

Peter Friese *EAT*.

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EAT. (the name of a London-based sandwich chain¹ for which the period after the T is also obligatory)

Art & Architecture

Christian Helwing chose a radical measure for his exhibition at the Kunstverein Ruhr: bringing in two walls kept completely in black that divide the exhibition space diagonally and in this way thoroughly alter it. This resulted in three separate spatial sections, of which two can be accessed. It soon becomes obvious that this elaborate structural measure, at the same time reduced to a bare minimum, has to be the exhibited work itself, and that a person entering the space in order to view "art" is already right in the middle of it. This fact may irritate all of those who expect "sculptures" or "paintings" by an artist and are instead confronted with altered spatial conditions, black walls, and their own irritation. Indeed, this is a concept of art that avails itself of certain means that are familiar to us from the interior fitting of buildings and the color-related design of spaces. Yet Helwing is in no way concerned with the simple equation of art with architecture or an apodictically executed fusion of art and design, but with the artistic inquiry into and fathoming of the conditions under which one can perceive, "use," and ultimately also "understand" architecture. In this way he succeeds in creating a certain kind of art whose parameters distinguish themselves both from a classic understanding of "sculpture" as well as from a conventional understanding of "architecture." The exhibition *EAT*. is meant to provide a concrete example of this artistic stance.

In situ

Helwing consistently works with the existing spatial conditions, dimensions, proportions, and sensory levels at each particular exhibition venue. He is also always interested in the local social, representative, or historical contexts. Among other things, it is about the meaning a building or a space has within the urban fabric; about the distances people cover in it; about the changes and the reallocations a location had to experience over the course of time. And so it is not surprising that after he was invited to develop an exhibition for the Kunstverein Ruhr at Kopstadtplatz, the Bremen-based artist first came to Essen to perform a precise study of the in situ situation. He took photographs, produced drawings, and explored the surroundings before he had even developed a concrete plan, which would first gradually develop out of the results of his research and their analysis. In his Bremen studio Helwing then produced floor plans, drawings of the space, and even three-dimensional models that demonstrate that the artist does not simply view architecture as something created by others, but as a semiotic system that can be "read," understood, or reformulated in a particular way. What was realized in the space at Kopstadtplatz is the visible and spatially and physically accessible result of an investigation performed in the actual setting. One could also call it the concentrate of an exploration that operates with various possibilities. In the end, what was produced was a radical measure that irritates visitors and in a literal sense is "space-consuming," and which allows apprehending the site-specific qualities in a new way.

¹ <http://www.eat.co.uk>

Stock Taking

It is easy to describe the architectural inventory that characterizes the Kunstverein's exhibition space and which many artists have responded to in different ways: typical inner-city postwar construction, former salesroom, eighty-five square meters of floor space, a large display window facing Kopstadtplatz, three doors, one round column, two square pillars, and three long, parallel-running rows of fluorescent tubes under the ceiling. The walls are painted white, the concrete floor gray. It in no way follows from such a sober description that it is a neutral, as it were faceless space whose empty walls can, in a figurative sense, be understood as blank pages (in order to ultimately be embellished with "art"). On the contrary: Christian Helwing "reads" and interprets these preexisting architectural conditions as results and symptoms of a historical development; he recognizes concepts that constitute its background and begins to work with them. He ultimately decides to use materials and apply methods that take up the trains of thought that others developed before him. In the end, he finds a special artistic solution that in turn can be read and interpreted in a specific way.

Space 1

If one enters the exhibition from Kopstadtplatz through the door with the lettering "EAT." on it, one arrives in a relatively small space with a triangular layout. However, the black wall installed opposite the entrance prevents one from walking in more than several meters. From here one cannot access either the office or the premises of the Forum Kunst & Architektur. Neither is there any further reference to the word "EAT." in this section of the space. There is nothing "to eat" here. Instead, one is standing directly in front of the diagonal black wall, which ends about forty-five centimeters below the ceiling and seems to be some kind of barrier. The tapered corner of the space indicates that this is a supplemental spatial cut. Here, the wall overlaps the short flight of stairs of the side entrance, leaving only a small, tiered, gray triangular structure hardly recognizable as steps. For all those who are familiar with the space from other occasions, it becomes clear that in this way, more than one third of the volume and the floor space must have been separated off. But even those entering the space for the first time sense that this radical triangular reduction cannot be all there is to the exhibition.

