

Abstract Possible

Amber Hickey and Lindsey V. Sharman

Abstract Possible, a series of exhibitions realised in various locations, aims to investigate the many forms and manifestations of abstraction in contemporary art and culture focusing on three main themes: economic abstraction, withdrawal, and formal abstraction. The emphasis of the Zurich edition, *The Zurich Test*, was placed on the latter.

Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, and styrofoam formed Tommy Støckel's *Exposed Superstructure*, one of only two pieces featured in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*. Wade Guyton's work *Untitled* was a plywood construction, one centimetre high and painted glossy black, covering the entire floor of the gallery.

Abstract Possible: The Trailer, the first iteration of the project, was realised from November 2010 to January 2011 in Malmö Kunsthall, Sweden. *Abstract Possible: The Tamayo Take* took place at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City from March to August 2011 and greatly expanded the discourse of the topic. The series features contributions by Doug Ashford, Claire Barclay, José León Cerrillo, Matias Faldbakken, Claudia Fernández, Liam Gillick, Goldin+Senneby, Wade Guyton, Gunilla Klingberg, David Maljkovic, Mai-Thu Perret, Seth Price, Walid Raad, Emily Roysdon, Salón, Bojan Sarcevic, Tommy Støckel, Ultra-Red, and Anton Vidokle.

In his text *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which was pivotal to this exhibition, Alfred Barr outlined two main threads dividing abstract artists into two opposing approaches to abstraction. He describes abstraction as either "intellectual, structural, architectonic geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence on logic and calculation" as illustrated by artists such as Cézanne, Seurat and the cubists and constructivists or "intuitive, emotional rather than intellectual," decorative, romantic, and irrational, as in the work of Kandinsky.¹

With the rise in popularity of photography in the early 1900s other artistic practices were freed from mimetic imagery, and where the obvious "truth" was put forward by photographs, deeper, more hidden truths were explored by abstraction. Touting the possibilities of abstraction for artists, Ibram Lassaw exclaimed that "the artist no longer feels that he is representing reality, he is actually making reality... reality is something stranger and greater than merely photographic rendering can show."¹ For artists such as Wade Guyton and Tommy Støckel working with abstraction removes the dependence on the 'real' world, liberating art from its position as a mere practice of imitation. Abstraction does not need to draw from the reality of the natural world for inspiration, its depictions become autonomous rather than reproductions or forgeries of nature.

Beyond formal abstraction, as described by Barr and many artists and theorists from the turn of the twentieth century onward, withdrawal and economic abstraction were key readings of the term in the *Abstract Possible* exhibitions. The

fascination with abstraction has come into focus behind a movement towards absolute abstraction, or as Marx labelled it, capital, that which turns anything into a commodity, art included.

Spawned by the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes articulated the main features of what came to be known as Keynesian Economics in his 1936 book entitled, *The General Theory of Employment, Business and Money*. In contrast to Marx's work related to the value of products, which focused on the idea that value is based on the costs of raw materials and the cost of labour, Keynes indicated that value is decided solely by the consumer; the popular demand of the product. As Keynesian Economics gained influence in the Western world, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, economic value became increasingly abstracted.² Although the recent economic recession has undoubtedly pushed the instances of monetary abstraction 'into relief,' as a backdrop to *The Zurich Test*, Zurich's financial industry guards a 'healthy,' although not fully 'recovered,' culture of economic abstraction.



Abstract, coming from the Latin *abstrahere* (to draw away from) quite literally means to withdraw. In art this often refers to artists' rejection of the accepted institutional framework of creation and display. This can trigger the formation of self-run initiatives which function against or parallel to gallery and museum systems. Artists for many generations have seen the traditional gallery or museum space as restrictive of their work and many see its structure as completely contradictory to their ideals. While not only restrictive, these accepted institutions are also simply incapable of housing, controlling, or displaying certain projects. Many artists abjure from this system and believe they can function more effectively on its peripheries. This form of abstraction is often encountered within manifestations of both formal abstraction and economic abstraction when accepted artistic or commercial practices are rejected.

Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test withdrew in many ways from the accepted models of exhibition making and art making. The curatorial process was abstracted, and even the artistic processes themselves were subjected to withdrawal. Wade Guyton had almost no part in the production of his artwork and only saw the piece through images. It was funded and manufactured by the twelve students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating who facilitated the entire exhibition, serving as remote studio assistants' for Guyton and fundraisers for the show.

