





In a book by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben titled *Idea della Prosa*, which collects a series of short essays built as dialectical images, the face is a recurring term that stands for language, and at the same time, for silence. Here, the face is a figure of both the possibility of, and the resistance to, communication. It came to my mind when, at the suggestion of Rhea Dall and Kristine Siegel, directors of PRAXES, I was invited to contribute to the Cycle of exhibitions dedicated to Judith Hopf by selecting one work each month and writing about it, and I immediately thought to start with one of her works from the series *Trying to Build a Mask*.

The first time I encountered Hopf's work was exactly through this same series, which she exhibited as part of *The Brain* at DOCUMENTA(13). I remember very well that I returned twice to look at these sculptures. What caught my attention then was not the fact that they were a response to a found object made some fifty years ago by the girls of a reformatory, and that indirectly, while displaying them at the very heart of the exhibition, the artist was marking a Foucaultian contiguity between the prison and the museum. It was rather their fragility, their craftiness, their grace, and yes, their beauty—their unrelated closeness, in this respect, with the stone figurines of Bactrian princesses shown a few meters away—that made me stop and retrace my steps.

A mask is generally understood as the opposite of a face, an object that hides the features of the person wearing it, conferring another—fixed—expression that emphasizes one aspect by canceling all other possible ones. Yet, the features of these heads by Hopf, standing upon a thin wire holding each atop a pedestal, preserved an individual quality. The pallid, serene surface of these masks that I was looking at made me then—and still do now—think of the face as it is interpreted by Agamben: a place of withdrawal and rest, yet one of dialogue and encounter, almost a figure of the relationship between the artwork and the spectator.

I went back to this memory when trying to make sense of my role as guest curator (for the PRAXES method entails a quasi blind date, from which a threesome has to find the terms of a lasting and fruitful relationship), and to understand how to contribute to a dialogue that I felt could even proceed without my presence. While at the same time I was attempting to read from a distance and indirectly (for a number of good and ineludible reasons) the work of an artist I felt attracted to, yet did not know well enough. Within this frame, writing appeared to me as a way to inhabit a remote proximity, and the *Mask* series surfaced then as a possible subject, as a location of my speech and as a figure of this mute dialogue between the artist and me.

So, what do these objects tell me now, as I continue to look at them?

I look at the masks and discern in each of them an individual character. They have features that make each of them very distinctive—a quality shared with most of Hopf's work. It was something I started to realize in the presence of the *Schafherde* that occupied the exhibition space in the first of the four exhibition modules, a fact that Anna Herms, who assisted Hopf in their making, indirectly confirmed, describing them through the expression of their face.

Each *Mask*, part of a series yet individually formed, is realized using discarded packaging originally protecting common digital devices, on which the artist intervenes by way of cutting, modeling, and shaping. Yet the re-

sulting face is not final, since this, which we could call an arguable original, is then scanned; it is the 3D-print that we regard as the (debatable) original.

Hopf's sculptures and films—and I am tempted to include her immaterial works too—all have this quality in common: they seem so carelessly and easily realized, and yet are instead carefully crafted, the results of long processes and preparation. At first glance it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern whether *Trying to Build a Mask* is a modified ready-made, or—what it is in fact—a made object. Then, a closer look into the passages that this particular work undergoes highlights the fact that these masks belong to the realm of sculpture. They are produced *per via di levare e per via di porre*, by cutting and molding, which are the two approaches that Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De statua* stigmatized as medium-specific. Of sculpture they employ and manifest the language by directly addressing it as a dialectics of surface and volume, void and matter, which the mask with its two sides—a positive and a negative—offers. These white, solid, and concrete surfaces stand between an ethnographic quotation and an evocation of Brâncuși's pristine and compact volumes, and the subject of the work indeed evokes the moment of rupture from which modern sculpture stems.

The *Masks*, formed from discarded serially produced shapes, bring to the forefront the notion of the relationship between copy and original (and by extension of originality and seriality)—an issue that sculpture has traditionally addressed since its beginning. What we consider classical statuary is mainly known to us not through the Greek originals, but via their copies of Roman age, for example. Such questions seem to me inherent to Hopf's object-based practice. Each work is individually made and individualized. Every piece maintains a special character, but at the same time, each object is an edition and part of a series, of which it typically preserves the main attributes. This is true for the *Masks*, the family of *Erschöpfte Vasen*, and for the *Schafherde*, even for the ropes of *From Up & In Between*, as well as for *Endings*. (It is perhaps also worth mentioning, if only in passing, that each of these works seems to problematize issues of perception or representation of modern and contemporary sculpture: think of the plinths in *Erschöpfte Vasen*, or the Minimalist evocation of the *Schafherde*.)