Space 2

For viewers entering the exhibition from the side, another accessible spatial section opens up from the Kunstverein's office. This space is also triangular but significantly larger than the first one. It is also striking that this black wall does not extend to the ceiling, but also ends forty-five centimeters below it. The distance to the ceiling also indicates that one is in a "space within a space" and that it continues beyond the wall. The three uninterrupted rows of neon tubes on the ceiling remain visible. This observation also applies to the two white pillars, which have been separated from each other by the spatial cut. One of them is on this side of the new wall, the other one on the other side. The latter visibly juts out between the edge of the wall and the ceiling, suggesting a third, non-accessible spatial section. Yet it is precisely this detail that makes it evident that as a result of the twofold separation, a fairly large section has been partitioned off. This likewise triangular area cannot be accessed for the duration of the exhibition; however, it remains theoretically deducible with little effort. A space within a space, unused, that is located between the front and the rear part of the exhibition.

Space 3

But the certainty that this hidden room exists makes the entire installation an experiment that, in addition to the viewer's physical experience, also comprises the insight and analyses that result directly from it. What is meant is the fact that certain movements can be performed in the space, whereas others are restricted to the extent that one is forced to adapt one's behavior to the space and at the same time begins to think about the circumstances that lead to this. One's presence in the space proves to be the basis of a special experience that is made possible here in which both the body as well as one's reflective skills play a role. In the process, the possibility of theoretically deducing the hidden space resembles a special aesthetic operation, as one becomes involved in something that to a large extent eludes a physical, sensory experience although it has to be assumed to exist behind the wall. This type of insight and experience associated with contemporary thought² is part of Christian Helwing's aesthetic strategy and can be also be encountered elsewhere within the installation.

No Go

In the rear corner of the larger space there is a door leading to a small storeroom that normally remains closed during an exhibition. Helwing opened this door a crack, but the same time closed it off with a vertical board, painted white, so that the door leaf remains fixed in this slightly open position. However, this position produces triangular black forms that taper to a point above and below the edges of the door leaf. The wedge on the upper edge proves to be an empty, dark gap, a regular hole, while the lower one makes part of the black floor of the storeroom visible. It is not possible to open this door any further. One can press the handle down, but the door leaf cannot be moved in either direction. While the possibility of passing through this door may briefly enter one's mind, it cannot be converted into a concrete action in the sense of using this door as a door. Here, architecture is employed much like a semiotic system and can thus be interpreted in this way. The function of the door suggests itself, but does not come to bear in the actual sense. Instead, we learn that there is a third, inaccessible space and at the same time recognize the paraphrases of the triangle motif that dominate the floor areas of the other spatial sections in the acute-angled triangles

References—A Look Back at History

At first glance, everything that has been described above is reminiscent of Constructivist forms as they were developed in the modernist reform movements in Russia, the Weimar Bauhaus, or the Dutch De Stijl group. The representatives of these avant-garde movements were not solely concerned with reduction or concentrating on the "essential" (for instance, the right angle) when implementing their basic geometric vocabulary, or with purely formal measures, but also—and above all—with radically changing life by means of art. With the radical reformulation and organization of the respective social environment with the modernity's forms. With the penetration of art into life, and vice versa, and the associated rearrangement of all areas of life—from architecture and art to furniture, articles of daily use, clothing, and materials. Modernity's agenda was also bound so closely with new materials and manufacturing methods that the principle of serial industrial production would eventually be reflected in its results (buildings, paintings,

² Wolfgang Welsch, "Ästhetik und Anästhetik," in id., *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart, 1990), pp. 9–40. Jean-François Lyotard, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist postmodern?" in Wolfgang Welsch, ed., *Wege aus der Moderne: Schlüsseltex-te der Postmo-dernen Diskussion* (Weinheim, 1988), pp. 198–200

sculptures, typography). One wanted to link the development of new technology and its associated industrialization to social reforms and in this way help set up a modern democratic society.

Possibilities and Limitations

In practice, Walter Gropius's social utopias, which were also incorporated into his teachings at the Bauhaus, founded in 1919, were consistent with certain social-democratic ideas of the Weimar Republic. Thus the desire to build apartments for as many people as possible, to enable them access to well-designed furniture and articles of daily use, can definitely be interpreted as a pragmatically intended connection of art with life. Irrespective of the contradictory political development in the young republic and its end in the so-called Third Reich, which put a stop to the development of such ideas in terms of social reform and their realization, the possibilities and limitations of this and other utopias in social practice can be examined using a variety of individual examples. One example for the dialectics or the joining together of potential and restriction is the famous "Frankfurt Kitchen,"³ which, on the one hand, enabled a formal "liberation"—or at least a certain degree of ease—in what up to then had been the arduous existence of the housewife. On the other hand, a calculated ergonomics prescribed how one moved about and behaved in a kitchen. Even today, one can identify these possibilities and limitations in subsidized housing of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which again took up the Bauhaus ideas. On the one hand, it continued to be about creating living space for many; on the other hand, in practice, this progressive and social concern had known consequences. Gigantic suburban settlements were built that, while capable of meeting the demand for living space, soon became modern ghettos at the city limits. What in itself was a "democratic" notion frequently led to the stereotypical dimensioning and design of apartments, to specifications that also influenced and shaped social interaction and the thinking and acting within these spaces not just in a positive way.

