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Josef Strau, "Genuss Luxus Stil. Sstems –ideological milieu", in exh. cat. "Josef Kramhüller",
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On Josef Kramhöller's Book »Genuss Luxus
Stil: sstems-ideological, milieu«
Josef Strau

Monumental and apocalyptic, as if moved by a huge crane along the formless, glistening summer sky, then onwards, deeper still over the city, and further, still deeper and ever closer to an island of a park landscape in the midst of it all, closer to the paradisiacal foliage in the glaring light and further and closer into the shade of the buildings and trees, and finally ever closer to the figures in the shade, vaguely discernable in the dark: like a long, continuous camera movement, this is how Josef Kramhöller's Genuss Luxus Stil begins. Reminiscent of certain dark urban cinematic landscapes, this brief preface awakens in the reader – not unjustifiably – associations with insecure existential entanglements, the unavoidable corruption of all social relations. The story has yet to begin, but it is already defined as pessimistic in tone.

Already after a few sentences, we think we are in a fiction, in the endless grey stories of the city, and we are sure we'll never again escape its truth. This urban space, the space-obsessed arch-city that appears before the reader's inner eye in the first lines of Josef Kramhöller's book, is London during the 1990s. In its shadows, the inescapable blurry movements of a bohemian world appear, with its complex dependencies not only on the powers of big money. The fictive 'I' is an attractive, talented young artist who uses costumes to conceal himself in order to survive the urban severity of his immigrant life. He is the story's hero, the good-looking, sensitive artist who hides behind the costume of a strict and bitterly embarrassing public disturbance, the costume of the performer romantically, as the story continues a world apparently too much driven by its judgements of taste fails to recognise him for what he is, and he is repeatedly rejected in this, the new world he has chosen for his future career. But again and again, sometimes in reality, but usually in his thoughts, this fictive I, the young artist – or more precisely,

concept artist – retreats and abandons the new city, a London that for him is truly nothing more than a not-Germany, a vanishing point from which he can trace back in his writing a seemingly horrific, post-warrish German genealogy and his education as an artist, writing only partially in German or Bavarian, most of all using his native »Euroenglish«. In the course of this self-reproduction in writing, he analyses not only the fascism and Catholicism of his school or family. Again and again, the text must start over in new places. In this restoration of his self as text, as it were, Kramhöller primarily uses the motif of space, the motif of architecture in both a metaphorical and a real sense. The social obsession with space is analysed in order to treat conflicts of psychological space on an abstract level, the social games of breaking into the 'foreign' space of the other and the resultant colonisation of the other person. Parallel to this, he reconstructs old theoretical models of actual urban spatial planning and colonisation, reproducing the plans for rebuilding Munich after the war, the dreams imagined with new transport lines and urban resettlements. This public and social theory of space, along with the theories of individual psychic spaces and the conflicts in both colonisations were probably at some point to be fused or universalised by Josef Kramhöller. The texts in this book are like a collection of initial attempts at getting at this central theory of spatial mechanics. They follow theories, providing theoretical re-textings in the spirit of conceptual art's compulsion to theorise, suddenly turning to banal, yet significant stories about the art scene of the day in London, or Munich, or Berlin. For not so few members of a certain so-called political art milieu in the 1990s, writing was the most fetishised absolute medium, almost the only allowed production and the treasured medium not subject to the supposed or actual dangers of aesthetic commodity appropriation, and many considered it to be relatively airtight as an artistic practice, the easiest to defend from capitalist alienation. Unfortunately, writing was for many also an awkward, over-coded chunk that not only hindered any other production, but also made itself impossible. I don't know exactly how Kramhöller was able to traverse this hard and twisted terrain at about the same time so successfully. Perhaps because he was able to begin writing repeatedly, exploring relatively minor questions with more practicality and talent for the language. The narrator figure in the story thus also always has to start something new, or at least list, recount, or repeat, in search of a formula that explains the mechanics concealed behind the oppressive,

compulsive social organism. The documents for this are logical, while the authentic life story is torn into small bits, cut into pieces – 'the growing boy says: parents, the form ancestors, but there is no form anymore'. The quite general formlessness of life events, the formlessness of the real in contrast to the form of life plans, the arbitrariness of forms and structures, often just establishing themselves, then becoming real: this is what he tries to formulate, but also formulaically fixing theories of money and capital. The formlessness of growing up is presented in lists of psychological states, rendered in a pointillist manner, it appears as a destructive repetition compulsion in the midst of copied texts on economic theories, putting a stop to appropriation once again and, to return once more to the reports, the actions of the characters, dwelling on the father, on the insoluble fears attributed to his mediating authority. Dissecting himself as an individual in such a way, taking himself apart, authentically placing onehimself in question: this is perhaps the specific energy with which Kramhöller wrote his text, at the same time speaking of himself so readily and easy that you come to ask yourself: 'Can we be so sure that he's always speaking about himself?', only to answer, 'No, we can't be all that sure'.

I not only ask myself how Kramhöller was able in this milieu to compile such a text, a book so ordered in its internal composition, but also how he was able in this act of writing over the course of years to block out the opposing subjectivity of appropriation without adopting strategies of rejection and self-legitimation by way of reduced judgments and other coarse methods. In personal relationships, friendships, the subjectivity of appropriation that sometimes dominates among members of the art scene is unfortunately often what brings about a certain alienation to the other, the other is to be transformed from an 'I' to a 'we', 'and thus claiming the right first to place us and then me in its place, abandoning all discretion and seizing the authority to speak for the other in case of his absence,' as Maurice Blanchot put it, who claimed the opposite about a deceased friend: 'the relationship to the other, to the friend is without dependence and makes its way by recognizing the mutual otherness that does not allow us to speak of our friends, but only to them, even in the greatest familiarity maintaining the infinite gap'. At issue here is not the motif of friendship in Kramhöller, but the motif of the self, or its colonisation, different relationships to self that apparently produce his text. And above all, he abandons this discretion only if treating something about or against

himself, about the formulation of post-fascist and Catholic apparatuses of his background, both his own and of others, he illuminates a relationship to himself so very different from the self-referentiality typical of this context. His alternative is countercolonisation and self-colonisation, and at the same time simply allowing others to do their own thing.

It seems so absolutely self-evident, the way he illuminates and treats himself, the way he produces this unique text, the way he so ultimately and unheroically stands up, distinguishes, individualises. Strange that no one else has been able to describe the habitus, the lifeworld of the cultural milieu of the time so well.

Translation: Brian Currid