

# Split in the Space of Appropriation (of Knowledge), or Always More Than the Self

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Although Miriam Bajtala engages with very different planes of meaning and structures of interconnection between spaces, her works always originate in concrete physical and social spaces. The common thread that runs through them is the constructed nature of spaces, whose contextualization she differentiates and visualizes. She sets dimensions of these spaces in geometric, experimental, and conceptual interrelation, engendering enmeshments of spaces that speak to the entanglements between personal and social-political histories. Raising the question of the interplay between physical and social spaces, she gestures toward the systems of power and territories bound up with them. Both, geographical and social spaces, reflect relationship structures and power differentials that are consciously or unconsciously reproduced again and again. That is the point that Miriam Bajtala's works home in on – she surveys real spaces, detects in-between spaces, imagines spaces of possibility, critiques representative spaces, and questions spaces of art as a hierarchical system, opening them up to renegotiation. The paradigms that organize these spaces, it turns out, are inseparable from the subject; interdependencies between actor and space come to the fore. These

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Gerrit Jackson.

relational constructs are informed by paradigms of the gaze, of language, of knowledge, of power, etc.; are dependent on emotions, personal experiences, and social and political developments. Spatial modules become a space of experience that is grounded in site-specific knowledge. Bajtala probes the question of how spaces and knowledge are appropriated and represented: with evident relish, she traverses, splits, and re-figures perspectives of the self and others' perceptions.

On the one hand, knowledge defines spatial structures; on the other hand, it is encoded in systems of spaces. As Donna Haraway has argued, any form of knowledge is always historically and culturally specific, and subjects cannot be isolated from their environment but are always part of and embodied in it. Haraway demonstrates how knowledge is tied to subjects and constitutively related to forms of social life and power and the technologies of knowledge they sustain. Bajtala's works scrutinize these subjective embodiments and biopolitical implications of knowledge; she quantifies material as well as ideal objects and transforms them into poetic knowledge. Her play with the partial nature, representation, and re-figuration of knowledge manifests itself in the staged interplay of different actors.

Taken together, her works yield a web woven of strands of knowledge drawn from diverse spatial and temporal contexts. They can stand alone as studies or overlap, be concrete or speculative. Re-presenting this knowledge requires exercises in spaces. They go hand in hand with a nonbinary view of body and mind that recognizes knowledge as anchored in bodies. Processes of knowledge production and materialization turn the bodies into "situated actors," as Haraway puts it, suspending the dualism of researcher subject and object under research. When the object of knowledge emerges as an actor in its own right, the speakers switch positions and narratives change. Objects are endowed with agency, as in the performance *bodies of my work* [WVZ 99 / 2016]; conversely, the language/speech that constitutes the subject is no longer tied to a specific person but instead characterized, as in *In my name* [WVZ 93 / 2013], by a variety of authors. The singular, in the community, becomes collective, just as the collective becomes singular in the individual. It follows that the self that interacts with other persons and spaces is always already the sum of appropriated knowledge.

How, then, are artistic practices and subjects situated in the physical and social space? Bajtala addresses this question in a number of works. In the installation *In my name* in the Vienna Secession's Grafisches Kabinett, she turned the process of artistic production on its head by altering the sequencing and linguistic situatedness of actors in the art

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space. The installation consists of the two video pieces *four speeches* and *chorus*. *Four speeches* dramatizes the artist's role between self-perception and the perceptions of others: four art workers were commissioned to write a first-person speech in Bajtala's name, at a time when the exhibition did not yet exist. The resulting texts were the material out of which she began to mold the work. In the video, Bajtala herself performs the four perspectives/speeches of the four proxies: a woman artist, two curators – a man and a woman – and a woman writer. She 'stages' and embodies the texts in close-up shots, internalizing the proxies' perspectives and roles in four different self-dramatizations, relying on appropriated language, facial expressions, and gestures. The first-person position is relinquished and reflected through other individuals in order to become a re-figured I. The I absorbs, transforms, and enacts the gathered voices.