The collaborative methods practiced during the preparation for *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* were strikingly suited to the title of the project, which involved two artists exhibiting, Maria Lind acting as a curator, and a group of post-graduate students (Amber Hickey, Lindsey V. Sharman, Candida Pestana, Marina Lopes Coelho, Silvia Simoncelli, Jeannine Herrmann, Corinne Rinaldis, Milena Brendle, Garance Massart-Blum, Melanie Büchel, Catrina Sonderegger, Sonja Hug) acting as producers, mediators, writers, organizers and fundraisers. This model of frequent role-reversal and uncertainty is perfectly in line with the topic of abstraction. Typical hierarchies within many art world working conditions were fluid - at one moment confirmed and at the next broken down. Perceptions of power held by the worker, apprentice, or outsourcer were often boiling below the surface. Stability was non-existent but, rather than hindering the project, these features seemed to feed it.

Tommy Støckel's work drew the viewer into the space, and rested on Guyton's floor using it as a pedestal while at the same time requiring its support. At first, Støckel's work may look like a 3D rendition of a game of Tetris, but behind his complex geometric forms are concerns that far surpass geeky fascination with video games. Støckel readily admits his weakness for science fiction novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he is equally concerned with modernist thinking, subverting the axioms associated with creation, and using nature as inspiration and as a theme of his artistic practice and discourse.³ This fascination with the human-made and the natural informs his works and results in a unique presence of both influences, with neither overpowering the other, but rather engaged in a respectful, symbiotic relationship within the work. His complex geometric forms are quintessential examples of visual complexity within the seemingly simple. Støckel often refers to his work as *maquettes*, or unfinished models, rather than as fully fledged sculptures, highlighting the "DIY" aspects of his work.

Although *Exposed Superstructure* is one of Støckel's older works, originally shown in Charlottenburg in 2006, it accurately represents some of the most consistent values throughout his oeuvre. The piece, an arrangement of precise, geometric forms ranging in size, explores notions of how multiplicity and small adjustments of scale can drastically affect perception and reveal otherwise unapparent intricacies in form. The work features a key component of one of the most discussed prints in art history, *Dürer's Solid* in Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I*. The use of this component initiates an exploration of themes such as institutional structure under the guise of a playful experimentation in contemporary urban forms and references. *Dürer's Solid* is a 8-surface polyhedron, originally featured in the 1513 print. The shape, on which some of the 2191 pieces of *Exposed Superstructure* are modelled after, is an unsolved mystery in the world of art and mathematics, as the exact measurements of its eight sides have never been proven. Støckel uses the most widely accepted educated-guess of these measurements as the framework for his sculpture, at once hinting at the uncertainties that are commonplace within contemporary lifestyles. The title of the work references Støckel's own position in society, producing artworks that are an integral part of the growing superstructure of cultural output. The title furthermore hints at the influence of Marx and Althusser, although Støckel insists the connection was not intentional. When asked about the significance of the title, he stated that he was inspired by the title of a Star Wars cartoon, and had no intention of referencing Marx. He finds it over-evaluative when people place too much political significance on his work. Perhaps Støckel is distancing himself from manipulating the viewer and, like Hans Hoffman, believes that "burdening the canvas with propaganda or history does not make a painting a better work of art."⁴ When the piece is situated on top of Wade Guyton's

Untitled (floor piece) the political connotations become evermore explicit as Guyton's floor directly addresses issues relating to economy and hierarchy.

Simplicity is also key to the work of Wade Guyton, who typically executes large scale artworks using modest materials. The piece he exhibited in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* greeted viewers as they entered and forced them into interaction the entire time they stayed in the space. The work, modelled after his previous studio floor is a casual yet compelling nod towards the methods of production used during times of economic strain, and shows how these methods can themselves become forms. The floor, originally created out of necessity and determined by the young artists meagre finances, was made out of the most inexpensive materials he could find. It formed the very support of all work taking place in the artist's studio, and in Zurich the piece created the support for the entire exhibition. Previous manifestations of the floor have utilised it as a base for other works by Guyton. *Abstract Possible* exhibited *Untitled* independently of other works in the artist's oeuvre for the first time.

Each time *Untitled* is exhibited, it is to be reconstructed, subjecting it to the material and economic situations of each location and building complexity within the piece every time it is shown. Realising the exhibition in Zurich presented its own unique challenges for the work. A haven of wealth, security, and high standards of living that are difficult to reach for 'outsiders,' Zurich is not the location *par excellence* to make art happen on a low budget. Regulations and standards, rather than in-kind acts and improvisation, prevail. This situation offers a stark contrast to the conditions in which Guyton first showed this work. Due to its relatively low quality, the wood that Guyton usually sources for his 'floor piece' is not available for purchase in Switzerland. This resulted in the creation of a work that made explicit the monumentalisation of the floor when it becomes art, rather than the sum of the materials which created it.

