotel in Pyongyang, a control tower, a podium, a convention center, the two-mile-high Ultima tower, graphics of a parliaments sitting arrangement, graphics of a stadium sitting arrangement, interior of the German Bundestag, a convention at Casino Municipal, another convention, graphics of exit polls, the Arirang games, the Ferris wheel, the Pentagon, polls graphics, a preacher, graphics of exit polls and another preacher.



*Another Adaptation of the Object to the Ultimate Form of Perfection in the Attempt to Celebrate the Center and Not the Middle, 2008*  
*Since We Last Spoke About Monuments, Stroom, The Hague, NL*

**MM:** If I read this correctly, the work visualizes precisely the mutability of order, the minute dislocations and reconfigurations that could finally articulate – or propel -, a paradigm shift in how an object or an idea is conceived and used. And it does so by complicating things, rather than stripping them bare, by being that provisional deferral, however pleonastic this may sound. The combination of vulnerability and ambition that struck me with ‘Another Attempt...’ is perhaps the Order – dominating, powerless, strenuous, never declaring itself to be the temporary armistice of Orders -, that traverses European culture. What are the histories, of art or thought, that you connect your practice to? And how, given the overwhelming historical load in your work, would you visualize the art history of today? This is a professional reflex, but also a proposal to outline what I sense is your look at the origins of abstract art.

**AL:** I am interested in the Renaissance study of classical antiquity in the pursuit of depicting ideal form, just as much as I am

interested in Modernism's rejection of this tradition in order to bring about a utopian society, free of indoctrinated ideals. For me, this bipolar notion of formal or conceptual value and meaning points to the fundamentally questionable relationship between knowledge and progress. I'm drawn to the moments in art history where these types of philosophical conflicts arise, where elaborate models are created to settle questions of truth, and where - incomplete and self-referential as they may be - ideologies are ultimately formed.

I envy the idea of the 'Renaissance Man' in contrast to the disciplined Modernist: the well-educated genius who masters sculpture, painting, biology, architecture, philosophy, and physics... Still, in Modernism too there is this model within the Russian avant-garde: a well-educated artist mastering painting, sculpture, design, architecture, and photography... But unlike these two archetypes, I am not searching for new ideals and utopias, nor do I look for a mathematical truth or technological answer. I am interested in the possibilities that occur outside these defined ideals, the place where systems collapse and cease to function and where new, as-of-yet undefined situations occur. The work is a process of engaging, cross-referencing, and organizing a mass of things and information that would be otherwise discarded as irrelevant, left outside the construction of the Model.

For my upcoming exhibition 'Postponed Modernism' I will have a series of works celebrating man's striving for the perfection of form. Works by Albrecht Dürer, Kazimir Malevich and the Ferris wheel of the 1893 Chicago World Fair are some of the starting points of the works on show. A colossal wheel will dominate the main exhibition area; it is titled 'Untitled, a Proposal for a Universe Under Control' and it is there as a sketch or a thought to capture and order all things. Next to it will hang a massive black and white wall installation titled 'A Large Inverted Standard Brain on The Wall'. It is a painting of a big white circle, defined by a framing black square - thus the opposite of the standard brain. In the back room there will be another smaller installation titled 'An attempt to Rediscover the Power of Imagination II'. It is a painting of an incomplete dodecahedron on a panel mounted to the wall with an

elaborate system of wooden crossbars and supports beams that jut the painting out from the wall. On the floor in front of it stands a red monochromatic wooden chair. The complex wooden structure and the dysfunctional character of the chair both emphasize the nature of presentation, the mechanisms of persuasion, and the validation process of the Grand Idea (an attempt to construct another greater structure).