Improper Thinking

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Psychologically [. . .] our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass.
Ferdinand de Saussure, 1931 [1]

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone.
Franz Kafka, *The Wish to Be a Red Indian,* 1913 [2]

A broad glance at a selection of Robert Estermann's works does not reveal any actual themes, the individual works stand next to one another, without any overriding programme: *Construction for an Acute Plane* (fig. p. 79) is a drawing with an ominous title, which seems to represent what the title designates, although no context is provided and the signs seem accordingly erratic; *Moving through Space (The Great Divide)* (fig. p. 53), a drawing whose title evokes an abstract connection that remains impervious to further comprehension, shows two straight lines with a kind of body between them, vaguely resembling a schematised bird; *Black Boy Licks Xsomes Ice Lolly* (fig. p. 68) stages a surprising encounter, across divided spheres of reality, of social subject and biological code; the installation *Distant Riders* (figs. pp. 89–103), in several parts, surrounds the viewers like a larger-than-life zoetrope that projects anonymous female horse-riders as an imaginary collective onto some unidentified beach.[3] The examples could be continued at random. It's as if they were devoted to deliberately different moods, interests and methods,

and in this work the feeling of repetition (symptomatically?) barely arises. On the other hand, of course, none of this means that this is a random, heterogeneous assemblage of pieces. Because the attempt to create an artistic sphere which satisfies rhizomatic criteria is a positive value *per se,* a noteworthy decision on the artist's part. An artist like this won't more or less translate "social moods", or try to create "representative works for his time". He will be more inclined to avoid doing precisely that. He will avoid adopting the doxa of his time, he will not choose with unspoken compulsion to think in a particular way, or aim for general consensus (will one ever hear him say as an artist, "I want everyone to like my work?"). This may be seen as a form of commitment, because the artist's desire ever – somehow – turns towards social matters and he ceases to be satisfied with the creation of a parallel universe or a private mythology.

Let's take a look at *D (Desire for People and Unity)* (fig. pp. 59, 60), a designed photography work on a largeformat tarpaulin like those used as signs in public spaces. It shows: two photographs of a group of people in an urban setting which cannot be further identified, now loosely grouped, now lined up in a row. The figures in question are indistinguishable from passers-by. Their grouping alone provides a purpose, however vague, for their gathering. It's impossible to tell whether its motivation is touristic, political or social. A comparatively crude aesthetic, let's call it "constructivist" (see that signalling D!) as well as a kind of determination in the faces of the figures involved suggests some vague connection with social organisation and collective initiative and action. Nonetheless: outwardly at least, these "activists" or "demonstrators" without any discernible agenda are indistinguishable from random passers-by in a European city. Can we reasonably speak about undertones – as the subtitle *Desire for People and Unity* encourages us to do, without doing too much hermeneutic violence to the work? Or, conversely, might the fact that the figures in this diffusely "committed" scenario are specifically not coded as

political, and no discernible purpose is given to their action, be the crucial hint? Perhaps the almost cinematic movement from the loose grouping (top picture) to the row (bottom picture) is enough to suggest the impression of an imminent event in a public space (even if that event finally proved to be “only” the event of this appearance by individuals)? Perhaps this is a potential event that has not yet spilled into the conspicuous vocabulary and tangible grammar of a political action. In fact, the figures in this picture stand together so loosely and apparently provisionally, that it seems that they could at any moment part company and divide once more into isolated individuals.[4] Unlike pictures, which herald literal, illustratively political significance, as in iconographies featuring demonstrations, mass rallies or riots, *D (Desire for People and Unity)* stresses the other end of the spectrum: the *phantasmatic* aspect of the political. Here politics is not seen in terms of *realpolitik,* the so-called events of public life, and hence not in connection with necessity (what must happen in society, what should change historically). Rather, politics here concerns the question of the conditions under which politics takes place, the form in which it is made possible, or in which it may be artistically imagined or signified. In this sense, size, flatness and design (that crude D!) act as a formal framework that may contain politically emblematic elements. But what is the purpose of this shift to the imaginary? Perhaps it is to emphasise the function of the imagination in the political process. From this perspective, attention is directed towards the shift from the status of the (supposedly) non-political to the (potentially) political, a process in which, as in *D (Desire for People and Unity),* the passer-by can become a political subject.[5]

