

The Fasnacht Fold

Notes on Heide Fasnacht's "New Frontier" (2015)

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For nothing is really itself anymore. There are pieces of this and pieces of that, but none of it fits together. And yet, very strangely, at the limit of all this chaos, everything begins to fuse again. A pulverized apple and a pulverized orange are finally the same ... At a certain point, things disintegrate into muck, or dust, or scraps, and what you have is something new, some particle or agglomeration of matter that cannot be identified. It is a clump, a mote, a fragment of the world that has no place: a cipher of it-ness ... The job is to zero in on these islands of intactness, to imagine them joined to other such islands, and those islands to still others, and thus to create new archipelagoes of matter.
Paul Auster, In the Country of Last Things

Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* is a diary of survival in a desperate post-apocalyptic (putative) Manhattan¹. To survive in the city Anna Blume, the young narrator, becomes an Object Hunter, collecting and combining impossible and unidentifiable fragments to produce something else, new forms of being. She isn't simply a rescuer or a recycler, but a re-inventor. Demiurge uses malleable clay; Anna has the harder task of working with the incoherence, inconsistency and heterogeneity of the debris of a vanishing society, to turn an 'agglomeration of matter [that] cannot be identified [and] has no place' into new 'archipelagoes of matter' in which 'islands of intactness' are 'joined to other such islands'. In a way, Anna is memory: she preserves the intactness of the given fragment, she keeps things alive by changing them, she moves between times beyond her grim present, she produces continuity out of fragments by trans-forming them. Yet, time remains still here, in a hopelessly recursive afterlife. The only temporal event that shifts the temporality of the novel is Anna's ultimate transgression in her demiurgic role: she becomes pregnant and gives birth, in a world where human reproduction has otherwise ceased.

Anna Blume borrows her name from the fictional object of love in Schwitters' poem *An Anna Blume* (1919), one of Schwitters' early works of literary *merz*ing. In a Europe devastated by the First World War, Kurt Schwitters' Merz pictures and the poem *An Anna Blume* were both

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precursors, in different media, of his *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, the *Merzbau*,² a true instance of 'new archipelagoes of matter' made with discarded fragments – objects, materials, words. Anna – Eve in Schwitters' own translation of the poem into English – is the one who can be read from the back: 'And you, you most glorious of all, / You are from the back as from the front, / E-V-E'. Anna/Eve revolves, she a true re-revolutionary who, beyond obvious sexual connotations, reverses everything ('Thou wearest thine hat on thy feet, and wanderest on thine hands'), spins colours ('Blue is the colour of your yellow hair / Red is the whirl of your

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green wheels'), and moves: she has wheels in English, she has/is a bird in German.³

Heide Fasnacht's *New Frontier* (2015)⁴ does not use discarded materials to recombine them, but carefully crafted new ones to

three-dimensionally reproduce the bi-dimensional recording (photographs and the drawings produced from them) of the aftermath of a planned demolition. The oscillation across multiple dimensions and media, a usual method for Fasnacht, produces a very careful analysis of images, forms and materials that expands and recompresses, simplifies and reassembles, reduces and reinstates dimensions, ultimately moving across different spaces and times. Hers is a process of folding, unfolding and refolding of an event.⁵ The 'new archipelagoes' that Fasnacht produces are not made only of matter, but of temporal relations that engage the changing relation of matter and form.

New Frontier takes on the choreographed demolition in 2007 of the Frontier, one of the oldest and most famous Las Vegas casino-hotels, which had found several reincarnations as it grew, expanded and reinvented itself to keep up with a changing Las Vegas. Fasnacht meticulously reconstructs the details of the debris from the implosion of the obsolete casino-hotel. Distorted letters from the Frontier sign appear, in a clearly recognisable font and colour, removing any tragic aspects from the work: there are no deaths here, no losses, no accident; it is all part of a plan of self-destruction that enables regrowth. This pile of rubble is physiological to the rebirth of the casino, and while structures, forms and materials are obliterated, the name is preserved. This is important in a type of architecture where symbolism and the expression of function are reduced to a sign that is applied to the building and often dwarfs it ('the decorated shed') or literally takes it over ('the duck'), as Venturi and Scott Brown teach us.⁶

