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On the Beauty of the Normal and the Poetry of the Everyday

Some thoughts on the works of Sakir Gökçebag

In his work, Sakir Gökçebag deconstructs the various dimensions of our everyday life to reveal its complexity and the multiple facets of reality this yields. The artist, who was born in 1965 in Turkey and currently resides in Hamburg, studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Istanbul. After completing his dissertation, he attended the Düsseldorf Art Academy on a DAAD grant, where he was awarded the Markus Lüpertz Prize. From the very beginning, the organization of three-dimensional objects in a given space played a decisive role in his work, which originally was focused upon graphic arts and painting. Today, his work is primarily determined by ready-made style object-based and spatial installations, in which he removes everyday objects from their customary contexts, charging them with new, often absurd levels of meaning through serial reproduction, deformation, and deconstruction. Parallel to this, since the 1990's Gökçebag has been involved in the production of photographs of displaced, cropped or also artificially manipulated realities. In these, he reworks objects from real life with the aid of thread and scissors, subsequently depicting the former in their altered state. The viewers are then faced with the question whether they are being confronted with the results of actual production or virtual post-production, a strategy, by way of which the artist, in a manner similar as in the case of the objects, conceives various levels of reality to question the viewers' structures of perception.

Objects of desire, or on concepts for an alternative logic in our world of objects

We live in a designed and thoroughly constructed world, in which the natural has largely been superseded by the cultural practices of man. Everything we use has been devised, produced, and mediated through others. Today, designers are the composers of our world. They determine how we sit, what we wear, and what we are supposed to eat. In consequence, we have long been deprived of our capacity for making our own decisions. In pre-modern times, man was more autarchic in his social environment and more concentrated on his immediate context. He lived in closer connection to nature, from which he learned and from which he obtained the raw materials for his existence. The end products with and from which the individual lived were partially produced by one's own hand. Yet, although the whole world has virtually become a village for us, we are no longer able to manufacture anything ourselves. Thus, we are caught in the paradox of a theoretical omnipresence and availability of products and their practical inaccessibility and unavailability. Because of this dilemma, we are dependent on the manual labor of people from countries, the geographical location of which we have difficulty finding on the world map. Our service, recreation, and entertainment society is amusing itself to death and in the process is being buried under the objects of everyday life, with which we connect the hope for meaning in the social vacuum of our existence. Disposable society! What an ironical term, when, in fact, we identify ourselves today more than ever through our possessions. Thus, the questions pertaining to our identity have only short-term significance since after all they ultimately end up in the garbage can.

And still we must ask ourselves: how well do we really know the world and the objects of which it consists? Since, according to Heidegger, in the language of philosophy all that which exists in terms of being-in-the-world exists as an object, in order to understand reality we must learn to know the objects, or—as Heidegger puts it—the articles of use (what he calls *Zeug*), which permanently surround us and from which we form our world. Since the nature of *Zeug* is founded in its function, its social dimension is determined by means of its forms of utilization. These are meticulously defined so they can easily be validated at a later point. A function is ascribed to each object, defining it and serving as a basis for determining its social context. If we extract the object from its original context and translocate it to another context, as already Marcel Duchamp did in his procedure of the ready-made, the object loses the majority of its characteristics and the contents of its former context, and becomes charged with new meanings. Resultantly, both the dimensions of the object as such are extended and the manners in which we experience it are questioned.

This process and the alternative conceptions of everyday phenomena thus attained are of fundamental significance in Sakir Gökçebag's works. These, in turn, question the one-dimensionality of our perception and render alternative versions of our world as well as of the phenomena from which this world consists. The artist's work makes lucid that our limited constructs of reality are based on objects, which in most cases have their origins in places beyond our spheres of knowledge and influence. Because of this limited knowledge of the world already the modern individual of the last century became dependent of the machines of the motorized environment. The post-postmodern individual has long exceeded the stage of dependence and has himself become a cyborg in the Hades of microtechnology. Gökçebag's works are directed at inducing a new understanding of our reality, which is only possible through alternative decodings of our world of objects. In his work, the viewers can discover alternative constructs of the everyday and the normal, aiding them in developing new levels of perception and consciousness. His works point out that—even if the former institutions dedicated to providing meaning such as religion, science, and politics are no longer able to provide us with coherent answers to the questions pertaining to our current disaster—we should still not give up the hope of understanding reality. According to the Japanese curator Yuko Hasegawa, art supplies information on how to survive and, as the innumerable exhibition events and biennales of the past twenty years prove, is again increasingly politically and socially engaged. If, however, we assume that all knowledge is relative and evanescent as well as geopolitically conditioned, and that furthermore the primary objective of art production should not be linear knowledge production since it would otherwise become a pure form of science, art must pose the question as to the mode of its own commitment.

