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The Origin of the Space from the Rectangle

Notes on the sculptural image spaces of Benjamin Appel

矩形空间的原点——记本杰明·阿普尔的雕塑图像空间

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About the Author

Stefanie Patruno, born in 1979, studied art history, classical and Christian archeology at the Ruprechts-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. From 2008-2016 curator for sculpture and new media at the Kunsthalle Mannheim. Since 2016 Deputy Director, Curator and Collection Manager at the Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt.

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史蒂芬妮·帕特鲁诺，1979年生，曾在海德堡的路布里希特-卡尔斯大学学习艺术史、古典与基督考古学。2008至2016年间担任曼海姆艺术中心的雕塑与新媒体部策展人。2016年起担任达姆施塔特玛蒂尔德霍尔艺术博物馆群副总监、策展人兼收藏主管。

The Origin of the Space from the Rectangle

Notes on the sculptural images spaces of Benjamin Appel

Stefanie Patruno July 2017

Walls separated from floors, angled layouts, ceilings that float on tables, dreary concrete surfaces, second-hand furniture stacked high mutating to become something else: a pedestal. In such exhibitions, for the artist Benjamin Appel, colour and material are of primary importance – deconstructed, subjected, drawn out, turned upside down and all limits removed to leave: space.

The focus is his relationship to surface, material, and colour, in front of a backdrop set by the question of how space can be formed and structured from these constituent elements. With its pure, geometric organization his exhibitions can seem static, austere, unsettled, but they are also full of energy and somehow poetic. When one enters these three-dimensional image spaces created by Appel, habitual visual systems of coordinating ourselves in space slip to form variables that are dependent on diverse artistic states of being – in order to seamlessly weave them together the artist builds a creative tension between sculpture, everyday objects, installation, architecture, painting and film.

At this point we are already inside, and thus part of, Benjamin Appel's multi-dimensional image spaces, that in turn enter into a relationship with the larger composition created by space, the material compositions on the wall, even with his serial oil paintings or moving video images.

The exhibition titled *Flowerbed in the Cellar*, 2017 at PIFO Gallery, Beijing effectively demonstrates how the extant walls, breaches and paths, the horizontals and verticals, can be woven together with contemporary materials, objects, and art works. Starting in the central room, the viewer meanders over several levels, through multiple image spaces visually tied to one another. By using the most unspectacular materials and methods Appel denies the possibility of a clear separation between form and space and thus, it is just as impossible to establish a clear categorization of the genre-form-transcending image-space amalgam he creates. This complicates not only the clear location of objects in space, but also the positioning of the viewers in that space. They are without orientation in this new visual experience and experience of space.

Located chronologically between constructivist utopias, minimalistic gestures and the here and now, with *Flowerbed in the Cellar*, Appel creates fragile, but also sensual, in part even frightening models of space. Using newly constructed concrete, plaster, and metal surfaces, 15 geometric, abstract paintings as well as text and video works, the artist balances the abstract meaning of space as concept, location and material.

In this way, the foyer space on the gallery's ground floor is dominated by two rectangular surfaces, which destabilizes the three-way relationship between walls, ceiling and floor due to their size, mass and material. All practical functions are removed, when the rectangular surfaces installed at various heights jut into the respective adjacent space and in that way, produce a connection with the next room. Simultaneously heavy and floating, the smooth slabs of plaster compete with the porous concrete surface for supremacy of the space. Several metal objects that have come from a former poultry farm carry the fragile, five-meter long plaster surface. Completely removed from its actual origin, this central element structures the space and confronts the viewers with real and fictive images of space and surface.

In this way, the material, interventions and effects – strictly oriented by form – unite all of the essential sculptural principles and methods that have been fundamental to Appel's work since 2009. The clearly defined relationship to the location of the presentation is one of his central artistic strategies. The association to space as a conceptual starting point can make the real location become an artistic one in which all of its elements are equally integrated. All of the sculptural visual spaces that Appel has installed in a specific place become a unique and unreproducible event.

However, Appel's materials are clearly not 'art' in and of themselves. They are set pieces from our everyday lives that unwittingly – when placed in the gallery, the studio, or the museum – become a part of new events with their rather recalcitrant allure. The seeming contradiction between formal clarity and content-based openness is consciously balanced by the 'spatial artist' with the use of highly contrasting materials and material qualities: transparency versus the opaque, brittleness against softness, bright colours against dark. Industrial products meet intellectual styling, inserts against breaches: a calculated interplay of materials and methods with which the transformation of the concrete space and the perception of it is created. This steers the viewers' attention towards questions of: material and rhythm, colour and form, gravity and mass, geometry and lines.