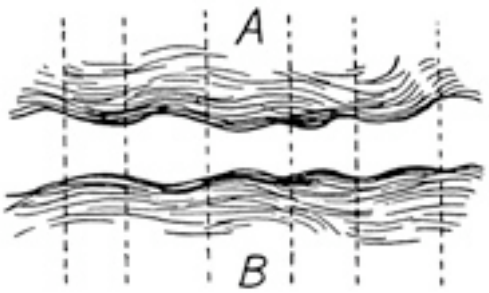
A similar scenario is proposed in *Distant Riders* (figs. pp. 99–103). Nine panels are set out in a circular formation. On the insides of these, photographs of women on horseback, almost on a lifesize scale, are arranged after the manner of a zoetrope: the circular arrangement, we imagine, connects the pictures of the riders into a continuous sequence,

particularly since their bodies and the horses all tend to face towards the left. In this larger-than-life zoetrope, the individual riders merge, so to speak, into a single rider. The landscape in the background of the nine photographs also seems to coalesce into a hyper-landscape. The background does not refer to a concrete geography more closely defined in temporal and spatial terms, but is rather the visual correspondence of a more diffuse kind of “beach-likeness” with a heavily metaphorical element: distance, culturally protected zone, state of emergency. Once again we are dealing not with a literally political discourse - for which read sexually reformist, generally “liberationist” – although it is also possible to discern an atmosphere of this kind in *Distant Riders*. This atmosphere is produced by the hallucinatory effect of the signifiers of the 1970s which Estermann is quoting here, apparent in the slightly voyeuristic gaze with which the riders enter the field of vision. One consequence of this *hallucinatory* treatment of signs may be that another context interposes itself over the sexually reformist and generally “liberationist” discourse of the 1970s: the question of the economic, political or even erotic relationship between humans and animals. But how does this theme arise, when it is neither formulated as an ethical programme nor idealised as a mythical unity from the past? As has already been discussed, the slight sexualisation of the motif of the girl rider is too faint to locate the sequence of images in the sphere of the obscene, let alone the perverse. And the atmosphere of the images, with their location in a distant, undefined coastal zone is too restrained to be subjected to a moral discourse. One key may be the landscape. Its significance as a trope may be better understood if we compare it with the function of the scenic refuge zone commonly featured in dystopias: usually this is portrayed as a zone contrasting with the civilised space, which is why it is depicted alternately as an inaccessible desert far from city life, as in *Brave New World,* as a hidden, protected forest at the end of the last railway line as in *Fahrenheit 451,* or as a distant coastal zone as in *Distant Riders.*[6] This counter-world is rich in sensations

and full of sensual freshness (in *Fahrenheit 451,* this is represented by the constant light snowfall in the protected zone of the forest). But as it is freed from the everyday, and its inhabitants are often in a kind of temporally and/or culturally exceptional condition, there is always something unreal – phantasmatic – about the counter-world. This makes its psychological function all the more important: it allows the citizens to experience sensomotoric renewal or even awakening (as opposed to social anaesthesia), psychical continuity (as opposed to schizoid fragmentation), and develop ethical care (as opposed to moral cynicism). Not least, the aforementioned trope infiltrates the moralisation of the political and erotic relationship between human being (girl) and animal (horse), and thus keeps it from being sacrificed too quickly to a discourse of obscenity.
On the other hand there is no reason to conceal the fact that Robert Estermann's work repeatedly presents an engagement with obscenity. However, the obscene – and this is a crucial observation – is not turned into a spectacle, quite the reverse. Of great importance in this respect is a group of drawings entitled *Elephant Man* (figs. pp. 54/55, 56): here the elephant man – unlike in the eponymous film by David Lynch with its phenomenal lead actor, John Hurt – does not appear as an amorphous physical phenomenon, but as a kind of block, a cube, a spatial figure.
This shape, running counter expectations, creates the impression that the obscene need not necessarily coincide with the stereotype images of the amorphous, the distorted, the grotesque, but can present itself perfectly well as a "rational" shape, albeit one that is infected with the obscene. The obscene is not conventionally fitted out with the attribute of monstrous disfigurement, on the contrary, the cube is "claimed" as a suitable visualisation, even if it represents an improper form of obscenity. In *Four Boys/ Four Horses* (figs. pp. 62–65), four boys each copulating with a horse, improperly once again since they are "schematised" and thus raised to the same level as the cube.[7]

In a sense, then, Robert Estermann always works with

coded scenarios. A brief digression on this subject might be apposite. In what sense are we talking about coding here? First of all, the term “code” does not mean, as it does in ordinary language, a *secret* code. Here it is more generally and openly meant as the aid required if information is to be conveyed in an effective manner. An example should illustrate this: when the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) represents language as a whole, he does so – in the (posthumously published) *Course of General Linguistics* – by using a diagram, and a diagram, moreover, which is only partially comprehensible without the corresponding textual commentary:



