

A Poem Is A Machine Made Out Of Words

Nicola Arthen

Laserprint on Paper

2015

Prologue

What I saw in Kassel (1: *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, autumn 2013 to spring 2014 at *Fridericianum*, Kassel.) last year has made me realize that this must be an upcoming tendency in the approach of art.

It is hard to pin it down, but the works I saw in the exhibition seemed to have been made so informedly. I believe the supplement of text in the practice of two artists, having exhibited at the show, is symptomatic to a broader shift in contemporary art. The term *text* being an approximation here for a multi-layered connection to theory.

Introduction

This connection to theory finds its form on one hand in the self-written exhibition texts as with Katja Novitskova and her strategic approach to the creation of both her sculptures and statements. On

the other hand, appearing in the argumentative character and causal logic of the works of Pamela Rosenkranz, advocated by texts of contemporary philosophers. Both artists contextualize their work within recent scientific insights and their philosophical implications, expanding these fields with their artistic practice as a form of speculation. They understand the role of their artworks as part of a socio-economic system and know how to make their works understandable within it.

In this thesis, I will introduce the investigations of both artists through their texts and works, examine why we often find actual consumer products in the latter and show that despite their austere appearance, their theoretical contextualisation has to be understood as a form of abstracting.

A POEM IS A MACHINE
MADE OUT OF WORDS

(2: taken from Heatsick's track *Re-Engineering* from the same-named Full-Length, released on Nov. 26th, 2013 on *PAN*, quoting William Carlos Williams from: *Williams's introduction to The Wedge*, in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (NY: New Directions, 1969), p. 256)

The title of this thesis is a quote by William Carlos Williams and appears in the song *Re-Engineering* by Heatsick in his same-named release of 2013.

Heatsick next to his music career is a Berlin-based artist and curator who identifies his album with many of the befriended artist's approaches whose works were shown in the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*. To me, this quote evokes a powerful image to condense the tendency, I am characterizing in this thesis.

Something poetic—the artwork—is able to communicate itself here by building upon the strategic use of text, intentionally abstracting our view of the artwork.

The artworks I will describe in this text, despite our experience of it on a poetic level at last, might appear with a machine-like character: argumentative and not uncommonly industrially manufactured. Besides understanding its accompanying, carefully composed text as “a machine made out of words”, it places the work and its activating potential in a framework of contemporary scientific insights or speculative philosophy that is considerably rational or prosaic.

Main

The first time I encountered the work of Katja Novitskova was in 2013 during the *Open Days of Rijksakademie*, where she was a resident at that time. Before I have seen any work physically on display, I had

already found out about her practice through images of her works, texts written about it and a video of a *TED-talk* she has been giving in that same year. In this talk, as on her website, she illustrated—in the bigger picture of evolution strategies—how her *Approximation* series of works (since 2012), sculptures of animal cut-outs, came into being. These cropped, large-scale stock photographs of cute animals printed on stands of aluminium dibond are an exaggerated display of the idea that pictures of cute animals, being spread (reposted and becoming viral) on the internet, can be seen as a form of their “breeding”. Novitskova argues, some animals have a natural capability to produce affection with humans that expands to their reproduced existence within images. By this speculation, Novitskova expands the understanding of the internet as something in which natural energies operate as active forces, while animals as complex beings expand their capabilities to the technological realm. Hereby, she

suggests a connection between a seemingly trivial trend—as the popularity of cat images and suchlike—to the bigger forces behind natural selection.

Her work has a commenting character and this is principally due to the fact that she always puts it into a larger context by written or spoken word that is present with the work. In 2010, she has published *Post-Internet Survival Guide*, a key compendium for artistic practices that translate the behavioral characteristics of internet usage back into the physical (exhibition) space and that have been coined as a movement called *Post-Internet Art*. Eventually, by making the guide, she has also recommended herself to a public as being part of the movement. Besides her own talks and texts, Novitskova writes texts for other artists, like Anne De Vries, self-curated exhibition *truEYE surVIEW* at *W139* and several exhibitions at *Media-matic*, Amsterdam.

When I met Katja personally (3: *In conversation with Katja Novitskova*

in February 2015, Amsterdam), to talk about the role of text in her practice, she explained me how the texts that accompany her work (in exhibitions or on her website) come to existence.