Seriality therefore stands as a privileged term bringing to light the relationship between art and craft, and the role of author versus artisan, through which we still continue to think of sculpture today. (A side thought: Rodin started his apprenticeship in a pottery workshop, from which he borrowed the idea of modularity, which he then applied to sculpture. Contemporary sculpture stems from this intersection between consumption and originality.)

The forms, or the originals, that Hopf employs and remakes, are always common objects: the package of a smartphone, standard moving boxes, a terracotta vase, a glass. It is the process to which the basic form is subjected, which transforms it and confers upon it a different value, that of an artwork. It is the obvious *vexata quaestio* of the use value that is at stake here, which the *Mask* series complicates and condenses. Yet I am tempted to say that (in each of her works, but particularly with the *Masks*) we are less in the realm of labor economics and more in that of the domestic. I am inclined to view the capital that the final work can claim as based on the mix of time, care, curiosity, and devotion invested by the artist in making something she might not have known how to do before—giving each of these objects that certain felicity of a well-made thing.



When a text is handed in, it starts to become another thing. It is out there, at the disposal of interpretations, responses, and further thinking. In general this is not so different from what curating is also (in part) about. More specifically, it resonates with what PRAXES as a *dispositif* aims at representing, allowing space for multiplying points of view on an artist's poetics. Once the somewhat solitary research or writing phase comes to an end, space is left to the reactions of the public, and to some extent also to a sort of self-assessment, the results of which can then leak into the next text, the next show, or the next module.

In my first text of this short series, Judith Hopf's practice surfaced as intimately connected to sculpture—to its language as well as to its history. This became discernible in details such as the material reality of the works, the approach to matter, and the display. At the same time, my reading brought to the forefront the notions of production, originality, and authorship.

In an email she sent after having read the text, Hopf alerted me about an aspect I had overlooked. The objects she employs, according to my argument, are often mass-produced common things (I like the word "thing": it was a moment of elation when, during our first meeting, in the empty upstairs gallery at PRAXES, she recounted the turning of her discursive practice into one that is object-based. And we both, at the same moment, said: "I love things"). But in fact, it isn't fully true; in retrospect I realize that sometimes they can be altered ready-mades—as with the table that in her 2012 show "A Sudden Walk" becomes a walking tiger by simply changing the degree between leg and plane—and sometimes they are apparently common, but in fact are not, as in the case of the *Erschöpfte Vasen* (Exhausted Vases, 2009).

Following that conversation, and since in discussing Hopf's works with Rhea Dall and Kristine Siegel these exhausted vases were often mentioned by the three of us, it is to this body of work that this text is dedicated. Lacquered in off-white and turned upside down, the vases are painted with faces based on illustrator Saul Steinberg's drawings and rest on specially made high and hollow (just as the vases) plinths. Each of the *Erschöpfte Vasen*, Hopf told me, was produced after ancient Greek and Roman prototypes and modeled by an artisan.

So what at a first glance seemed a generic, common, and ultimately archetypal vase, once considered more carefully, revealed itself to be carefully modeled after a *oinochoe*, a *hydria*, a *pelike*, a *dinos*, a *psykter*, *skyphos*, or a *kantharos* (memories of a course on Archeology taken almost twenty years ago slowly resurface!). Typically, each of such vases belonged to a family and its shape was developed according to a specific use. There were vases to hold certain beverages and vases from which to pour them; vases for ointments; vases for liquids or for wheat. This very precise taxonomy, an aspect, I dare say, is of no secondary interest for the artist, as her objects always seem to allude to their performance and performativity, or, to use an Arendtian term, to a potential action.

Also, while carefully following the artist's indications based on the originals, the craftsman has inevitably translated it through his or her own style, thus complicating the notion of reproduction through interpretation. Just as the vases, not only our convictions regarding the idea of a copy in its relationship to the original is put upside down, but also that of the authorship of the artist versus that of the artisan, of the degree of interpretation and invention that forms a common base for both practices.

Similarly to *Trying to Build a Mask*, in *Erschöpfte Vasen* the display of the group of works, as well as the proportions of the plinth, facilitate a physical relation between the spectator and the object. In the apprehension of sculpture of all arts, the body is assumed as measure. These thin and tall forms, surmounted by heads—or faces—seem to inhabit the exhibition space, to confront the public with their presence, or to mirror it.