The Two-Faced Janus and Inspection

The inconsistency of Constructivist utopias in practice is thematically and consciously formally taken up in the installation *EAT*. at all those places at which paths are directed, access and insight are obstructed, and spaces are redefined and deliberately minimized. At the same time, in this way the two-faced aspect of "modernity" is also capable of being critically reflected. We have long since learned that architecture always impacts the behavior of the people who dwell in it, that it is capable of influencing their thinking, and it is necessary draw consequences from this insight. Helwing's interventions demonstrate that there are calculations, considerations, and formulated intentions behind all architectural measures; indeed, that against one's better judgment, some fatal and lasting errors, both in an architectural as well as a social sense, continue to be made in present-day urban planning. *EAT*, of course, is first and foremost concerned with art and not with a critique of the system, much less with offering solutions or making suggestions for improvement to architects. Yet to the extent in which ideas and concepts, both contemporary and historical, attain an aesthetic perspective, here it also becomes possible to subject them in a special way to a critical inspection—to place them on a higher level of reflection, so to speak. And this occurs by means of the conscious treatment of the materials that are employed, in this case drywall and the spaces it has redefined.

³ With the development of the "Frankfurt Kitchen" in 1926, the socially engaged Austrian architect and interior designer Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky created the prototype of a rationalized modern custom kitchen.

Charles Edouard Jeanneret⁴

Christian Helwing's considerations also pertain to the elements that already exist in the basic fabric at Kopstadtplatz, such as pillars and columns, which are also related to the basic ideas of modernity as formulated and practiced, for instance, by Le Corbusier. The latter was concerned with the largest possible degree of freedom, indeed, with the "breakup" of previous concepts of space in a dual sense. By placing structures on pillars, he was able—irrespective of what had been the all-dominant foundation walls—to break up space and freely design a building. He developed a simple but effective system comprised of concrete slabs borne by supports. Buildings were produced without visible foundations and with ribbon windows that frequently also incorporated the corners of the buildings. Dispensing with load-bearing walls made it possible to define and expand spaces at will and according to need. On the one hand, in this way the living space within the famous Villa Savoye would be individually defined and openly designed. On the other hand, due to the, in technical terms, newly gained possibilities, enormous factory buildings and open-plan offices were produced that simultaneously integrated many people into an overseeable and streamlined production process, and thus to a certain degree also deindividualized them. The view enabled in the installation *EAT*. from the large triangular space to the pillars that jut upward again aesthetically demonstrates this historical fact, as does the column to the right at the window, which has always been part of the building's basic fabric. In terms of Le Corbusier, the drywall walls Helwing's has incorporated into the space no longer make essential reference to the static foundations of the building; they could be freely, in this case diagonally constructed.

Color Concepts

In terms of color (in this case black), the emphasis and new design of the walls is reminiscent of the color concepts developed by Bruno Taut, who redefined and revolutionized subsidized housing in the early twentieth century. Taut knew how to accentuate his consciously economical stylistic elements by means of different colors. For the first time, color was understood as an element for structuring urban space and a means of systematically emphasizing what had otherwise been plastered gray walls, and it was deliberately employed. The possibility of painting a building or a wall in any color one sees fit—for us, a complete matter of course—had its origin here and became part of the system. Taut's decision to end the monotony of gray tenements by means of new architectural forms and in part expressive colors found stunning expression as early as between 1913 and 1915 in the so-called Paintbox Estate in Berlin. The estate, which consists of townhouses and multi-story apartment buildings, is now viewed as an early, visible signal for new, improved living. Today, what the architect, who emigrated from Germany in 1932, introduced to residential construction as a pioneering social achievement finds its misunderstood continuation in one or the other questionable and rampant form. The inclusion of colored surfaces in order to "enliven" or "loosen up" massive high-rise apartment complexes and prefabricated buildings made with concrete slabs is considered a tried and true means for the cosmetic, in other words superficial correction of the inherent stereotypical quality and monotony of these tenements. Thus, it is not about a reorganization of what permeates all areas in a humane or creative sense, but about a distraction from the core of the real problem.

⁴ Le Corbusier's civil name.

