

Twice
Park McArthur
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Kunstraum Leuphana University Lüneburg

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[Transcript]

Introduction

January 2024 - I am wandering around the campus of Leuphana University in Lüneburg. One old barracks building follows the next. There is a structured, open and productive feeling in the air as I am taking in the sights and sounds of a vibrant academic environment. Students move around in small groups talking to each other or alone, lost in thought or in the music playing through their headphones. At least that's what I imagine them listening to. I move carefully, as it is slippery. In recent weeks, the weather has been chilly, with occasional snowfall. I breathe in the ice-cold air. When I breathe out, a small cloud appears. Both my body and the air flowing out of my lungs are warmer than all that surrounds me. I look around. My gaze falls on large letters - "Kunstraum" is written on a building on the left-hand side. I want to take a look inside, but the windows do not allow much insight as they are covered in papers. Am I allowed to enter the premises? As my curiosity grows, I observe a sign at the entrance indicating the presence of an installation created by the artist Park McArthur. "Twice," the name of the exhibit, experiments with the personal and social meanings of weakness, delay, and dependency under the guidance of disability." That indeed sounds intriguing!! The Kunstraum is in a constant state of change, like a gallery being staged. I want to embrace this. I want to be part of this. I decide to open the door.

Entering the space

As the heavy door opens, I stand in front of the entrance on the inside of the exhibition space. I take a moment to pause, reflect, and explore the intimate connection between my breath and the art surrounding me. The room I find myself in is rectangular and barren with high ceilings. The window front to my right is covered in a grid-like pattern of printed papers, which I had seen from outside already. The warm afternoon sunlight falls through its gaps and creates geometric patterns on the wall to my left. The warm air pouring out the knee-high heater underneath the windows is making stray pages dance, reminiscent of calm inward and outward breaths. The room itself appears to be alive. My body feels more alive as it warms up slowly.

Artwork window - Form found figuring it out

I am moving closer to the window installation which I saw from outside. I examine how the pages, 196 pieces of paper, are strategically placed to maximize coverage on the windows without altering their format drastically. The scale of the pages acts as a multiplicity or repetition.

Each page becomes a flat, abstract rendering of multiple breaths, emphasizing the durational aspect. I gaze through the window. The transparent barrier of the window blurs the line between inside and outside, offering a unique perspective on the world beyond, I think. Could it be a protective layer against the medical gaze?

As I observe the pages more closely, I am reminded of an incentive spirometer. Do you know what that is? It is an exercise tool designed to enhance breathing, providing a visual indicator of an attempt to achieve THE BEST. One sees the labeling of the spirometer, milliliter indications, 2500 ml as the maximum, 250 ml as the minimum. However, these are mirrored. It appears as if it is the view from the inside of the device. As if I am inside the tool! What a unique insight. Perhaps it is the awareness of my surroundings that brings me back to myself, as I become increasingly conscious of my breathing. The small digits printed on the pages bring me closer to the window, and I wonder how close can I come before my breath shows on the window. Could my breath also push the corners of the pages?

Inhale.

Exhale.

Usually unconscious and mechanical, my breath now becomes conscious and almost rational. I get a similar sensation to whenever I paid a visit to the doctor and was asked to "breathe deeply". I never know if my breathing is deep enough.

I get back to the idea that I am inside the spirometer and instinctively try to regulate my breath the best I can. I must admit, though, that I do not know what is the "best" way to breathe, and all the overthinking is making my breathing feel agitated, even a bit uncomfortable. I let go.

Inhale.

Exhale.

22 filter connected - Fantasies

Advancing further into the space my winter boots leave little puddles of melted snow on the green rubber floor. They catch the sunlight. I approach the single sculpture on the far right wall. It is a 153 cm high rod made up of 22 disposable viral and bacterial filters used by the artist to filter air coming into her ventilator. They are of a see-through plastic material and slightly vary in

size, shape and gray coloration. I reach out to carefully touch the cold smooth surface and run my fingertips over the rough edges of hardly visible engravings. The inside of the singular filter modules, reminiscent of UFOs, is horizontally divided by a felt-like layer. Its softness seems like it needs to be protected by the enclosing hard plastic shell. Each layer has its own gray discoloration reminding me of the singularity and uniqueness of each breath, which has passed through. Yet the structure as a whole unites these breaths lingering in the modules and creates a sense of interconnectedness. The overall structure made up of these medical devices appears sterility yet anthropomorphic calling to mind a straightened out spine. The set of barely visible silver nails holding the installation in place, makes it look like the sculpture is floating in front of the white brick wall.

