Sara Kramer *in conversation with* Katharina Wendler

Email, October 2020

KW: *Your installation at Haus Wien consists of anthropomorphic glass objects, some of them holding fluids. The objects are connected with tubes, evoking a sense of a network of organisms. Can you tell me how this work came about?*

SK: For the installation *Amorphous Solid,* my starting point was the notion of 'Big Data' – this relatively new era in which we are living in which information about our thoughts, bodies, habits and even our futures are increasingly monitored, measured, predicted and commodified. During the process I began to think about external and internal transportation systems of information and matter as metaphors for a virtual omnipresent economy that seemingly affects all aspects of our lives – our surroundings, bodies and our psyches. In external transport systems, commodities, information and data move through distribution networks, wires and fiber optic cables in order to generate revenue. Similarly, our connection with the outside world is often established by matter flowing through our digestive systems and into our surroundings. We become what we eat and what we eat becomes us. Hence, seeing from the perspective how the economy has become a virtual abstract entity that moves and expands already existing exterior and interior infrastructures, I wanted to create and examine an information process between my own body and economic and technological phenomena.

On a more practical level, I first 3D-scanned my body with a free app I had on my phone because I wanted to use the data points to digitally change the representation of my body's surface in a software program and transform it into new abstract configurations. Initially, I then wanted to 3D-print a selection of these renderings, but it turned out that it would have exceeded my budget, so instead I visually translated the 3D shapes into handmade clay forms, which I used to make the plaster molds, in which I finally blew the glass. Even though this decision might sound a little, well, inconsistent, I find economic obstacles interesting because the notion of the causes and effects of the surrounding economy in a broad sense plays a significant role in my practice. The financial frameworks around projects naturally define the possibilities and limitations of how an idea can be executed. Obviously in this case, what was supposed to be a digital process instead became an analogue one. However, the main idea was that I wanted to render the digital information of my body only to thereafter reinsert its surrogates in a physical space, manifested as fragile anthropomorphic glass objects. I was interested in the process of how the information used to materialize their forms had originally been extracted (under which terms and conditions was I e.g. able to use the free 3D body scanning app?).

At the exhibition at Haus Wien, the hollow glass objects were filled with water and various substances such as algae and probiotics, and connected on the ground via semi-transparent tubes, to enable the liquids to literally move and "exchange information" inside a hermetically sealed micro-network. In the beginning, each color was distinct and clear (e.g. turquoise, white and dark red – depending on the substance) but over the course of time the colors hybridized and transformed into a muddy brownish goo. It might be obvious, but I think we sometimes forget that data physically moves from one place to another, and I find this dynamic fascinating in a horrifying way!

KW: *How important is space, or the exhibition space, for your work? (Haus Wien was quite a special setting, I would say; did you have to adjust your work to this space?)*

SK: It is of course important for me to know in which context I show my work – both on a formal level, so for example how the space looks in terms of the architecture, size, maintenance of the space, but also the surrounding geographical, political, economic and historical context: Is it an artist run space or an institution? Is it funded by the government? Am I receiving a production grant or an artist fee – or is someone else involved receiving a fee? However, these considerations do not usually manifest directly in the work.
Haus Wien was a former residential building and car repair shop, which was going to be demolished immediately after the exhibition. In my opinion the ephemerality of the event accentuated the transitoriness of *Amorphous Solid* in which substances were moving, decaying and becoming something else. I installed my work outside in what I think was the most obscure corner of the courtyard. The location had seemingly been undisturbed by the former residents and changing businesses over the years, and therefore definitely had a very distinct ambience, which offered a sense of openness in terms of how to use the space in relation to my work. It was narrow and right next to the train tracks, and it had originally been covered with concrete but layers of dirt, grass, ivy and weeds had concealed the hard industrial surface over the course of time. The space seemed to have taken on a savage life of its own. I wanted to intertwine the silicone tubes, which connected the glass objects, with the chaotic network of the ivy roots, which had overgrown the entire facade and the ground on one side of the space. The combination of these two elements made me think of a rhizomatic network, which in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's theories is connected to non-hierarchical concepts of knowledge and hybridization as a strategy for reorganizing existing power structures.