Learning from Las Vegas

It is precisely the apparently open arrangement of spaces, the possibility of erecting new walls as the need arises, of designing them in color, indeed, the advancement of garages, sunrooms, storage spaces, and entire auxiliary structures directs our view and our thoughts to another point of reference for Christian Helwing that began to change the minds of architects and architecture critics above all in the 1970s. In their book *Learning from Las Vegas*,⁵ which was published in 1972, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown described the dispersed settlements of the American metropolis that had emerged out of the uncontrolled use of technical possibilities. It is basically a survey of unplanned, to some irresponsible, proliferation. What is notable about this study is that it is also a survey of seedy commercial aesthetics, billboards, and superimposed, mismatched, glaring façades. Venturi and Scott Brown do not examine the current state of the American metropolis from the point of view of modernity with its high standards and seriously meant planning utopias, but rather in the sense of a case study that takes what, so to speak, randomly evolved in the desert seriously. They are interested in the question of how such anarchic proliferations can even endure and come to the conclusion that many big cities have developed in a similar way, i.e., in the sense of expanding dispersed settlements. In the final analysis, the city can be understood as a readable, constantly changing semiotic system in which it is not just about ostensive functions such as life, living, and working, but also advertising messages, urban marketing, and other forms of representation, for instance those that can be found in emblematic façades. It is ultimately not about copying Las Vegas, but about drawing insight and conclusions therefrom (precisely from the mistakes that have been made). Christian Helwing accommodates these considerations in that his design of the display window and his decision to call the exhibition *EAT.* are interwoven with the other façades in Essen's urban space.

EAT.—Concept for Essen

Certain parameters of modernity are reflected in the lettering and corporate identity of the London-based sandwich chain mentioned above. The use of the sans-serif, “modern” Helvetica font; dispensing with any kind of unnecessary design-related ballast in the restaurant's image; and the furnishings, menus, announcements, and a minimalist Internet presence make *EAT.* unmistakable. And although certain existing ideas are recombined and continue to be used, the way in which the objective, sparse typography of modernity and a specific concept for fast food come together here is typical and seminal. For Christian Helwing, the signature *EAT.* with the full stop also represents a possibility for making a statement in the sense of his having consciously adopted it from London. After all, “to eat” is the English translation of the German verb “essen,” and can thus also be read and understood as the literal translation of the name of the Ruhr metropolis that is home to the Kunstverein. In this way, three levels of meaning appear in the title of the exhibition that has been neatly applied to the exterior door. Sans-serif modernity, a characteristic symbol for the said sandwich chain, and finally, what is to an outsider definitely an odd synonym: eating in Essen.

⁵ Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA, 1972).

Dirk & Maik

The attentive viewer will have long since noticed that the black drywall walls Helwing placed in the space end at a certain height. This approximately 2.80 meter high upper edge consistently adopts the height of the display window pane. In other words: the rhythm of the window organization finds its correspondence and its reverberation in the space. The display window, painted diagonally with black paint, also noticeably corresponds to the form and the floor plan of the triangular spatial segments. Everything appears to harmonize and to consistently respond to the architectural specifications. With one exception: Helwing designed the side wall in the second space, directly adjacent to the Kunstverein's office, to deviate from this canon. The upper edge of its coat of black paint lies about eight centimeters below that of the drywall walls. This detail, which does not arise directly out of the space's elements, proves to be a special tribute to a previous exhibition. In 2005, in their exhibition *Schicht*, the brothers Dirk and Maik Löbbert immersed the entire space in black. Only a narrow white stripe, a reference to the Golden Cut, remained below the ceiling. In his preparations for *EAT.*, Helwing discovered this strip under the white paint on the wall, which had in the meantime been painted over several times, as a plastic, somewhat raised edge. Had he been consistent, he should have sanded down, painted over, and assimilated this fine ridge into the spatial dimensions. Instead, he decided to take up and positively thematize the Löbber's work in his own installation. If one discerns this small deviation, it ultimately proves to be not an immediately evident but yet consistent tribute to the Cologne-based artist duo that several years ago responded to the empty exhibition space using extremely similar means but with a completely different concept.⁶