It is difficult, not useless, to categorize Wade Guyton or his work within one medium. His work not only challenges accepted notions within the art world, but accepted notions of production. Guyton's concern is with the mode of material production, whether it be production with a printer, or production of materials such as pre-finished canvas, mass produced plywood, or dry wall. He uses these materials and plays with their irregularities, which, as claimed by their production methods, should be completely uniform. This self proclaimed 'lazy artist' often outsources his works and believes that other people or other mechanisms can create more compelling work than his own hands.⁵ He acts as concept creator, not as builder and outsources not out of necessity but out of curiosity. When creating works he often only presents the concept and then allows, for example, the staff at a printing shop to interpret his colours and his intentions as they like. He indulges in the unknown and enjoys sharing artistic licence whether he is appropriating images, or letting his own ideas develop in the hands of others.

However, Guyton has a clear idea of how his work should be exhibited and plays a large role in its display. As noted, Guyton will often recreate the floor of his studio in galleries acting to connect the works with their place of production. The gallery space is also often outfitted with a printer that creates more printer paintings during the exhibition, allowing visitors to the gallery another view into the artistic process. The printer paintings fall from the printer onto the floor, itself a large monochrome. These two actions, paintings falling on the floor and visitors actually walking on and in essence 'destroying' an artwork, directly undermine accepted notions of the artist as genius and the artwork as sacred.

When examining the work of Wade Guyton one realizes all that he critiques is also perpetuated. He directly critiques the art market, while being very comfortably situated within it. Complex in its simplicity, even the concept of the death of painting is both championed and challenged in the work of Wade Guyton.

Formal abstraction is explored in Guyton and Støckel's works through both artists' attempts to shape their works through the exploration of basic materials, and methodical construction. Both artists' bodies of work depict what can not be seen by searching in the natural. Neither artist claims to be revolutionary. Both works in *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* do however have political undertones, and one can only speculate about the reasons the artists refrain from highlighting the politics of their work.

The many layers of abstraction in this project go much deeper than the surface level of the works presented. Formal abstraction, economic abstraction, and withdrawal are found in every level of the working conditions and collaborations that made *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* possible. The production and result of *The Zurich Test*, as in the works of Støckel and Guyton, is more compelling than a mere sum of its parts.



2

Notes

1 Ibram Lassaw, "On inventing Our Own Art", first published in *American Abstract Artists' Yearbook*, 1938, reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory. 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 398.

2 This is debatable, depending on whose definition of economic abstraction one references. For instance, David Graeber would argue that the abstraction of economic exchange existed far before the 1900s (David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Melville House, 2012).

3 "Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow." <http://futuorologyprogramme.org/tommy-st%C3%B8ckel/>. Accessed 13.03.2011.

4 Hans Hoffman, "On the Aims of Art", first published in *The Fortnight*, Campbell, CA, vol. 1, no. 13, 26 February 1932, reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory. 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 373

5 Linda Yablonsky "Artifacts: Wade Guyton's Monument to Epson", *T Magazine*, *New York Times Blog* May 6, 2010, accessed April 6, 2011. <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/06/artifacts-wade-guytons-monument-to-epson/>.

Captions

1 Tommy Stöckel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006. Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, styrofoam, 45 x 230 x 230 cm. Installed on Wade Guyton's Untitled (floor piece) at *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*, Whitespace, Zurich 2011. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

2 *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*, exhibition opening, curator's talk. Photo: Amber Hickey.

Amber Hickey is an artist, organizer, educator, and PhD researcher at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her research focuses include art activism and the visibility of violence. She has lectured at Scripps College Claremont, the California Institute of Integral Studies, and UC Santa Cruz, among others. Amber is a founding member of the UCSC Global Nuclear Awareness Coalition and on the editorial board of their forthcoming *Working Papers Series*. She recently received the UCSC Dean's Award for Excellence in the Arts, which funded research regarding the visual records and social history of nuclear weapons in Los Alamos, New Mexico. She is the editor of *A Guidebook of Alternative News* and is currently working on an interactive archive that will expand the content of the project by facilitating contributions from the public, which was part of her MAS Project in the MAS Curating, Zürich, www.curating.org.

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Lindsey V. Sharman was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Switzerland, Austria and MAS Curating, Zürich, www.curating.org. Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for *The Founders' Gallery* at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.