The areas layered on top of one another look like zones of waves and clouds, which create a vague idea of something moving and diffuse. The letters A and B, on the other hand, suggest, in connection with the broken vertical and parallel lines, a certain measurability about the relations between the two areas A and B – over all, not a very revealing impression, without the help of an explanation. Saussure’s clarifying commentary: “So we can envisage the linguistic phenomenon in its entirety – the language, that is – as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (A), and on the equally featureless plane of sound (B).”[8] Thus the diagram becomes, in the general sense outlined above, a code for Saussure’s conception of language. Although the diagram appears abstract without explanation, once it has been explained, it becomes an effective way of packaging and conveying information. Interestingly, as well as the auxiliary function of illustration it also fulfils other purposes. The diagram enables the author to conceptualise some intuitions, which may be both diffuse and complex, about the phenomenon

of language. In this sense the code (the diagram) proves to be an element in a process of understanding with a weight of its own: it gives visual form to an as-yet unknown subject-matter, and serves to make the “assertions” of theoretical speculation appear more probable. Interestingly, codes like Saussure’s diagram make the statements associated with them no less unambiguous, even though they give them concrete form. Many of Robert Estermann’s drawings (his works as a whole?) perhaps function in a not dissimilar fashion.

The assignment of a concrete sense without denotation and simplification of meaning, then. Take a look at *Pillars for the Bay of Shanghai* (figs. pp. 10–14). The title seems pretty unambiguous. So it’s an architectural undertaking? Land reclamation? Do the terms refer literally to the scenario described? Or does the title refer to a kind of fantasy – just as Saussure’s diagram for language could be described as a fantasy, a speculation with a degree of probability, turning the range of previous opinions on the subject inside out? In *Pillars for the Bay of Shanghai,* five plaster panels, acting as “walls”, form a closed-off area, a pentagon, at the same time a kind of silo or tower. You can see inside through the gaps between them: on the floor there is a piece of paper showing, in postcard size, the skyline of the city of Shanghai, which is built into the sea. Around this element are grouped four wheel tables (specially made). On each of these, in turn, lie four rods of silver plated steel (again specially made), which are turned lengthwise at right angle in different ways to produce different profiles (once again, a code, just as key profiles or musical scores represent codes). A network of analogies or apparent analogies embraces the whole construction: pillars, rods, cylindrical elements. The vanishingly small picture of the Shanghai skyline is something like an identifying locus for the ensemble – or at least that’s how it can be read. As though the installation were a fantasy about an absent zone – the architectural sphere of the city’s foundation – and the way in which it is realised in an installation that alternates between office,

workshop and maquette. Thus it is also a fantasy about places, and the ways in which places can stand in relation to one another: physical places of production, psychical places of cultural imagination. At the same time, this installation has something about it that is not unambiguously definable, a daydream-like transition from the surface of the wheel table to an overall architectural conception, and back to the haptic sphere of experience with volumes, weight and structure. *Pillars for the Bay of Shanghai* does not depict something, but works as a place where psychical and physical connections come into being. It is, as Robert Estermann himself says, an "artistic proposal for a positive space containing mixtures and combinations." [9]

But how would one describe the attitude with which these "artistic proposals for a positive space" are made? What are the unspoken ideas about the kind of commitment which, as we have seen, is far removed from more canonical conceptions of political art? In *Transparent Kindergartens above Streets (Translated Research Samples)* (fig. p. 34), we encounter, as the subtitle suggests, a study situation. Resonances with the educational theory of Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (1782–1852) are produced by the explicit mention of the term "Kindergarten", which he invented. In the installation: two projections, consisting of a series of drawings and a sequence of sentences: "'Smaller, smaller . . .', 'The car traffic is right below', 'The children can watch the cars and the car drivers can watch the children', 'Lots of futile children in little space', 'The buses stop here', 'There is an interest in the Froebel toys', 'Cubes, sticks . . .', 'Cigars' . . .". Standing next to these, backs turned towards the viewer, are two carefully dressed children, which turn out to be dolls. The series of drawings shows what we might take to be examples of structures of kindergartens far above the level of the street. The focus of the works in terms of their content rests on the institution of the kindergarten which, for Fröbel, is seen as a place for the practice and development of presocial abilities, designed to produce the insight that thought and action are