A Case of Sparkling Mineral Water

Both architecture as well as design aficionados, but even most unbiased visitors notice that there is a case of sparkling mineral water with a cubical black superstructure next to the entrance in the second space that can be used from the office. It is a normal, commercially available case of water that provides visitors as well as those who work in the office a welcome refreshment. Yet its plastic extension causes it to become an irritating, sculpture-like structure composed of the functional, light-green plastic case and the solidly worked minimalist superstructure. This in a positive sense curious ensemble is in fact part of the exhibition, and Helwing situated it in exactly the same place a case of mineral water customarily stands. His decision for this intervention resulted from observations he made during the exhibition setup. Thus, reaching for a bottle of water from the case belongs to the canon of habitual behavior patterns in this office. And the entire exhibition underscores certain courses of action and behavior patterns. Speaking purely formally or sculpturally, the superstructure on the case of water would be only a black cube if not all those who wanted a bottle of water did not have to now automatically reach through this empty black cube in order to reach their goal. They make a detour through a functionless but nevertheless existing empty space. With this sculpture, Helwing created a dysfunctional analog to the other elements in the exhibition space. Reaching for a bottle of water becomes reaching into a black void, rendering conscious both a habit as well as enabling us to grasp what is in fact an exhibition empty space. And there are also several such empty spaces worth considering in the exhibition space, for instance the inaccessible triangular space in the middle or the small storeroom at the rear end of space two. And it is in particular in the latter that the hand of the (curious) viewer in fact reaches into a void if he or she wants to touch the black triangle above the door leaf.

⁶ Maik and Dirk Löbbert, *Schicht*, catalogue from the series by the Kunstverein Ruhr, with texts by Anne Schloen and Peter Friese (Essen, 2005).

The Inspection of Behavior Patterns

The examination of the elements in the installation *EAT*. does not culminate in a tacitly persistent reflection; it is not a meditation occurring from a distance on what we see here, but a permanent reflection and observation of our own behavior patterns in the space and their mental inspection. Entering the spatial segments; abruptly stopping in front of a black wall; the futile attempt to open the rear door; indeed, even reaching into the case of mineral water are behavior patterns that generate insight, that are, as it were, programmatically laid out in this spatial ensemble. The possibility of apprehending as existent an inaccessible space that is hidden from view or associating the title of the exhibition with the city of Essen also belongs to this special form of aesthetic reasoning. At issue are always sensory, initially physical experiences that are in a position to change into analyses and insight. By simulating such interconnections in his work, Helwing responds to the efforts and demands made by the Constructivist avant-garde to allow art and life to merge into one another, to produce links between everyday life and the symbolic sphere of art that is, as a rule, detached from it. The connection always occurs when a “normal” action is identical to an aesthetic experience. And there are several indicators for these transitions and congruencies in *EAT*. In consciously retracing his or her own patterns of behavior and experiencing and reflecting first-hand demands that were once formulated, the viewer becomes the artist’s accomplice and the respective leading character within art.

The Body’s Thinking

Experiences such as those possible in Helwing’s accessible work could be associated with a tradition of space-related Conceptual Art or viewed as their reverberation. One need only bear in mind the *Corridor Pieces* by Bruce Nauman, Michael Asher’s spatial cuts and subtle interventions, Dan Graham’s accessible works with their interior-exterior reflections, or the treatment of material and space by Minimal artists, who made conditions of perception the theme of their work. The young Chris Burden should also be mentioned in this context, who in several of his pieces worked with his absence (hidden from the viewer’s view). Bruce Nauman in particular mobilizes a form of thinking and perceiving that takes seriously and reckons with something that initially or lastingly evades the senses.⁷ With reference to his work, Friederike Wappler justifiably speaks of a “body’s thinking, which deliberates over itself.”⁸ All of these stances are about the viewer actively becoming involved in actual circumstances (intentionally created by the artist) both physically as well as theoretically and apprehending their coaction and one’s own part in it. It is ultimately about achieving an independent, by all means critical stance toward artistic specifications and one’s own perceptions. In this sense, Helwing’s work—intended or not—has something in common with the American stances mentioned above. At least his artistic attitude exhibits certain affinities with the attitudes of his older colleagues. Those who are prepared to become involved with Helwing’s installation will also automatically become actors and participants who can experience how an “aesthetic distance” that is otherwise obligatory for art is capable of being rigidly dispelled, only to reappear in one’s consciousness a short time later or virtually at the same time as a new experience that can by all means be deliberated over.

⁷ Nauman’s famous *Concrete Tape Recorder Piece* from 1969 is a strong example of this.

⁸ Friederike Wappler, “Ein Denken des Körpers, das sich selbst reflektiert, gerät ins Rotieren,” in *Bruce Nauman: Versuchsanordnungen; Werke 1965–1994*, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg, 1998), p. 91.

And it is also always about the physical presence of the viewer in the space and the special aesthetic experiences this engenders.⁹ That Christian Helwing experiences, understands, and critically reconsiders the forms, ideas, theories, and utopias of architectural modernity and post-modernity is (quite in a European spirit) the foundation and theme of his work.

⁹ The corporeality of our perceptions is plausibly demonstrated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, first published in 1945.