

The Peripatetic Architecture of the Delta

DELTA: Volker Atrops, Daniela Zeilinger | February 29 – March 13, 2020

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Delta is a fertile term with manifold meanings. But the one that resonates particularly well within the context of this exhibition is this: a land form comprised of sediments that comes into being when river channels reach their end, separate and flow into another stiller body of water, and whose triangular shape, which develops at mouth of the river, resembles the upper-case Greek letter delta. Deltas are site-specific phenomena that, conversely, are not limited to place (the Mississippi, Nile, Amazon, Ganges and Yangtze deltas being just a few examples)—wonderful inevitabilities of nature virtually beyond human influence.¹

And these wetlands are fascinating because they are at once pregnant and decaying, present and past, coming and going. And because the water that has given birth to them has changed its pace. It has found its feet and wound down to a quite leisurely stroll, extending curious tentacles and tendrils into its surroundings, occasionally choosing to lay down roots in a quiet pool or simply pausing to then spill over sideways. The water changes its speed and course to become one with, part of, another. And as it does so, it releases its alluvial semen (its load), layers of sediment that gradually build up into a rich plain over time. Indeed, delta dirt is a fecund soil because its strata is filled with the documentation and history of other places and times, it produces culture so to say, preserves, remembers, discloses, and conceals it. It is in a continual state of processing its being. So to grasp its architecture, that is, its circumstances, structure and shape, you have to get down there in the dirt. You have to walk it.

And that's where the visit to Volker Atrops' and Daniela Zeilinger's DELTA begins: with a slow unhurried walk—at times a bit challenging one within the intimate 16-qm quarters of the Milchstraße, but a ramble just the same—through what feels like both an *Urzeit*, or geologic time, and an Anthropocene time of humans. It's not just that the space itself provides innumerable layers of man-made information. Thankfully, all of the remnants of its past have been left as they are: a 19th-century door hung at original level halfway up the wall and stony century-old mortar peeking through broken layers of stenciled pastel paint. But it's that this contrasts so well with the artists' personal delta which begs to be explored through a quite basic and sensual curiosity and intuitive interaction with its geography. There's a certain inherited wisdom or instinct at play here. Layers of information waiting to be unearthed. This is not a place for gazing.

Specifically here, and randomly there, up high and down low, close together and far apart: a large frame, scattered words and phrases and a number of red clay plates mounted to the wall in stacks of twos and threes beckon us into their strata. Over on the floor in one corner of the room is a small triangular deposit of—fossils? Offerings? Relics? One must squat down to excavate: a long, even chain of beads, exquisite in its modesty, a few rings—one stalactite in form, another a primal lump of silver—and an ancient armband. Behind me a prickly chain hung in a triangular formation festoons the wall, its thorny links revealing themselves to be tiny guns, indeed G3s, Kalaschnikows, AK-47s and MK48s. Below or adjacent to each group of plates are cryptic messages from a forgotten (or present?) era—and we as crisscross between them, we attempt to decipher the hints: THEN, LEAVE, GRUND BODEN, OUR SKY, DIE ÜBER UNS, WHERE IS MY FATHER NOW. Everything is in a state of potential, as if these things were a part of the architecture of the place that is only now revealing itself.

¹ See the Chapter "Atchafalaya" in John McPhee's, *The Control of Nature* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989).

Emerging from this archaeology is Daniela Zeilingers *D* (2020), an analogue C-Print rising up almost two meters in height that, at surface level, has all the attributes of a painting—gesture, depth, color, light and shadow. But there’s something else pulling us in and pushing us out. This image pulses, releasing more of itself as we physically move in relation to it. Indeed, a rich and complex layering of artistic processes ranging from intuitive drawing, painting and collage to analogue and digital photography has resulted in this vibrating reality before us, a process that has happened over time. The final image is more of a revelation of information—fragments of real painting, multiple image reproductions, digitally produced shapes or shadows—that has been deposited over time with no certainty of outcome. The experience is akin to a walking through mist in which optical phenomena materialize only to subside or shift—glimpses rendered tangible and commemorative strata built up, only to be dispersed as a layer crests and recedes.

This simultaneity of ascendance and descendance is also present in Atrops’ earthen plates, each dish a fossilized link in the chain of information moves from the bottom up or vice versa. Their surfaces have been glazed and burnished with enigmatic white stripes—a rocket?/phallus?/pencil?—that gradually trail off and fade into milky condensation. When we begin to recite the aforementioned words while handling the plates, we start to see our own existence in relation to something else, possibly greater. And what that something else could be is just forming the next layer.

In passing, Atrops showed me a little catalogue of 17–19th-century *Festtagsschüsseln* from the Niederrhein region where he lives. These ceramic “plates” were commissioned to commemorate human rituals, in particular courtships, engagements and weddings, and were typically fastened to the wall, often above a fireplace. They depict the festive events with a natural and didactic pictorial language supported by pithy rhymes about the owner. Like jewelry or architecture, they function in relationship to these *lived* events, demarcating and transporting identity, transmitting artificial memories, if only for a while. And these souvenirs are nomadic, little pieces of pedestrian architecture that can be easily passed along or deposited in a new place.

Those who visited the show at its beginning and end may have noticed that it’s installation, too, had wandered: new objects appeared, positions changed, new associations and connections were set free. A series of small black-and-white silver gelatine prints cropped up between the plates and a pair of sexually charged helmets (resembling a phallus/vulva) were placed under Zeilingers *D*, transitioning into a new conversation. New relationships and dialogues emerged between the individual works, entities and identities forged and parted. Which reminded me of the fact that the path into a place is quite different than the one that leads out of it. The experience of arriving is different from leaving. Approach is other than the departure. It’s a yin and yang interdependency, somewhat melancholic and thoroughly regenerative—like every good walk can be.

Take me to the river.

Courtenay Smith is a freelance curator and writer based in Munich, Germany. She studied at the University of Illinois Chicago and served as curator for contemporary art at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago before relocating to Germany in 1999. Here she founded the project space »homeroom« and later served as the Artistic Director of the municipal art space Lothringer13 and Director of the Galerie Neumeister. She is the author of several books including »Xtreme Houses«.