Over time, she collects quotes, sometimes just tiny bits or words, from texts of scientific journals, lectures by some venture capitalist or the theories of Gilles Deleuze explained by Mexican scholar Manuel De Landa. The language she finds in there, which is explicitly not of artists, can become material for her texts, independently from its original context, similar to the use of found images in her works. To give an example, the title of her former artist statement "*Bonding with, Filtering, and Assembling reality*" (4: This artist statement used to be on her website till the beginning of the year 2015 and has only shortly before my talk with her and my completion of this text been removed by her as she felt it was "dated".) borrows its terminology from

the language of chemical science. Here, “bonding” is usually employed to describe “a strong force of attraction holding atoms together in a molecule or crystal, resulting from the sharing or transfer of electrons” (5: from *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Version 2.1.3) as pre-installed on *Apple* computers). The result of her appropriation of words being the creation of a much larger context in which the work moves within.

The quality of Novitskova’s text is the logic of guiding the reader from one thought to the other and furthermore the broad view with which she is able to argument her artistic approach. In her latest, the above-mentioned artist statement, the fundamental premise clearly was: “evolutionary becoming”.

There is this paragraph in it in which Katja portrays an art-making that is not necessarily specific, but she does so from a perspective that shows the same knowlegeability by natural sciences and philosophies that is source to her work:

“By bonding with, filtering and assembling elements from surrounding reality I exercise my personal neurochemical consciousness; produce new concentrated patterns; and I make art. In order for it to be recognized by others, my assemblages respond to certain aesthetic and formal traditions of western (and now global) art and challenge some of them with novel gestures. By using latest formats like the Internet, image editing software or industrially manufactured products, my participation in global economic relations become part of the work.” (6: *katjanovi.net*, accessed at Dec. 2014)

In fact, this paragraph does not describe an artistic practice that seems different from any that we know already, but the reformulation of it in a broader picture (almost the broadest imaginable) sets its intellectual context and the relevance for it.

It does not surprise that Novitskova considers the texts that she writes as her works, too, even though they occur in a for-

mat that is typically recognized as supplement to the work, as they appear as part of an exhibition reader or filed with interviews under a link titled "text" on her website.

For the occasion of her upcoming solo show in April 2015, she will be writing a new text. According to herself, interestingly enough, her approach to the tone of exhibition texts has changed a while ago, she said. Her works became more complex and less predictable. Therefore, she wants to choose for a more "essay-style", "poetic language", so not to fall into comparison with the writings of full-time, professional philosophers. Nevertheless, at her solo show will also be a more descriptive text that will be handed out to the journalists which is a common practice for PR work. She was mentioning to avoid buzzwords, like *Accelerationism* and *Neomaterialism*, in order to keep an autonomy from the pace of argumentation at which these philosophical movements and art institutions that refer explicitly to these labels have

recently moved; “because that train is too fast” (7: see 3). Novitskova was mentioning Arman Avanessian (Co-Director of the philosophical symposium accompanying *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*) as one of the philosophical figures that occupies and pushes the topic of *Accelerationism* at immense speed. It is important to notice here that Novitskova’s work has become a common example of *Post-Internet Art*, a general label to group artists with a certain similar aesthetic.

As shown above, Novitskova’s strive for conceptual emancipation expresses itself in a strategic approach that we can recognize in the contextualization of her artistic work through the supplement of text (or talks), but as well in the making of her work: Her usual first step to an exhibition is the virtual creation and placing of sculptures within photographs of the exhibition space by use of digital image-editing software. Once decided, their physical manufacturing is done at a latter stage of the exhibition making.

Another artist who explicitly frames her work in the realm of scientific theories is Pamela Rosenkranz. She has recently still been a resident at *Rijksakademie*, till 2013, and was showing her work at *Venice Biennale* in the same year. This year, she will represent the Swiss Pavillon in Venice.

Rosenkranz draws inspiration from neurobiology on the human perception of color, namely that the latter is a result of evolution (8: *No Core*; Rosenkranz, Pamela; 2012; p.16 and Interview *Man As Color Spectrum at Metropolis M*, June/July 2012), accounting for the human ability to still see most differences within the color blue (coming from our origin of the sea) and for most people to prefer it to any other hue.