But at the same time the plinth is there to remind us that no matter what our impression is we are still in the presence of artworks, and of a very codified modernist exhibitionary complex, which is critically addressed and being mocked, thus reminding us that the notion of production, originality, and authorship, is far from having been resolved in the years of the discursive turn.



In the night of January 14th of the newly started year 1968 an earthquake of magnitude 6.1 struck the western area of Sicily, hitting fourteen villages and completely destroying four. History has a sense of humor of its own, marking the beginning of that year—linked inevitably to the students' protests in Paris—with destruction, catastrophe, and ruin.

Of the four small towns that tumbled within the few minutes that the earthquake lasted, Gibellina is the one that probably sounds most familiar. While reading out the letters that compose its name, it takes the form of an image: a white shroud of concrete covering the ruins on the side of a hill, an architecture of passageways through which you can walk—the largest of Albert Burri's *Cretti*.

As opposed to Berlin's Holocaust-Mahnmal, which borrows the morphology of the *Cretto di Gibellina*, the form of the grid is not modeled on a minimalist vocabulary, but carefully delineates the topography of the destroyed town. And in the perfect silence of the remote Sicilian countryside—for there is no sign that leads you to the site—you are left alone walking through this ghostly representation of the former village, with its alleys, buildings, people.

The *Cretto* is a dialectic figure: neither ruin nor monument, and always on the edge of collapsing under the negligence of the Italian government, it is a suspended and ambiguous object. And perhaps as such, it haunts the imagination of many artists.

What does this long digression have to do with the piece I am supposed to talk about in this third and conclusive text on Judith Hopf's work? *Untitled*, featured in the last of the four modules, and surely a favorite of Rhea, Kristine, and myself, should be the object of my analysis. Yet, I cannot escape thinking of it within the frame of the final display, which turned PRAXES's upstairs gallery into the place of a catastrophe. Seemingly sinking into the floor, or emerging from the watery remains of a flood, we can discern a vase, a wooden cube, and two faces made of tiles. A bit further to the right, the top ends of three ropes, one blue, one green, one golden, stick out of the floor, continuing their descent downstairs, thus connecting the two levels of the architecture.

When first presented in the frame of her solo show at Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples, *Untitled* had a Piranesian trait, enhancing with its discrete presence the idea of the city as an organism, where everything connects and high and low are positions that one occupies accidentally, perhaps by chance. In lieu of the transitive property that objects sometime retain, the image of the dismissive magniloquence of Neapolitan palazzi, half-ruins, and half-monuments momentarily superimposes that of the Berlin-based center for contemporary art. The romantic and tragic of the dangling ropes in Naples is here more tainted with humor; if the space is absorbing the works in its floor, this is certainly not due to the humid old walls of the *palazzo*.

Remains and ruins are ultimately iconic figures of the new century and of the century past. From the slow piano traveling over the grass covering what is left of the camps in *Nuit et brouillard*, to the film's aerial view of the bombed German cities, to more recent imagery of the demolition of the Berlin wall, to the fall of the Soviet block (versus the current rising of Russia), and the visual impact of the toppling Twin Towers. History is haunted by an idea of collapse that is both one of destruction and of elation, an ending and a possible reconfiguration—an image offered to us by Walter Benjamin with his usual foresight, well before it took a tangible form in reality.

Here, an exhibition space that is equally the scene of a disaster can perhaps bring more focus on the reasons for which we do the things we do, forcing us to look not only inside the white cube, but outside, beyond, and sometimes beneath.

Written by PRAXES guest curator Cecilia Canziani, this Paper is a game or an exercise with one simple rule—for Canziani to respond both personally and critically to a single artwork through patient, focused contemplation. The result is an essay in the true sense of the word, an attempt or a trial—led by a steady yet physically remote curatorial gaze—that both intently focuses in and freely pans out. Forming a series of reflective studies of Hopf’s artworks, the Paper centers around *Trying to Build a Mask*, presented in the third exhibition module *Untitled (3)*; then Hopf’s ceramics *Erschöpfte Vasen*; after which the focal point becomes the rope works, *Untitled*, installed in her final exhibition module at PRAXES *Untitled (4)*.

Trying to Build a Mask, 2012;
Erschöpfte Vasen, 2009;
Untitled, 2014
© Judith Hopf
“Trying to Build a Mask”; “Exhausted Vases”; “Untitled”
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Published by
PRAXES Center for Contemporary Art
www.praxes.de