Again and again, Appel transports the reality of the pedestal back to the sculpture. But then he steps out from behind the utilitarian, service-function and fuses the elements with the room to create an amalgam of forms, like in the exhibition *Filling the Basement with Concrete*¹, 2017. In that presentation, the placement of individual elements, extending over several rooms, was based on strictly oriented right angles. Developing this idea further, the rectangular room is also at the centre of the exhibition *Flowerbed in the Cellar* at PIFO Gallery. As a constituent element of our technified and clearly structured everyday world, the right angle is further illuminated as a part of a larger experiment. In this way, the strict organization of all spatial elements in the gallery are reflected in the right angle and its

¹ Benjamin Appel, in the exhibition catalogue *Den Keller mit Beton füllen (Fill the cellar with Concrete)* Galerie der Stadt Sindelfingen am Sonntag, 2017

surfaces articulated in the room, even in the painting with the title *Putting the Table in the Corner*, 2015-2017.

The right angle already forms a central visual motif in the works and extends also into Appel's paintings – fields of various sizes and colours overlap and condense into multiple layers of paint. Thus, the almost 100 superimposed right angles are the result of a process of convergence towards the phenomenon of spatial structures on the levels of the image-space. Like a reservoir of ideas, the abstract compositions transmit between the spaces, architectural constructs, everyday objects as well as the video work. Even the video unmistakably refers to the right angle as a returning organizational format that cultivates natural life forms itself: fish swim circles in the right angles spaces created by various aquariums, with in turn refers to a text on the wall that searches in vain for explanations for the meaning and function of rectangular aquariums.

Sculpture has experienced enormous developments like no other artistic form. More than any other time, during the last 20 years it has experienced an unprecedented renaissance as an artistic form of expression: today sculpture expands its borders in all directions. Today sculpture is allowed to do everything and can do anything! If one understands the modern period in the first decades of the 20th century and then the 1960s as a starting point of this upheavals in art, Benjamin Appel's work can be viewed as sculpture of the most recent generation. As an artist, and since the earliest part of his career, Appel has transformed the demands of sculpture as a practice, questioned, radicalized and reinterpreted them.

His sculptural image-spaces, which can be encountered in the exhibition *Flowerbed in the Cellar*, can be seen as the systematic extended development of its previous exhibition-projects such as *The Bird in its Nest*, *Filling the Basement with Concrete*² or *Walls are Stairs without Floors*. Through the strict network of relationships that Benjamin Appel creates between a location, objects, and viewers, he suspends the architectonic connections and forces us to recognize and accept the instability in our spatial experience. What makes up the quality of this spatially defined total work of art is that it is not about seeing the familiar in a new way, but rather always counters our fundamental yearning, thought for spatial anchors, with a firm and clearly defined artistic form.

² Benjamin Appel, from the exhibition catalogue *Den Keller mit Beton füllen (Fill the Cellar with Concrete)* Galerie der Stadt Sindelfingen am Sonntag, 2017

矩形空间的原点

——记本杰明·阿普尔的雕塑图像空间

史蒂芬妮·帕特鲁诺 2017年7月

那些与地板相分隔的墙壁、倾斜的陈设、悬浮于桌面上的天花板、看似庸常的混凝土、二手家具堆叠而突变为另一物体，即一种基底。对于艺术家本杰明·阿普尔（Benjamin Appel）而言，颜色与材料在其一系列展览中占据了首要位置，被解构的、受限的、延伸的、上下颠倒的种种束缚都一一摆脱了空间的限制。

在画面背景中，艺术家与表面、材料和颜色之间的关系成为了焦点，这一背景的构成源于对两个问题的探索，即空间如何构成，以何种方式由必要组成部分建构起来。归因于纯粹的几何框架，他的展览总是呈现平静、严谨与不安，却也蕴含着能量与些许诗意。不同于在空间内总会进行自我调整的习惯性视觉系统，当我们走进由阿普尔所缔造的三维图像空间时，它会产生新的变化以适应多重艺术形态，并且与艺术家天衣无缝地融为一体，通过雕塑、日常物品、装置、建筑、绘画和影像与艺术家建立起一种紧密的创意关系。

由此而言，我们已身处并成为本杰明·阿普尔多维图像空间内部的一部分，同时因此而走进由空间所缔造的又一宏大作品之中，与墙壁上的材料结构甚至与一系列的油画作品或动态视频图像建立起了一种关系。

于2017年在北京偏锋新艺术空间举办的名为《地下室花圃》的展览有力地呈现了现有的墙壁、间隙、线路、纵横线条之间如何与当代材料、物体和艺术品之间相互交汇。从中心位置的展厅开始，观者迂回经过几个不同平面时他们会与多个图像空间在视觉层面上紧密相联。由于采用了最不足为奇的材料与方法，阿普尔实际上否认了形式和空间之间的明确分割点，因此，他也无法为他所创造的超越类型与形式的图像空间结合体给出明确的分类。这使得空间中的物体置放变得复杂起来，同时身处此空间内的观众所处的位置也变得繁复，如此一来，他们的新视觉体验与空间体验似乎失去了方向。

在构成主义、极简主义的形态和当代之间游离，阿普尔藉由《地下室花圃》创造了一个脆弱且感性的空间。盛放着新鲜铸造出的水泥、石膏和金属框架，以及十几幅几何抽象油画和影像文字作品，艺术家平衡着有关观念、场地和材料的抽象意味。