Her work *Because they tried to bore holes in my greatest and most beautiful work* from 2011 (9: at *Arsenale of Venice Biennale* in 2013), the title being a quote from Yves Klein, is a materialized reflection on several layers of the *International Klein Blue (IKB)* developed

and patented by Yves Klein as a hue to, idealistically, allow transcendence. The work is an internet-downloaded image file of the mentioned hue that was enlarged and printed on huge transparent sticky foil and mounted by amateur hands into glass frames, presented as a triptych. In the contrast of the classical fine art display of thin white frames with the insufficiency of the bubbly, pixelated image, the material in which Klein's modernist idea(-lism) exists, tragically fails to convince in the confrontation with its internet representation.

In her series of works *Firm Being (Fiji Series)*, from 2010–2011, showing commercial water bottles filled with skin-tone silicone, “images and slogans [...] were unmasked to reveal their basic absurdity” (10: *No Core*; Rosenkranz, Pamela; 2012; p.16), their label text advertising the water as “untouched by man”. It is not as if the slogan was ridiculed or revealed as being untrue, but rather to reveal the abstract status that drinking water, having become a consum-

er product, has reached in our society.

Rosenkranz appears to be really a smart artist with a strong connection to philosophy. Eventhough, online, I was unable to find texts written explicitly by herself, concluding from two interviews with her, the texts in *No Core*—the first monograph on her practice—draw a strikingly similar context of her work as she does herself in the before-mentioned interviews. To me, it is no doubt that Rosenkranz is the emancipated figure in control of the formulations of her work's context. "I am just interested in engaging with philosophers who incorporate contemporary ideas in their theories. I have tried to understand the implications that Reza [Negarestani]'s and Robin [MacKay]'s work holds for art. I've investigated such questions as: How do we connect with art biologically? What does neurology tell us about the meaning of art? To what extent is art geographically determined? What are we made of and why does it make us feel how we feel?", she says in an inter-

view (11: from: *Art in America*, Jan. 2015 Issue; Interview by Aoife Rosenmeyer). Her works are carefully balanced formulations on these questions originating from scientific insights and philosophical thoughts, understanding themselves within the conditions of a market-based society. They move on the scale of philosophical questions and are originated in nihilist assumptions that come from the same uncompromised materialist attitude that her works appear in. By now, what is generally identifiable as a contemporary art aesthetic, originated in a dry, registrative enlarging of appearances of commodities: the colors of *Evian* bottle labels, several plastic water bottles on floor-level, unfolded emergency blankets, enlargements of compressed image files, applications of skin tone paint, acrylic glass sheets, etc.

This minimal aesthetic comes at a consequence to what is delivered as an idea, first, to let the commodities speak for themselves, without a subjective ab-

straction of them and, second, to be able to question the heritage of Minimalism and Conceptualism within the formal framework of the latter.

It seems all of her work requires further reading, thus her first monographic catalogue *No Core* comes with texts by influential contemporary philosophers Robin MacKay and Reza Negarestani who lectured (among others) in the symposium (12: on Jan. 4th, 2014, *Fridericianum*, Kassel) that accompanied the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, which both Novitskova and Rosenkranz were part of.

The mutual appreciation between Rosenkranz and these philosophers does not come with a surprise, as her works, sophisticatedly formulated, operate almost as arguments and by that enable new horizons in thinking. Despite its consequent materialism, her practice is able to reveal something poetic, when experiencing the scientific insights, her work proceeds from. For example, when seeing

your own shadow covering the wall-size projection of *absolute* blue hue in *Living Colors*, from 2011, and nevertheless, of her works, “the once potent and meaningless recombinations of their subtitles” (13: *No Core*; Rosenkranz, Pamela; 2012; p. 53).

I believe that Rosenkranz’s attempt to deconstruct Yves Klein’s idealism of absolute transcendence by means of a materialist understanding, inspires as a result another kind of transcendence: to realize the potential to zoom-in and zoom-out with the mind through the infinite levels of material constitutions, beyond a mere surface.

In my eyes, the work of Novitskova and Rosenkranz can operate as comments on the developments of our society. Their works have to be understood as part of this system and through text the artists contextualize them within.

Looking at the successfulness of these two artists, text in their practice obviously seems to have accomplished to

emphasize the relevance of their work to an audience. Therefore, I want to look vice versa, at societal circumstances that might have motivated the use of text as a mediation tool in the first place:

If we look at it in the bigger picture, we find that professional artists are constantly asked to communicate existing and planned work as a condition to financial support for their practice. Artists need to apply, suggest and reason (basically their whole life) to boards of selection for grants, education, residencies and of course to colleagues as a practice that we call *socializing* and that often is job-generating. These demands of course are part of larger mind-set in western society, namely a focus on the individual and his or her personal goals, the own life as “the dream of the one-man show” (14: *Neomaterialism*; Simon, Joshua; 2013; p. 133.). This, I want to argue, results among artists—as per definition self-employed, mostly one-person enterprises of public-appearance—into “producing

oneself [as] becoming the dominant occupation" (15: *The Coming Insurrection; The Invisible Committee* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); p. 49–50).