KW: *You have repeatedly worked with glass as a sculptural material. What fascinates you about this material and will you continue to use it in your work?*

SK: To first take a step back, I have worked with various transparent materials over the past years – using glass, prints on transparent chiffon fabric or plastic foil. I think transparency simply has a strong aesthetic appeal and simultaneously a quality of quite literally abolishing a threshold between interior and exterior spaces. From another perspective, I find it interesting how transparency has also become a neoliberal buzzword, which indicates "sincerity" or having "nothing to hide" – this is e.g. expressed in terms such as 'financial transparency', 'transparent economies' or even 'transparent cities'. There is a paradoxical friction connected to the notion of transparency – both as an actual material and its symbolic meaning; it seems 'perfectly clear' and yet it is totally untrustworthy.
In the past couple of years, glass has been my main medium and I plan to continue exploring its potentiality. When I first began working with the material I wanted to know more about what it actually is, and that was when I learned that the scientific community hadn't been able to define whether glass is liquid or solid (!) and – just recently – agreed that glass is 'amorphous solid', which in scientific terms means that it is a "chaotic" material that is constantly fluctuating between being in a solid and liquid state – in other words: a random arrangement of atoms. I found this fact so fascinating that I even decided to steal the definition and use it as the title for the work which I showed at Haus Wien. Hence, *Amorphous Solid* refers directly to the inherent unstable transitory quality of the material, while simultaneously carrying the potentiality of encompassing other, more abstract meanings in terms of its 'in-between quality'; glass is no longer and not yet, and at the same time seemingly driven by a desire to assume a concrete, albeit temporary, form.

The light and its changes in the exhibition space have also become more interesting to me in relation to working with glass. If there is daylight, the hollow spaces inside the glass objects become activated in such a beautiful way due to the refraction of the light. The refraction occurs because the speed of the light slows down and therefore bends due to the glass being thicker than air. What I simultaneously find "dangerous" about working with glass is the material's inherent seductiveness and beauty. This fact constantly reminds me to keep a critical distance towards working with glass, and not merely use it for its aesthetic quality, but to always try to have a clear idea of why I am using it. However, distinguishing can be a grey zone since the material can inform the work, in the same way as the idea can inform the process.

KW: *Do psychological phenomena translate into material? Would you say that this is an important part of your artistic practice? (I am thinking here of your 2019 work* Vita Activa *in which you explored states of fatigue, exhaustion, and burn-out.)*

SK: Yes, I am interested in investigating and materializing an intimate relation between mental processes and economic and technological phenomena. In connection with the work *Vita Activa*, my starting point was the notion of the 'Burnout Society', where subjects are no longer driven to perform/work by the external conditions and demands but instead are steered by an internalized drive that is exercised under their own supervision or by the so-called quantified self.
In collaboration with a modern dancer I developed a video work that included what I refer to as 'exhaustion choreographies', which unfolded as a series of rehearsed and improvised deconstructed movements of collapse, falling and lying positions. Another part of the exhibition *Vita Activa* was a series of transparent and golden handblown glass sculptures which I installed alongside half-empty Club-Mate bottles, to visually juxtapose the sculptures inherent fragility and latent destruction with how the bottles represented accelerating energy, speed, performativity – yet at the same time fragility.
As a side note, the Club-Mate hype has already peaked some years ago and is now far more mainstream and widespread, but when I first moved to Berlin to study art in 2012, it was immediately clear that there was a lot of identity and cultural positioning related to drinking exactly that energy drink (as opposed to drinking e.g. Red Bull, which I never saw anyone drink at art school). The use of the brand is therefore in a sense a reference to my own life as a "young Berlin-based artist". However, it is important for me to transgress the individual imperative and relate my own experience of being a freelancer in a highly competitive precarious cultural field to surrounding social and political phenomena.