parallel spheres (and not, for example, that action follows on from thought, or that actions are uncoupled from thought in the sense of being automatic reactions). The sketches might drive one to think about the nature and definition of the kindergarten, that “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser) within the education sector. But in this instance it happens in a way relatively untouched by sociology, let alone realpolitik. One might almost speak of a non-place, condensed here in the form of an installation, a spatial diagram (in its mode of functioning, yet again, not unlike that diagram of Saussure’s). Interestingly, both the drawings and the title call to mind one prominent model of committed art, the Situationist conception of *New Babylon* by Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005). The *New Babylon* referred to what would eventually be a global network of architectural habitats and zones, imagined at a great height, above the cities, resting on massive pillars. They were supposed to be docked to one another by a network of similarly monumental footbridges and intermediate zones, and unite to form an uninterrupted continuum. These zones consisted of variable spheres of architecture, light and temperature, which would also adapt to the needs of the “nomadic” postnational population. Admittedly, nothing of the modernistic heroism of such a conception remains in *Transparent Kindergartens above Streets,* but the work can still be seen as an echo of the Situationist model of a post-ideological and trans-national reality. But does that really have anything to do with the other concept? Or is the comparison too far-fetched? Perhaps. But at any rate, it’s tempting to imagine that the echo of Situationism was intentional. This prompts fantasies about a “different” education, about its perspectives and possibilities in a future society, and without the over-hasty reference to a political programme or the context of a utopia. But renouncing programmes or utopias does not mean renouncing the sense of possibility, which can in the end – as I have suggested above – accomplish the transfer from the periphery to the center, from singular to universal (and vice versa).

So: transference, displacement. My concluding remarks are devoted to the drawing *Moving through Space (The Great Divide)* (fig. p. 53). It consists of two straight lines and a loosely suggested elongated body. The straight lines are arranged like wings in schematised depictions of birds. The title reinforces this association with a bird, a kind of butterfly or a similarly flying "thing gliding through space" which, as the subtitle indicates, is undertaking the "great divide". So here we have a link between a concrete figure, a specific phenomenon, the "singular", with more abstract, not necessarily sensory entities such as space and division. Could it be that this specific combination of abstract and concrete, the way in which a specific figure can open up a nonsensory referential context, might be about an allegorical figure? If so, then this abstract creature, this schematised bird flying through an imagined space, passing through it like a quiet, ubiquitous presence, is a mental principle. It's a mental image, we might say, which provides a metaphor for the thinking of such a principle (i.e. it translates it into an image or diagram of an image). Or Robert Estermann's words: "The phantasmagoria of this drawing lies in the fact that the principle defines the space itself, and to define is also to create (with each beat of its wings the bird creates the space it is flying through)".[10] A critical allegory of the binary principle, then? It threatens that other kind of space in which fantasies stir, and for which Robert Estermann finds concrete examples. The subject here is the creation of space, a sense of spaciousness, not unlike those zones in dystopias that lie beyond the repressive social structure. They are spaces beyond social control, which come into being thanks to an indomitable, pure, absolute movement.

[1] Quoted from Ferdinand de Saussure, Course of General Linguistics, Trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.111.

[2] Franz Kafka, Complete Short Stories, Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London, 1933).

[3] In the zoetrope, the viewer looks through slits into a rotating drum which produces the illusion of movement; the device was invented in the 1830s by William George Horner (1786–1837), but did not become well known until the 1860s.

[4] One characteristic detail is the small group of five, six or perhaps seven individuals: the commitment, or political action, is consequently not conceived on the level of a mass population which then would produces a representative, critical public opinion, but rather in the sense of a minority or micro-politics. So it is not understood against the background of that which is simply taken for granted in political theories of society: that political is what takes possession of the masses, what revolutionises the majority. Second detail: it is, even if it is not identified geographically, the urban space, the city as topos, as a place of the polis, as a place of assembly, as a public space Robert Estermann is hinting at.

[5] Unlike flirting with immediacy, as in the more conventional genres of politically committed art – Santiago Sierra, Thomas Hirschhorn, Joseph Beuys etc. – when artistic adaptations of "direct political action" repeatedly appear (is this supposed to "reproduce" the immediacy of
social processes of change?), Estermann instead stresses the aspect according to which the
political could not be replaced by a more universal capacity to imagine, the transformation of the secondary into the crucial, the singular into something universal – which brings him close to such artists as Cady Noland, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Gober.

[6] In the negative designs of dystopias, civilisation in turn is usually intensified into an over-technologised space, characterised by political extremism, subjected to various control mechanisms and tending towards moral and sexual conformity.

[7] Robert Estermann: "It was a remarkable experience for me, seeing the shape of the cube of the Elephant Man and the shape 'boy-copulation-horse' as somehow 'politically' equivalent,
in the sense of 'show everything, say nothing'." Email correspondence with the author, January 2007.

[8] Ferdinand de Saussure (note 1), p. 133.

[9] Conversation with the author, December 2006.

[10] Email correspondence with the author, January 2007.

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