In response to the four commissioned speeches, Bajtala wrote a riposte that is recited by a chorus. The video *chorus* shows the fifty people who responded to the artist's open call: they enter the Secession's main gallery and then collectively deliver her speech. Bajtala appropriates the Secession's main gallery for herself by means of the chorus's vocal force (and the invitation card), and the material for the exhibition in form of the proxies' texts. The spectacle of the staging intertwines the spatial and textual models of appropriation.

Self-statement and others' communications, the singular and the collective intermix in the process of artistic production. Bajtala points up the interplay of input and output, undoes the division between production and reception, exposes methods of appropriation. The outside view that becomes the self's perspective is the basis for a work that is coming into being. The distance between producer, beholder, and critic – as well as that between the spaces – temporarily collapses. The artistic I appears as a multitude of actors' voices that, in a partial split, constitute components of the self.

The two videos were projected onto two facing walls, with the protagonists appearing in alternation. Each becomes the other's sounding box.

For the performative action *bodies of my work*, Bajtala again invited art workers and others to be part of – play a part in – the performance. The work investigates possible agencies of works of art and interactions in the art space. Bajtala here stages the index of her oeuvre as a physical lineup in three dimensions. Ninety-nine friends, acquaintances, and strangers each held up or carried a sign with the title of an earlier work. The performance, which lasted an hour, may be read as an indexical presentation of all listed works by Bajtala. It concluded with a group photograph of all carriers, who each 'embodied' one work in the space. The suspension of the traditional subject-object-beholder

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situation turns the space of representation into one of action. The performance breaks up the situatedness of the works in the exhibition space by featuring not the works themselves but their names=titles, animated by their carriers' movements, in the lead parts. The works forfeit their visually defined material identity, their status of objects, and attain the status of subjects by becoming actors in their own right. The works' performative appearance not only proclaims their concern and their protest to the public, they also continually change their positions relative to one another and hence their inter-relations. They are now read in their shared context of action.

How can narratives encoded in spaces be apprehended before they speak for themselves?

In the work *wall in hand* [WVZ 48 / 2006], Bajtala delves into questions of the materiality and representation of her studio space by fanning out the narratives and social structures embodied in it. She photographically decomposed the studio space into individual parts and systematized its walls using a coordinate grid she terms "space capture." The grid structure served her as an orientation guide as she compiled an optical survey of the walls. The process of visual recording and appropriation yielded one book per wall. In an edition of four, the volumes not only archive the room; the studio space may also be put back together and reconstructed as a full-size image out of the altogether nine hundred plates, like an analog backup. A space is captured in its present condition that represents specific experiential narratives in Bajtala's life and artistic practice. The application of a quasi-archaeological method of imaging and archiving to the studio produces a kind of hyperreality one can set down on the bookshelf and unfold in three dimensions at any time. The biographical-spatial and the archival element are fused in the structure of the taxonomy. The systematic order of recording process, spatial mapping, and archiving compresses the studio and, as it were, folds it up into a space of recollection. Bajtala thus transfers her workspace into a narrative that, arranged in four volumes, visualizes chapters in her life. The space in which the artist lives and works is appropriated through procedures of recording and surveying and spelled out so that its legibility and reconstructibility decode the operation of social positioning.

In which form do spaces of knowledge reflect social structures and systems of power, and how do they produce them?