由此，两块矩形表面占据了画廊一层的大厅空间的重要位置，并且由于其尺寸、规模与材质使得墙壁、天花板和地面之间的三重关系亦发生变化。当置放在不同高度的矩形表面与相邻空间相接时，它们原有的实际功能被移除，并与相邻空间建立起新

的联系。看似沉重又颇不稳固，石膏的平滑表面与粗糙的混凝土表面仿似正在为获取最优空间而互相竞争。长达五米看似易碎的石膏表面由取材于一家家禽农场的金属物品承载着。当实际属性被完全移除后，该中心元素在构成当前这个新空间的同时，又以真实且虚构的空间和表面图像面对所有观众。

如此一来，材料与其所产生的介入和效果——严格以形式为导向的材料和效果——统一了所有基本雕塑准则和方法，这些准则和方法自 2009 年以来对阿普尔的创作尤为重要。明确界定与展示场地的关系一直是阿普尔最重视的艺术策略之一。将与空间的联系视作为出发点，无疑可以促进实际场地转化为一个艺术空间，而在此空间所有的构成元素融合为一。阿普尔在一个具体场地所构筑的全部雕塑视觉空间则统一构成一个独特而又不可复制的完整事件。

然而，阿普尔所选的材料显然并不属于“艺术”本身。虽然这些材料来源于我们的日常生活，然而一旦被呈现于画廊、工作室或美术馆，它们便带着其原本令人不可抗拒的诱惑力不经意演变成了一系列事件中的一部分。通过利用高度对比的材料及其属性——即透明与晦暗、脆弱与柔和、亮色与暗色之间的对照，这位“空间艺术家”有意识地平衡了形式上的清晰度与基于内容的开放性二者之间看似矛盾的关系。当工业产品与理性造型碰撞，当间隙被填充，一种基于精心计算的材料与方法的相互作用诞生，接踵而来的是原混凝土空间的转换以及观者对它的感知。因此，观众的注意力也会被转向以下议题的思考，即材料与韵律、颜色与形式、引力与质量、几何图形与线条。

阿普尔将基底的真实面貌重新引入到雕塑的层面，然而，正如他 2017 年举办的展览《将混凝土填满地下室》¹所展示一样，此后他又摆脱了功利与服务功能，并将空间的各个元素合为一体从而创造出又一个新形式的结合体。在该展览中，多个严格按照定向直角进行放置的独立元素分布于多个不同空间。为进一步拓展这一想法，于偏锋新艺术空间举办的《地下室花圃》展览中，矩形空间依旧安排在展览场地的中心地带。更进一步来讲，直角作为被日益技术化、结构化的世界的一个组成部分，一直被视作一场宏观实验的一部分。由此，直角和由此互相衔接的空间表面体现了画廊所有空间元素的严格布局，包括题为《将桌子置于角落》（2015—2017）的画作也凸显了这一做法。

直角已在整个作品中形成了一个中心视觉主题并延伸至阿普尔的所有绘画中，布满各种尺寸与色彩的平面互相重叠，并且凝结为油彩的多重层次。图像空间与水平空间结构互相聚合造就了一百多个直角的堆叠。如同一个汇聚了各种观念的蓄水池，这些抽象作品在不同空间之间、建筑物之间、日常物品之间、以及影像作品之间互相蔓

¹本杰明·阿普尔展览《将混凝土填满地下室》画册，辛德尔芬根市美术馆，辛德尔芬根，2017

延传播开来。毫无疑问，通过来回游动于直角鱼池空间内的鱼，影像作品将直角视作一种自然而然培养自然生活结构的回归形式，如若想通过墙壁上的文字探寻矩形水池的意义和功能的阐释,那将是一件徒劳无益的事。

与其他任何一种艺术形态不同的是，雕塑已经历了最为巨大的变化发展。不同于以往任何时候，在过去二十年间雕塑作为一种艺术形式的表达已经历了一场前所未有的复兴，如今雕塑已延伸至无限可能。今天的雕塑不拘一格，几乎无所不能。如果我们了解 20 世纪前几十年并将 60 年代视为艺术变革的起点，那么本杰明·阿普尔的创作就可以被视为最新时代的雕塑。作为一名艺术家，自他的职业生涯起步阶段以来，阿普尔已将对雕塑的需求转化为一种实践，同时进行追问、推进与重新诠释。

正如观者在《地下室花圃》展览中所见一般，从某种程度而言，他的雕塑图像空间是对先前展览项目的系统化延伸，包括《巢中之鸟》、《将混凝土填满地下室》²以及《墙是没有地板的台阶》。通过自己所创造的场地、物体和观者之间的紧密关系网络，本杰明·阿普尔将建筑意义上的关系搁置一旁，引导观者识别并接受其空间体验的不稳定性。总之，并非一种用来看旧事物的新方法，而是一种不同于日常期待却又停靠于空间的坚定而明确的艺术形式塑造了这一充满空间意味的完整艺术作品。

²本杰明·阿普尔展览《将混凝土填满地下室》画册，辛德尔芬根市美术馆，辛德尔芬根，2017