I find it difficult to distinguish the role of text in a particular artist's practice between being either strategic for reasons of marketability, thus *lifting* it to an expected level of social relevance or merely in order to inspire a new reading, a new vision. Therefore, I will try to give an idea about the strategic-ness, I assume with Novitskova and Rosenkranz, by examining another particular tendency within their work: something that one could call a *late-capitalist aesthetic*.

Novitskova's animal cut-outs are printed in a way (size and material) that is used for advertising displays. In 2012, she made an exceptionally appealing sculpture, called *Exotic Pets*, by placing a deflated, folded gym ball onto *Nike* push-up grips, imitating the shape of a colorful animal. In her latest installation *A DAY IN A LIFE*

with *THINGS I REGRET BUYING* of electronic baby swings with applications of collages, encapsulated in patches of resin, the line between product appeal and absurdity is further blurred.

Also in most of Rosenkranz work, we can find the products of a consumption-driven lifestyle: *ASCIS* running shoes (16: *I almost forgot that ASICS means Anima Sana in Corpore Sano*, 2007) and a fridge full of *Smart Water* bottles (17: *Purity of Vapors*, 2012 at *Speculations on Anonymous Materials, Fridericianum, Kassel*), both robbed of their purpose as filled with skin-tone silicone. Rosenkranz interest in neuroscience comes in play, when she states about her interest to use a product and its label as material: "Successful marketing is mastering how people react to things automatically." (18: from: *Art in America*, Jan. 2015 Issue; Interview by Aoife Rosenmeyer). But Rosenkranz accesses further another specific commodity-aesthetic, namely that of

artworks in the character of Minimalism and color-field painting, which are somewhat the prominent standard inventory of museums of modern art. Works of this kind are, despite of their relevance as artworks to contemplate, what you would find most likely, when you would enter a museum in a major city *to look at art*. By displaying her paintings and prints (Among others: *Express Nothing*, 2010, *Because they tried to bore holes in my greatest and most beautiful work*, 2011 – 2012 and *Everything is Already Dead*, 2012) each as series in large format and white glass frames, Rosenkranz moves within the established framework of *museum art*. I want to suggest that both, the marketing materialized in the label of products and minimal art aesthetics are employed in Rosenkranz's work as *Readymades*.

Thus, even when Rosenkranz and Novitskova are playing with a product aesthetics to eventually question it, it adds to the appeal of their work.

At the same time, the incorporation

of commodities allows us to look at them –in the frame of art exclusively–as what they are “materially and with their political meaning of their being-through sociality” (19: *Neomaterialism*; Simon, Joshua; 2013; p. 19); independent from their direct exchange-value and with all their inherent abstraction. This might make us think of strategies from *Pop-Art*, but has been redefined by Joshua Simon and practiced among a group of artists that he coins as using “neomaterialist strategies” (20: *Neomaterialism*; Simon, Joshua; 2013; p. 55). Simon is one of the figures that detects and inspires a new reading of contemporary art. Remarkably, he is not writing about it from a distance, but develops his ideas alongside and involved with artists and their work. He was engaged in the exhibition *truEYE surVIEW* together with Katja Novitskova (21: *truEYE surVIEW* is an exhibition that took place between June 17th and August 21st 2011 at *W139*, Amsterdam. See

also: *Neomaterialism*; Simon, Joshua; 2013; p. 7 “Acknowledgements”)

Reading Simon’s chapter *The language of commodities*, seems to perfectly support Rosenkranz’s choice to treat the plastic water bottles with their corresponding label as a material of her sculptures and installations that speak of themselves. To my understanding, Simon suggests that the things around us are already so abstracted that we do not need to abstract them any further to give meaning, but instead display them as they are in the context that we give them. Or to give another source claiming this approach as a novelty:

“The order of the day is to understand the world from the vantage point of abstraction and not to abstract from the world.” (22: from the English version of the exhibition booklet of *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*)

It is important to put this quote into context. The exhibition has been a widely-recognized survey show of a tendency among contemporary artists. It was the first undertaking of the new director and former curator at *KW* (Berlin) Susanne Pfeffer (Susanne Pfeffer is also the curator of the Swiss Pavillon at the Venice Biennale in 2015, in which Pamela Rosenkranz will be exhibiting). Pfeffer cooperated on this show and its accompanying philosophical symposium with writer, professor and unofficial German mediator of *Speculative Realism* Arman Avanessian.