In *New Frontier*, as in most of her works, Fasnacht plays with her materials to trick the viewer. Here we are offered a sculptural piece made of lightweight fragments and pliable volumes sewn together in textile vinyl, slumped between the gallery wall and floor to reproduce broken structures, distorted sheet metal and the letters of the name sign. Fasnacht often works from photographs, or in fact from one photograph she carefully selects or recomposes among many, to grasp the event in the image and bridge between the two- and the four-dimensional to produce her three-dimensional pieces. Indeed her sculptures denounce the limitations of our perception of time, stretch it, dilate it and ultimately represent it. The image Fasnacht chooses is always a synthesis, not only essential or symphonic, but always also contaminated. Objects or fragments hint at a time past and at a possible re-enactment, but

also break through the photographic frame, alluding to that which is outside the frame – the before and the after, in an extended temporality of the event – and continues in the narrative of her project. Indeed, Fasnacht's projects are never framed other than by their location and context, with which they play to produce a layered study of time through their forms. What her works address are, at once, the dimensional flow and the complex temporality of the event.

Here the twisted sheets of metal and bent letters are rendered in soft sheets of vinyl coated fabric, painstakingly and precisely stitched together with a domestic sewing machine. Soft, friendly, domestic, the work reduces the building and its demolition to innocuous manifestations of a longer term project: the commercial, entrepreneurial one of the empire of money and hope built in the middle of nowhere. Whether a building or a ruin, the physical manifestation of the moment of *New Frontier* becomes irrelevant, as long as its name and the mirage (indeed the name of another famous casino-hotel in Las Vegas) that goes with it remain. Fasnacht's *New Frontier* thus doubly plays on the name of the casino-hotel: not only on the recognisability of the casino's sign, but also as a reference to the way in which the establishment itself has always played on the ambiguous associations of its name. The original name of the Frontier, Pair-O-Dice, painted gambling as heavenly alluring; the Hotel Last Frontier that followed played on the myth of both its location and use; the New added at the time of its expansion to contrast inevitable obsolescence, was eventually replaced by Old to claim an established heritage in the short time of the Strip city by realigning it with the myth of the West; and so on.

In *New Frontier* identities are constructed and reconstructed in time, and even the reconstructed rubble of the demolition remains "the" Frontier: a frontier between the past and the present of the name, between the past and the future, between poverty and riches, between failure and success. And while the building no longer exists, what remains is the name that carries the possibility of its reconstruction. This liminal space, all contained in its name, continues to push its boundaries, in Fasnacht's work as well ('Pushing Boundaries' is in fact the title of the show where *New Frontier* is featured),⁷ as it captures the thread of continuity of the establishment around itself and onto itself, by cycles of destruction and (re)growth. Its time includes the time of the lapse, of the absence, where Frontier, reduced to rubble and bulldozed away continues to exist as a financial speculation and a name awaiting to be resurrected.

While the mock debris of the Frontier sprawls in the gallery space in Fasnacht's installation, the news emerges that, eight years since its spectacular demolition and after a dormant period and several changes of hands during the global financial crisis, the Frontier, old, new or just Frontier will indeed be reborn after all. But the name, and with it the memories of its beginnings, renovations, extensions and demolitions, will be replaced by Alon, the name of the prospective developer.⁸ Or perhaps the name will return, dictated by marketing strategies more than by nostalgic celebration. Time will tell.

