

Oedipal relationships are ambivalent—in art as in life—and thus more difficult than psychoanalysis would like to make us believe. It speaks of “patricide” as if it were subject to the laws of nature and takes place with the same inevitability as the metamorphosis from a larva to a butterfly. For sons, however, it is not just a matter of eliminating fathers in order to freely set about shaping one’s own life and work. Ordinarily, there are also feelings of respect and love for a man who helped one get a start in life and often enough did one or the other good thing. In the area of art this ambivalence concerns the great father figures and role models toward whom young artists orient themselves and whom they later discard in order to discover themselves and forge their own path. Without cutting this cord, a self-determined life or an autonomous oeuvre is inconceivable. But the way in which this takes place varies enormously from individual to individual. In art, one of the last great authorities—aesthetic superego and dominant father figure par excellence—is American Minimal Art, which in the last century attempted to cast art in ultimate aesthetic forms and formulae. However, it is not a *creatio ex nihilo* but has a long history of progenitors. It goes back to Plato, for whom geometric laws, such as those that underlie Minimal Art, are the expression of a harmonious world defined by symmetry and proportion. We also find an appreciation of the world *de more geometrico* in the Renaissance, in which Leonardo saw the human being inscribed into the proportion of circle and square. In the twentieth century, the laws of geometry not only define the aesthetics of Minimal Art but even prior to that the art of Russian Suprematism, the Dutch De Stijl group, and the German Bauhaus.

All of these movements, which in equal measure view the world philosophically and aesthetically, act with an ideological claim to absoluteness that, if it did not make them followers, roused opposition among those born later. In the nineties, a clever and eye-opening exhibition entitled *Minimal–Maximal*, curated by Peter Frieze, at the Weserburg in Bremen drew on Minimal Art and its protagonists to demonstrate how the succeeding generation reacted to their aesthetic concepts. From biting irony and iconoclasm to what was more moderate dissociation—the presentation included and allowed studying the entire spectrum of the artistic examination of Minimal Art in all of its facets. Christian Helwing did not participate in the show. He was still studying visual art at the time at the Fachhochschule Hannover, a course of studies he continued from 2001 to 2005 at the Hochschule für Künste in Bremen and finished as a master student. But from today’s perspective, he definitely could have been there. For his site-specific interventions, which are just as much autonomous sculptures as they are architectural placements, work just as much with geometric means and Constructivism as the works by those artists represented in *Minimal–Maximal*. Like them, Helwing also makes reference to historical models. Not just Minimal artists, but also to those who stand in the same line of tradition. In conversations with him about his work, he is bound to mention the names of architects, among them Bruno Taut, who in the twentieth century was one of the influential protagonists of “New Building” and had close connections to Walter Gropius and Hans Scharoun. The National Socialists vilified him as a “cultural Bolshevik” and ousted him from his position as professor of architecture.

Christian Helwing makes explicit reference to Bruno Taut and the beginnings of architectural modernism in his work for the stairwell in the Kunstverein in Hannover. The title of the installation, *A Crystal Lives On* (2010), is an elliptic abbreviation translated into English that cites the inscription, written by Paul Scheerbart, that Taut had applied to his Glass Pavilion at the Cologne Werkbund Exhibition in 1914: "Without a glass palace, life is a burden. . . . Light permeates the entire universe. It is alive in crystal." Scheerbart had euphorically welcomed the glass palace as the modern rebirth of the Solomonian temple. In Helwing's title, living crystal becomes glass that lives on, which can be understood programmatically. For the artist, tradition is alive; he examines it, and it lives on in his own work, although in modified form of course. With a stance like this, in his relationship to the past Helwing belongs more to the gentle Oedipal rebels than to the radical subversives who want to completely rewrite the world and art in their time. However, his ears are deaf to the lofty and idealistic undertones, which reach as far as the sacred, in Taut's understanding of a work of art. However, he looks with eyes wide open at the aesthetic innovations, the rhombic structure of the glass palace, and its kaleidoscopic colors. He quotes them in his installation in a subtle play of construction and deconstruction. He installs colored wooden boards in the wide stairwell whose sharp angles and straight corners reflect the succession of stairs. Toward the shaft they are dark blue, toward the stairs light blue. White and black are added to the light blue of the walls. The repetitions, variations, and reversals of color and plastic interventions underscore the architectural ideal and history of the stairwell. But they also contradict them. Something hallucinatory is lent to the clear element of the artist's interventions. In this work, order and confusion go hand in hand, which can definitely be seen as programmatic.