While this half of the room feels solitary, the opposite side is more busy and unfinished. In the center of the wall stands a switched off tv screen framed by three piles of inconsistently stacked chairs on each side. One speaker each is placed on the two outer edges of the row of chairs. A metal ladder stands in front of the left hand speaker glittering in the sunlight and waiting to be climbed. The space before this wall constructed of furniture is scattered with three comfy sofas

and a couple of chairs. The frontal formation of the seats towards the TV screen creates a sense of abandonment - the state of a presentation about to start or just having ended. Across from the entrance there is another doorway. The room behind the half open sliding door lies in darkness and is barely visible. A distant soundscape spills over from the darkness into the room I am standing in. As I step through the door opening and into the gloomy room my eyes slowly adjust to the change of light. The sounds are coming from the still installed previous work by Tejal Shah consisting of three screens of different placement and size on each wall. The floor is covered in heterogeneous formations of the same filter modules as the ones from the sculpture. They wind their way through the space and around the blocks placed within to sit down on. The groupings of modules change throughout the space creating a rhythm of attraction and repulsion/ togetherness and singularity between the different elements. Moving along the formations of filters their distribution changes from a connected trail to clusters and back again.

Artwork filter & 2 pages next room - Fantasies

In the far left corner two pieces of paper meet at chest height. It's more a way of thinking about breath spatially than it is about making the two pieces of paper look a certain way or look "good."

Nothing remarkable, I think. What could be so special about two pieces of paper? But my gaze keeps returning to one point in space—the left corner—the place where the small diptych is affixed like Prometheus. Despite the two sheets of white paper adeptly blending into the surface of the brick wall, painted in the same white color, I notice them from the first step into this room. Trying to discern what is depicted on them, I move closer. The same indicators on the incentive spirometer, 250, 1000, 1750, who's ahead? I observe my breathing. Is there enough oxygen for me now? I listen to myself. Can I control this process? It seems I can. What is the volume of my lungs? 250, 1000, 1750? And will it be enough for me to go through the entire exhibition from start to finish again? I hold my breath, but after a minute, I realize that the accumulated carbon dioxide in my lungs has already entered my bloodstream and quickened my pulse. I move on, trying not to disturb the modules.

Plastic filters scattered on the floor seem to entangle beneath my feet, demanding careful steps. To avoid crushing such a fragile object that allows the lungs to fill with oxygen, I pause and glance around. Modular blocks resemble constellations on the dark green floor of the room. Mentally, I draw connecting lines between them, and familiar shapes emerge: here is the Sagittarius, and there is the Great Bear. I understand they are not there, but the brain itself completes the image, even though they don't exist in the sky either.

I observe my breathing again. My pulse has returned to normal, and I breathe calmly. I realize that the gray blocks, intended for seating, obstruct the path and hinder visitors. I consider moving them. It would be better to remove them altogether. But then, where could one sit? Perhaps it's better to leave them, but have them placed against the wall, so they don't interfere with the modular filters coexisting in the space.

I lift my head upward to make sure there is nothing on the ceiling and take a step into the well-lit hall, reentering the previous space.

Exiting the space

I slowly walk to the exit. I always leave the exhibitions slowly as I am trying to postpone the moment of coming back to reality and to spend a few more moments being present at this alternative microcosm. It is getting dark outside. Already standing behind the door I look back and I think of the space. Being a seminar room before, the “Kunstraum” now is filled with art. It is always a very special feeling, how the art changes the perception of the space bringing new senses into it. It also makes me think of the reverse process: how does the surrounding change the perception of the art installed at the campus of the university? I open the door: its heaviness made it an obstacle for me to enter the space first, and now it does not want me to leave the exhibition easily. Once I step out of the space, the wave of cold air hits my face. I take a deep breath to feel the air feeling up my lungs. Now it feels different: like the air that just entered my body is heavy and I can literally feel it inside. I start walking, leaving the “Kunstraum” behind, but the impressions I got are staying with me. My breath changes as I walk faster, am I breathing good enough at this point?