What is the role of the artwork in this context? It constructs the critical instant; it records the permanence of the name and the memory of it when the form is undone; it celebrates the debris, lifting it to the status of sculpture. At the same time, it ironizes on the idea of value

that is entrusted to a name, an image, a mirage in the desert, transforming it in its “relocation” in interiors into a cartoonish and colourful domestication made of soft, playful, familiar materials. Stripped of monetary value, cleansed of sleaziness, recognisable and yet transformed, reduced to a soft-toy-like malleable piece, this work celebrates the infratemporality of its reality: between Frontier new-old and old-new and a possible future that requires the loss of its name, the work realises the thin layer when the building exists not as a structure or as a form but only as a name, the flickering moment of invisibility materialised that Marcel Duchamp had called ‘infrathin’⁹

Time is really what Fasnacht’s oeuvre is about. From the burst of a sneeze (*Sneeze*, 1997, 2001, 2004), the sudden explosions of erupting volcanoes (1997 and 1999) and the planned ones of scored building demolitions (*Hotel Demolition*, 2001 and *Demo*, 2001) and of airplanes blown up in flight in disaster movies (*Exploding Plane*, 2000), her images and sculptures concentrate on the time that we cannot or do not want to “see”, even when in the body of works (2008–12) presented in *Loot* (2012)¹⁰ time is instead slowed down in disheartening views of the almost still shifting and accumulation of spoils of war – rubble, books, personal effects and paintings alike.

The folding of times and dimensions (from the four-dimensional event to a three-dimensional space via a bi-dimensional representation) returns in Fasnacht’s work. Her early works concentrate on images of deflagrations and reproduce them in mock-ups that play with their materiality, always visibly transformed from that of the event: what is gaseous becomes solid, what is hard and solid becomes supple, and so on. Maybe Heide Fasnacht is an Anna Blume, one of the many of them: whether her works reproduce the climax of the event or its denouement, nothing comes to rest here, the stillness is only momentary, constructed by the photograph and appropriated and reactivated in the installations. What her works tell us is that stillness, fixity, an end, and indeed the infinite are never achievable, not by forms nor by materials, not by the bi-dimensional representations that triggers the work, nor by the event they represent.



Endnotes

1 Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987, pp. 35–36.

2 On the Merzbau see Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000.

3 Kurt Schwitters' translation of An Anna Blume as To Eve Blossom is available online at <http://www.costis.org/x/schwitters/eve.htm> (accessed 14 August 2015).

4 See the work on Heide Fasnacht's website: <http://heidefasnacht.com/current-works/1/0> and <http://heidefasnacht.com/current-works/1/1> (accessed 14 August 2015), and the interview with the artist in 'Sculptor Heide Fasnacht on the Ephemerality of Our Built Environment', *Artnet News*, 11 August 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/people/interview-with-heide-fasnacht-323167> (accessed 14 August 2015).

5 On the idea of unfolding as folding, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993. In particular 'The unfold', pp. 35–36, in chapter 3, 'What is Baroque?', pp. 27–38.

6 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Stephen Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977.

7 *New Frontier* (2015) was shown in 'Pushing Boundaries', at Kent Fine Arts, New York 29 May–24 July 2015; see <http://www.kentfineart.net/exhibitions/pushing-boundaries> (accessed on 14 August 2015).

8 'Plans emerge for new casino-hotel called Alon on site of New Frontier on Las Vegas Strip', *Associated Press*, 6 July 2015, <http://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/2015/07/06/plans-emerge-for-new-casino-hotel-called-alon-on-site-new-frontier-on-las-vegas/> (accessed on 14 August 2015).

9 For Marcel Duchamp, the 'infrathin' is impossible to define and 'one can only give examples of it: —the warmth of a seat (which has just / been left) is infrathin; —when the tobacco smoke smells also of the / mouth which exhales it, the two odors / marry by infrathin; —forms cast in / the same mold (?) differ from each other by an infrathin separative amount.' Marcel Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp. Notes*, Paul Matisse (ed.), Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983.

10 Heide Fasnacht, *Loot*, Jeanne Marie Wasilik (ed.), New York: Kent Fine Art, 2012. Catalogue of the exhibition held at Kent Fine Art, New York, 2 March–21 April 2012. Available at <http://www.kentfineart.net/publications/heide-fasnacht-loot> (accessed 14 August 2015).