Revealing in this connection is a conversation Christian Helwing had with Joachim Kreibohm, editor-in-chief of *artist*, the same year he produced his work for Hannover. The two talked about the artist's oeuvre on the occasion of his work *EAT*. (2010) for the Kunstverein Ruhr. The conversation is printed in the accompanying catalogue. When asked whether geometric forms "serve as a manifesto" for him, Helwing replied: "I don't write manifestos, because what interests me about geometries is their 'abuse' in an attempt to explain a world order. What I do is more an attempt to polemically culminate the right angle, or in this case the acute angle [here he is making reference to his installation at the Kunstverein Ruhr, A.N.] whereby I use principles similar to those in modernity in order to counteract them in equal measure." As if under a magnifying glass, this illustrates Helwing's understanding of himself as an artist and his relationship to the tradition of modernism. He does not see the vocabulary or the language of geometry and Constructivism discredited or contaminated so that he would have to discard them but rather the ideological superstructure that is normally associated with them. The one-sided and exclusive emphasis of Cartesian cognition. The cocksure expectation to be able to *clare et distincte* get to the heart of the world and get a grip on it. Delighting humankind by means of the right angle. And this in view of a population about which Immanuel Kant once wrote the following: "Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as which man is made of." As if to confirm and illustrate the thesis put forward by the philosopher, in 2010 Helwing drove a black, inaccessible wedge into the orthogonal shell of the former salesroom in Essen—which explains the title of the work: *EAT*.—that he constituted out of the twofold diagonal division of the space. Another attempt at inciting confusion by means of a crystal-clear structure. And even though visitors to the Kunstverein did not choke on this work during their aesthetic consumption of it, one or the other

will have stood in front of it shaking his or her head.

This possibly also applies to a phenomenologically similar work that Christian Helwing created in 2012 for the group exhibition *Ab in die Ecke!* (Off into the Corner) at the Städtische Galerie Delmenhorst. Its director, Annett Reckert, used this title to address the corner as an artistic subject. Helwing's *Corner Piece* (2012) consists of an isosceles triangle made of MDF that voluminously protrudes from the ceiling into a corner of the exhibition space. It is therefore a corner piece in a twofold sense. And it is striking in a spectacular way, because its black color is in stark contrast to the white of the exhibition spaces. It is no less spectacular because it is so nonfunctional. Because it does not support, hold, or extend anything. Even though it is obviously reminiscent of architecture and apparently seeks to become a part of the existing architecture. Here, too, Helwing reverses a fundamental law of modernism. He suspends the relation of form to content no less than the canonic phrase "form follows function." At the same time, with the positioning of his black triangle the artist makes reference to Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*, which for its first presentation in 1915 likewise hung far up on the wall. Another artist whom Christian Helwing likewise often refers to in connection with his oeuvre is the American Gordon Matta-Clark. He became well known for the cuts and sections through buildings and architecture he performed with the precision of a surgeon. What fascinates Helwing about Matta-Clark is less the sociocritical dimension of his works than their analytical and deconstructive quality. In his work *Grauhof Revolutionary Gate* (2012), he approaches the exhibition space of the Städtische Galerie Bremen with a similar unlocking gaze. However, he does not hollow out the space but places something into it. He confronts the cast-iron, gray pillars from the nineteenth century with a white pair of pillars that bear equally white T-girders onto which he has placed a row of green mineral-water bottles. In doing so, he apparently effortlessly brings two centuries face and face and has them enter into a dialogue.

One of the most poetic spatial transformations in Christian Helwing's oeuvre is the project *Sleeping* (2011). He uses paint to divide an empty space into black and white zones. An armada of diagonally hung overhead neon lights dynamically transect the space while its interior is reflected in a complex way in the panes of the windows that have been painted black on the outside. The discreet interventions bring about striking effects. The architecture becomes a force field of emotional, narrative, and mythic impressions. The space hauntingly relates the story of the absent human being and his *condition humaine*. Of day and night, tranquility and motion, life and death. His work *Seeing Stars* (2010) also works with the structure of the space as if it were a matter of course. Christian Helwing placed two walls that intersect to form an X into the convoluted space of the Riga Art Space. Made of simple cardboard boxes held together with black stretch film, the two walls can easily be read as the geometric symbol for a star. However, in order to do so one requires an overview that the installation does not provide as such. The viewer can approach the architectural sculpture from two different directions and each time sees two identical inverted halves of it. Yet never the work in its entirety.

In order to actually see a star, viewers have become absorbed in it and join the two halves together in their imagination. Only then do they grasp the work in its totality and does it make good on its promise, which after all is a saying that means quite the contrary: that a hit on the

head causes us to lose consciousness and see stars. However, Christian Helwing's installations sharpen our consciousness, which is true in general for his enlightening and clear-sighted works. Albeit, thank god, not as savagely and painfully as Bruce Nauman wishes for from art and for whom it should be like being hit on the neck by a baseball bat, but rather gently and subtly.