At the invitation of FFG and section.a, Miriam Bajtala created the video installation *my excellence, the appropriate rest, a variable triologue* [WVZ 56 / 2006-07], which grapples with the idea of academic excellence. Based on interviews with the Austrian scien-

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tists Andrea Barta, Helga Kromp-Kolb, and Silvia Miksch, she produced a three-part video installation, flanked by three books containing the interviews. Deleted and relocated passages are indicated as such in the books, revealing the construction of the text of the videos. The collaged interview texts are spoken and represented by Bajtala herself, who in this instance speaks in the scientists' names, letting the three positions interact in a staged dialogue. The question of subjective and objective knowledge, of the representation and embodiment of knowledge is framed in the context of the university with its power politics and social dynamics. In the interviews, the three women recall their experiences of living and working in academic and university systems, of how habitus, social status, and gender play a role in the reproduction of systems of power. They talk about their specific fields of expertise and their passion for research, describe how their academic positions and work shape their private lives, comment on their concrete working conditions, the competitive pressure, the growing dominance of economic considerations in academic life, on the need to be able to bear frustrations, gender-specific differences, and women scientists' networks, on the importance of critique, scientific exchanges of ideas, and more.

The interviews reveal how science is situated not only in the three women's social-political contexts, but also in the hierarchical social and economic field of the academy. They shed light on the relation between space of knowledge and social space, on the university as a space of the advancement of knowledge as well as interactions. The scientists' accounts demonstrate that neither spaces of knowledge nor social spaces are neutral. They are shaped by individuals, institutions, and ideologies and are anchored in social, cultural, historical contexts.

How do representative spaces, spaces of control, and spaces of possibility relate to one another?

In *Catwalk for the President* [WVZ 71 / 2009], Bajtala extended the red carpet of the office of the president of Austria at the Hofburg in Vienna with layers of rag rugs that extended all the way to the "yellow room." At the end of this mottled catwalk, on the threshold to the music room, she positioned a collection of worn shoes, a symbol, in contrast with the representative spaces and the president's public office, of a private space. The intervention with its staged intimacy subversively counteracts the setting's representative function, which is tied to the public office of the president. By ironically commenting on the institution's rules, conventions, and protocols, she forces the representative space open. Props of private life that gesture toward poorer social classes serve her to appropriate the space of state representation inside the Hofburg.

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Ceremonial control and controlled ceremony as a form of representative theatricality are neutralized by the everyday objects.

In the video installation *Operation Goldhaube* [WVZ 53 / 2006], Miriam Bajtala refers to the eponymous air surveillance system of the Austrian Armed Forces. For this project, she asked conscripts to stretch a 1000-meter rubber band throughout a room that was empty save for wall hooks, working alone or in twos or threes for several hours. The resulting individual structures organizing the space may be read as reflecting both military-strategic and personal approaches. The tangle of lines visualizes the act of charting a spatial situation and the appropriation of a space, with the threadlike structure of the elastic rubber bands indicating the extension, expansions, and diversity of possible practices. In *Operation Goldhaube*, rather than the military surveilling the airspace, the camera positioned in the room records the soldiers' strategies in the room. As the playful demarcation of a territory progresses, their freedom of movement is curtailed by the growing density of the rubber bands. On the other hand, the bands render their approaches visible and intelligible. The question of the transparency of surveillance – who appropriates which knowledge about whom or what? – encounters that of individuals' discretion and enmeshment in biopolitical systems.

In the earlier work *Wild spaces* [WVZ 18 / 2002], it was Bajtala herself who stretched wool strings throughout a room, working for five days until the strings were so dense that the space was no longer usable, so dense that all movement in the space became impossible and the body was thoroughly woven into the room. The dense web of wool strings is fraught with symbolism, referring in particular to spaces of the mind; Bajtala regards it as a metaphor for synaptic connections, webs of ideas, or spaces of association. In this instance, then, the threads represent not lines of surveying but networking options and fields of possibility. They also recall Haraway's string game, a material-semiotic model for how all human as well as non-human actors come into being in the tangle of relationships in which they are embedded and which is defined by an ongoing process of re-figuration.

Miriam Bajtala turns ideas about spaces and subjecthood on their head, lets spaces of science, art, and memory interact, collapses metaphorical ideas of space, fictionalizes perspectives by folding spaces and shifting perspectives. Working to detect interconnections between the split subject and splits in spaces, she brings out ambiguities and in-between spaces on the stage of her art. It is invariably never a solo for the self.

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