KW: *It seems you mainly work with sculpture and installation, with a conceptual twist. Which techniques, methods, materials interest you (in addition to those already mentioned)?*

SK: I mainly think of my work as conceptual sculpture but I don't want to define how others should see it. I try to let an idea define which techniques and materials I want to use/make sense to me. Having said that, I really do enjoy working with clay for example, preparing the molds for glass blowing, but I never use clay in the final work, only for the process. Clay is obviously a very spontaneous and tactile material, and yet you can have a lot of control over the material.
I am also very interested in reading critical theory that is related to a wide range of topics such as power, economy and technology and using it as a starting point for my work process by thinking about how certain aspects of the texts interest me and can be interpreted and translated into a visual language.

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KW: *I first came across your work in a group show at the project space +DeDe in Berlin two years ago. At the time you were showing a work titled* Visible Economy *which consisted of three sculptures, all chiffon on customized steel racks. The rather delicate textile prints depicted ATMs or cash machines and were installed in such a way that they reminded me of beach towels that were hung up to dry on metal racks. The topics that you mention – economy, technology, power – resonate quite strongly in this work. Can you tell me more about it?*

SK: It's interesting you ask because I think that my field of interest and the works I have made since then derive from the process of making *Visible Economy*. Yet when I look back at this specific work today, it already seems rather distant, but re-examining it makes me understand better where I stand now.

Visible Economy dates back to Spring 2018, and it was mainly inspired by two things: the first being the book 'The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance' by Franco "Bifo" Berardi, which was actually widely criticized for its lack of scientific integrity. The other incentive was simply observations of the presence and absence of physical money when traveling back and forth between Berlin and Copenhagen (which I do quite a lot!). It has changed a great deal the last few years in Berlin but it is still common knowledge that you need to bring cash if you want to grab a drink or snack at the night shop, aka "Späti". Denmark has traditionally been much more pro-digitalization than Germany, and already for quite some years now physical cash is rarely even seen or exchanged. Some people in Denmark don't even have a conventional wallet or purse, instead they have a 'cardholder' or pay and receive money via an app on their smartphones. Anyway, where all this was going back then, was an interest in the impact of the visibility vs. the invisibility of money. The way I interpreted Berardi's theory was that the dephysicalization of money is part of the general process of abstraction, which is part of the all-encompassing tendency of capitalism. He refers to Baudrillard's text 'Symbolic Exchange and Death' (1976) and especially the section about the "hyperreality of floating values", meaning that value is no longer tied down to anything "real", and digitalization and virtualization all take part in the techno-capitalist's agenda. I wanted to visualize the process from concreteness to abstraction by documenting what is already becoming obsolete: the ATM machine – you physically have to walk over to the machine, maybe stand in line, and then get your physical paper money. The transparency of the chiffon fabric – on which the photos of the ATMs were printed – in a sense became an emblem of an unstable place between here and nowhere, and now and the future where there will presumably be an omnipresence, yet total physical absence, of money and finance.

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Sara Kramer (born 1985 in Copenhagen) is a Danish-American visual artist who is based in Berlin. She began her studies in 2009 at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and transferred to the sculpture department at Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin in 2012, where she completed her diploma in 2016. Since then she has exhibited internationally, for example at Floating Projects in Hong Kong and the Kópavogur Art Museum in Iceland. Since 2018, Kramer co-organizes and curates an annual exhibition titled *KOLONIEN* in Rødovre, Denmark, which brings together up to 50 Danish and international artists. In 2021, Kramer will organize and participate in a group exhibition at Alte Münze, Berlin, and attend the Mount Lebanon Residency in Upstate New York.

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Katharina Wendler (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

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In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format __in conversation with__, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

__in conversation with__ is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

E x h i b i t i o n

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