

## **Katrin Hornek's architecture of movement, from the local to the global and back again.**

**Stephen Zepke**

Katrin Hornek's work concerns loops. She creates and follows flows of material and information as they pass from the world into her work and out again. This is an architecture of movements, because for Hornek a space is not defined by its walls, but by the systems that inhabit and animate it. This makes architecture a political construction, both an expression of the systems of which it is a part, and a mechanism by which these wider social forces can be questioned, challenged and possibly rebuilt. In this way Hornek explores space as a kind of interface, as a process connecting and disconnecting specific localities from the global forces that structure and striate them. In this space Hornek's work critiques and unravels these structures to create brief moments of autonomy and freedom.

Her very precise method is immediately obvious in the exhibition *Die Weite ist nicht fern* (Galerie 5020, Salzburg, 2009). The show takes place in three rooms separated from the rest of the gallery by the construction of exits and entrances to allow a constant circulation through the space, which has become semi-autonomous and self-sufficient. Hornek calls this work *A Loop*. The first room contains two further works, *Little Desert* and *Zoom #1*. The first is made up of 11 pieces of grey-black sandpaper hanging on the wall, and ranging from a very fine to a very coarse grain. The second is a video loop beginning with a close-up on the figures of Jesus and Mary before zooming out to reveal the uncompleted backyard in which it sits and the threatening sign 'Private Do Not Enter'. Together these works seem to offer quite different artistic materials, aesthetics and theoretical frames. The zoom reveals the unofficial system of control protecting private property, and the distance of the camera that evades this domestic policing, while the sandpaper suggests that the slow and sensuous friction of the (abstract and minimal) art-work defines an intimate space through its tactile connections. Here we find a tension that underlies much of Hornek's work, that between documentary and metaphor, between intellectual work and feeling. The point is not to privilege one over the other, but to find a way in which they can be used together.

If the first room offers a self-reflecting loop around art, then *If Architecture could talk \_ Installation view I* set up in the large central space charts a different territory. The work presents two videos tracing the global circuit between Austria and Mongolia traversed by the Ger (or Yurt), a circular tent-like dwelling traditionally used by the Mongolian nomads. One video shows a Mongolian woman named Oyuntungalag speaking about the pros and cons of living in a Ger compared to her current life in a Western European apartment. On the one hand the close communal life in a Ger was close and generous, she says, but the privacy and autonomy of the apartment spaces encourages independence and self-reliance, two things Oyuntungalag aspires to, as she tries to become self-employed as a therapist. She nevertheless maintains a Ger in her backyard, which is clearly a poignant and sometimes uncomfortable symbol of her physical and cultural distance from Mongolia. In the second video we meet Claudius Kern, who has worked with Gers for the last 10 years. He tells us of his dream to build a 4-storied Ger, we see him in his Ger, and we meet some of the people taking a workshop with him on how to build Gers. These people, almost without exception, say that the "freedom" the Ger gives is what attracts them to it. This "freedom" however, is not only that associated with the romantic cliché of the nomadic herdsman, but is quite real and concrete because one doesn't need a building permit for a Ger, and they are relatively cheap as housing. What Hornek shows us here is how dreams of escape and freedom are in fact fundamentally determined by their local conditions, from Oyuntungalag's desire for economic independence, to the necessity for hay insulation to make the Gers durable in the damp Austrian

climate, and the loopholes in the building regulations that make life in a Ger possible. In this way the work reveals the loop formed by the Mongolian and Austrian sides of the Ger around the desire for autonomy and freedom. But whereas the Austrians adopt and adapt the Ger to achieve their own version of nomadic autonomy within Europe, Oyuntungalag seeks independence on the other side of the world, where she must find a niche within capitalism. This trajectory towards the West has led to the transformation of Mongolia from a communist state to a rapidly expanding capitalist free-market, and caused the nomads to migrate to the city in search of work and an apartment. Apartments and jobs however, are not easily available, and as a result the Ger-suburb of Ulaan Bator has emerged as a paradoxical expression of the “freedom” of the free-market. In fact Hornek suggests that the dreams of the Mongols as much as the Austrians always concern a pseudo-autonomy, because their idealist (or in Oyuntungalag’s case realist) desires are equally conditioned by the wider social and political architectures of global capital flows. Finally, Hornek doesn’t spare herself from this critique, as it can be clearly applied to her own attempts to separate her exhibition from the institution that supports it. But despite this there remains a very engaging fondness for her protagonists, by which Hornek allows herself and the viewer the hope that maybe some sort of autonomy is possible, and that at least the dream is important.

*If Architecture could talk \_ Installation view 1* presents various actualisations of the Ger as idea, including the display of the work itself, which uses the Struc-Tube exhibition system first developed by George Nelson in 1948, and reconstructed by Martin Beck in 2006. This was one of the first modular systems that made the exhibition space itself mobile. Hornek shows us how these actualisations themselves feedback into the idea of the Ger and make it change along with its materialisations. In this way the material, emotional and the conceptual levels of the Ger are intertwined, forming an architecture in which it is constantly being re-built as a complex physical, cultural and emotional entity. As the Ger moves between Mongolia and Austria it constructs a loop that seems to be constantly rebuilding itself in a permanent, global nomadic movement. What is so perceptive and moving about Hornek’s staging of this movement is how she shows that its liberatory potentials can only be understood in relation to the local architectures that materialize them.

The final work in the exhibition is *From ground floor to household*, which consists of mice in a terrarium whose nest has been made from pieces of wood taken from the gallery floor. The local conditions of habitation explored in the exhibition have here been materialised and miniturized, inasmuch as the mice instinctively turn the materials around them into a comfortable shelter. This contextualises the desires and dreams revealed in *If Architecture could talk \_ Installation view 1* as being fundamental to any living creature. In doing so *From ground floor to household* offers the most miniature, but also the most expanded loop of all, where the conversion of the gallery into a habitation by the mice is a metaphor for the show itself, but this process is also an example of the way all living systems must meet the universal need of shelter. Architecture is here certainly the first art, but it makes art into something we share with animals. In this way we come back to the concerns of the first room, and addresses the role of the artist herself as a builder of temporary habitations. The artist supplies the materials by which the mice make their housing, and art and nature come together in an architectural undertaking whose conditions are at once entirely local and utterly universal. In this final gesture Hornek completes her architectural project, she has constructed a space from the gallery itself, harvesting the materials and freedom it offers to construct her loops around the world. Total autonomy is not possible, she seems to say, but our desire for freedom is nevertheless a good foundation upon which we might try to experiment with the ways we inhabit the world.