The symposium's lectures were but only held by philosophers and thus controversially regarded by the exhibiting artists. The curator's choice to merge the philosophical school-du-jour with what she identified as a new aesthetic in art (23: "I think, the idea of that exhibition occure[d] 2012, when I got more and more aware that there is a really different aesthetic around.", Susanne Pfeffer during

Art Basel Salon, Artist Talk on Speculations on Anonymous Materials) was seen by some reviews as curated in an opportunistic, simplified and clumsy way (24: Planitzer, M., *Kaum Spekulationen über anonyme Materialien*, www.castor-und-pollux.de/2014/01/kaum-spekulationen-ueber-anonyme-materialien, Jan. 2014). Nevertheless, it was the first institutional show that grouped the aforementioned artistic approaches in a major European institution. It was convincing as an exhibition as it showed works of artists that have been working together for longer and are thus, to the most, profound within their approaches. The show's success led to several follow-ups that have watered the concepts further by reducing them to buzzwords. Novitskova, part of the show, has been since then strategically avoiding any labelling of her work in her own texts—in relation to the buzzwords of the show—as in contrast to former texts on her works.

Conclusion

In the aforementioned quote from the introduction text of the exhibition, we can find a neglect of addressing the responsibility for abstraction. It assumes a vantage point of abstraction. But how did we get there in first place?

By accompanying text to the display of works, whether self-written or advocated by theorists and philosophers, artists like Novitskova and Rosenkranz intentionally shift the way of reading of their works. This shift, I want to argue, despite the seemingly concrete character of the works, is: an active abstraction. It is one that we can largely make artists themselves responsible for.

This emancipated, all-compassing rendering of the own work's context and the viewer's reading is fairly contemporary. Here is a generation that very smartly uses both channels—the work and the communication on it—to promote their ideas and *artistic selves*.

The text provides us with the intellectual equipment to reach a new horizon – its engineeriness is the machine that, ultimately, allows us to experience something poetic.

No Core, Garcia-Anton, K., Jetzer, G.,
Wagner, H., JRP Ringier, Zürich, 2012

Re-Engineering, Heatsick, PAN, Berlin,
2013

Mit Biss und Konzept, Muscionico, D.,
Kunst, ZEIT Online, [www.zeit.de/
2014/26/pamela-rosenkranz-art-basel](http://www.zeit.de/2014/26/pamela-rosenkranz-art-basel),
2014

katjanovi.net, Novitskova, K., April 2015

truEYE surVIEW, exhibition reader, W139,
Amsterdam, Novitskova, K., 2011

Speculations on Anonymous Materials,
exhibition reader, *Fridericianum*, Kassel,
Pfeffer, S., 2013/2014

*Kaum Spekulationen über anonyme
Materialien*, Planitzer, M., [www.castor-
und-pollux.de/2014/01/kaum-spekula-
tionen-ueber-anonyme-materialien](http://www.castor-und-pollux.de/2014/01/kaum-spekulationen-ueber-anonyme-materialien),
April 2015

Interview with Pamela Rosenkranz,
Rosenmeyer, A., Art In America, Issue
Jan. 2015

Neomaterialism, Simon, J., Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013

Man As Colour Spectrum, In conversation with Pamela Rosenkranz, Wysocan, E., Metropolis M, June/July 2012, Utrecht, 2012

Flow Motion: An Interview with Heatsick, Blanning, L., www.electronicbeats.net/flow-motion-an-interview-with-heatsick, 2013

Nicola Arthen

A Poem Is A Machine Made Out Of Words, 2015

This text was written as a thesis for my studies in the Fine Arts Department of Gerrit Rietveld Academie and tutored by Janice McNab. It was designed, accompanied with an inspiring dialog, by Paul Bernhard and made possible by the advice and help of my mom, Katleen Arthen, and Ivo Rick, Adrian Sölch and Yvonne Dröge-Wendel.