In times in which answers become arbitrary, posing questions becomes all the more important. Thus, a duty of art might consist in creating questions instead of answers. Exactly this is what Sakir Gökçebag's works do. They put into perspective the nature of our world of object and induce the development of alternative forms, which are always already latently inherent in the original design. Like the “open,” unbiased eye of a child, the questioning artist also reveals to the viewers how to look behind what is known in order to penetrate the unknown. We should learn from this energy. It enables art to be socially engaged and relevant since it enriches processes of human communication and perception. Insofar, as we only see what we believe to know, we must first learn to see before we can perceive and understand. In terms of being conscious of the viewers and its responsibility towards these, contemporary art should therefore be a school of perception. In this sense, art might point out to the viewers how to create a wide-angle perspective, enabling these to understand the visible and to discover the invisible. Sakir Gökçebag's work is such a school of perception. It questions our illusion of reality, which is pressed into a collective construct through social regulations and is misconceived by us as a universal truth. For Gökçebag this mechanism is problematic. Through his works, we discover other dimensions of everyday life and realize how unconsciously we move through the world and avail ourselves of its objects without giving these any significant attention. Thus, for instance, we use a chair and sit down on it without having further perceived it. After getting

out of the chair, we have already forgotten it and in retrospect can usually no longer reconstruct it in our mind. We almost blindly trust in what we know. Yet how are we to progress if we only perceive what we understand? How are we to discover and learn about those phenomena, which we have previously failed to understand?

Serial beauty or on the poetic logic inherent in the absurdity of everyday life

Let me to pursue some thoughts on the formal and conceptual nature of the artist's works. One of their dominant characteristics is the use of series or sequences. In works such as (Roll of Toilet Paper, Page 2/3) or (Broom, Page 9) Sakir Gökçebag takes everyday objects, which normally exist in a singular form, from their original context, reduplicates these, and places them into a new context. However, in opposition to Minimal art of the 1960's, he goes beyond the confines of their purely serial character in order to create alternative levels of meaning, which extend the merely visual plane. In contrast to Minimalism, the work does not only consist of what the viewer sees, but also of that which the viewer may personally project into the work. The artist thus allows for various versions of reality in his works. An accumulation of roles of toilet paper might be transformed into an ornamental symphony, which exceeds the formal limitations of the circle as well as the contextual limitations of the material's customary use as a toilet article. The rigid form of the tissue role counterbalanced by the unraveled lengths of paper serves to create a new overall image, which in retrospect also affects the perception of the original object. After viewing his work, one will never again perceive a roll of toilet paper in the same manner as before. Other objects as, for instance, brooms, are often presented by the artist in groups and placed into a new compositional context. To emphasize the effect of the new in the old or rather of the unknown in the familiar, Gökçebag clips the broom into shape according to a particular aesthetic formula.

In other works such as (Prayer Beads, Page 15), the artist presents the object in its singularity, exhibiting it in different versions placed side by side in a row on the wall. And yet the prayer beads appear like animate organisms, writhing as if to flee from the nail that retains them. It seems as if the dynamic with which the prayer beads rotate in the hands of believers has so highly charged them that they have now become living beings.

Parallel to the serial reduplication, Gökçebag also employs the medium of deformation. By cropping his objects, for example in the work (Shoes), the severed parts develop an independent dynamic, which makes them appear almost autonomous. Nonetheless, these retain a formal and conceptual connection with the objects to which they originally belonged, forming a line or a circle in conjunction with these. This method appears like a metaphor that reveals references to our social system, which, in turn, consists of innumerable partial systems that simultaneously have interrelationships with one another and to a certain degree exist autarchically.

In Sakir Gökçebag's work, the ready-made is of fundamental significance. And yet the artist's interventions are not limited to pure translocations, but encompass transformations, which give the objects an independent existence exceeding their mere material and conceptual presence. **The artist is a master of references.**

He borrows the ready-made from Duchamp, the critical irony from Dadaism, the absurd psychological dimension of our world of objects from Surrealism, the emphasis on geometry from Bauhaus aesthetics, and from Minimalism the sequence and serial production.

Beyond this, his works display cultural interrelationships, which are immediately recognizable for those with knowledge of Turkish culture. The row of shoes is familiar from hallways of houses or the entrances of mosques. The broom and the prayer beads are also objects, which one can encounter everywhere on the streets of Istanbul. However, Gökçebag develops an alternative logic of the world in which a wonderful balance between the aesthetic and conceptual aspects is maintained. A poetry of silence surrounds his works. Their aura is determined both by the memory of the objects original utilization and by the transformations induced by the artist. In the

exhibition space, the object is altered and its otherwise so omnipresent owner is absent. And still the latter's presence remains palpable because the objects function as substitutes. They tell the owner's as well as their own stories, lending the work - in spite of the strong aesthetic and conceptual dominance inherent in it - a narrative dimension.

Apart from the poetic aspect, Sakir Gökçebag's works ultimately even contain a political dimension because they address the responsibility of the viewers to discover the various levels of their reality and to dig deeper for truths. In his works, the artist proves that the obvious and customary does not necessarily have to be the final version of reality. He demands active viewers who consciously look behind the barriers of their perception and take the risk to cast their thoughts further than ever before. These viewers become creators of their own reality, changing from passive recipients into active designers of their own individual worlds.

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