

Manfred Pernice

Vienna, Austria

Secession



Manfred Pernice, *sculpturama*, 2010, Installation view

The sculptural potential of the built environment plays a central role in Manfred Pernice's work. This was clear from the start, as one entered Secession's main gallery through a plywood construction based on the form of a simple road overpass (*Brücke*, Bridge, all works 2010). Visitors standing on the bridge, which could be accessed via an integrated staircase, were greeted by a scene suggesting seasonal labour, sparsely equipped with a laundry drying rack, work clothes and a chair.

This elevated spot also offered the best view: The exhibition "sculpturama" presented itself as both a conference and an office party for objects. The idea that objects were meeting here as beings opened up a field of social and aesthetic tensions. Almost automatically, one credited these beings with an unspoken awareness of their origins (province, suburb, city), status and position in a hierarchy. There were intimations of career moves, promotion, rediscovery and posthumous recognition.

Some of the many pieces of pottery and crockery arranged on several tables were not without a certain snobbishness (*Liquidation Tischwelten 2*, Liquidation of Table Worlds 2). The historical origins of the individual items ranged across the 19th and 20th centuries: ceramics by Strehla (the East German Cinderella of the tableware and tea service world) were outshone by Baccarat crystal from France. What the artefacts shared was their endurance and literal "survival" of war and hardship "minor biographies

within bigger, and in some cases tragic, events of European history; and they were set apart by their different perceived values as unimpressive items for practical use or as high-status handicraft.

Many exhibits, grouped loosely by theme, were presented in unpretentious vitrines, more reminiscent of flea market finds or items in a local history museum than earnestly proto-scientific artistic research. One of the artefacts was a commercial inquiry from 1946: In businesslike terms, the letter asks whether the Strehla ceramic works might be interested in purchasing "1000 kg of bones" from an unnamed source. The war being recently over at the time, this request had a macabre ring to it, recalling the infamous lampshades allegedly made from human skin in Buchenwald.

With his "Hoods" series that began in the late 1980s, Richard Prince skilfully combined painting and amateur auto-repairs by hanging what the British call "car bonnets" as paintings. Pernice's answer to this is a slightly rusted, semicircular awning in sun-bleached sky-blue (*Untitled*), such as might once have hung over the street vending window of an Italian ice cream parlour – faded *dolce vita* instead of rowdy Americana. Overall, the show came across as entirely European, or rather: It suggested the nostalgic history of an almost disappeared Europe, tinted in dull pastel shades, of a landscape and an era in which objects and artefacts were still privileged and burdened with the task of representing cultural peculiarities and chauvinistic claims to prestige.

The abundance of possible readings of Pernice's work – art historical, culture historical, narrative – was reflected in formal terms in the vertically arranged stacked sculptures consisting of simple, partly painted, geometric pieces of wood, piled on top of each other: diversity as a modular system (*Aufbau* and *Aufbau 2*, *Set-Up* and *Set-Up 2*). Nevertheless, the works do not submit to mere formal arbitrariness or the hip "whatever" stance that is currently rife, not least among the practitioners of contemporary sculpture whose work shows signs of Pernice's influence. This was evident in seemingly casual but ingenious details like the strip of foam rubber which gently strokes a touchingly gigantic old-school ghetto blaster at every turn of the rotating sculpture *o.7.* (*Untitled*). Or the miniature key-ring sculptures which cling symbiotically to their "host", their "mother sculpture", like brightly patterned little cleaner wrasses. In a hidden corner, a television screen was showing a popular Danish detective series. More bizarre than mysterious, this element ultimately underscored the dusty domesticity and the informal charm that ran through the whole exhibition.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

—by *Daniel Horn*

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