

SIBERIAN LIGHT

*Between words and things [...] there is neither correspondence nor adequatio. [...] Everything is based on] successive layers of transformations.*¹

In 1966 the French sociologist and co-founder of the actor-network theory Bruno Latour participated in an excursion to the Amazon forest near Boa Vista in Brazil. He accompanied an international group of researchers composed of two pedologists, a geographer, and a botanist, who were investigating the question of whether the savanna was advancing into the forest or, conversely, the forest was pushing back the savanna. Latour meticulously describes the numerous steps and tools that allowed the researchers to gradually transform the soil and plant samples they gathered into datasets. In short: He accompanied the “task of abstraction”² – that is, the substitution of material objects by signs (that represent them).

Ben Greber is a sculptor: He cartographizes the relationship between people and objects in time and space. *Sibirisches Licht* [Siberian Light] (2008), like other works created by Greber between 2006 and 2011, provides space for a seemingly bygone era. His installations show industrial machines or mechanical devices. Relics of another time, when mechanics, weight, and size still visibly and significantly influenced operating modes and processes: an oil pump, transformer station, or indeed *Sibirisches Licht* (2008), a train wreck in muted yellow and green that stretches out over two disconnected platform elements each two meters long. Each platform, in turn, is composed of 15 square, three-dimensional concrete blocks covered with a thin layer of paper and reminiscent of stones coated with frost or moss. I ask Ben Greber if he has ever been to Siberia. His simple answer: No. It was the sheen of the surface, the clarity of the colors that induced him to title the work *Sibirisches Licht* [Siberian Light].

Objects and our perception of them are shaped significantly by the places and contexts in which they are embedded. Ben Greber gives the sometimes everyday objects in his work a narrative charge by subjecting the surface to certain treatments, adding apparent signs of wear, or, as is the case in *Sibirisches Licht*, by evoking an imaginary connection to a distant place through the title.

Objects have (hi)stories. The (hi)stories of their materials, their production, and the hands and people with whom they have come into contact. In an object’s transition to new spaces or different eras, certain (hi)stories can be perpetuated, peel off, or be replaced by new ones. There is nothing new about the fact that immaterial components, whether of an individual or general nature, can significantly determine the value of objects. To describe this condition, the Polish-French historian and museologist Krzysztof Pomian coined the term “semiophore,”³ which can be translated loosely as “signifier.” A portmanteau of “semiotics” and “amphora,” the word designates an *open* sign that serves as a fixed receptacle for mutable sign content. With re-

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□ Bruno Latour, “Chapter 2. Circulating Reference: Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest,” in *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24–79: 64.

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□ See *ibid.*, 48f.

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□ See Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums, vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1998).

spect to museumized or art objects, Pomian does not see any inherent connection between objects and the meanings ascribed to them, though he concedes that visible – and thus material – characteristics influence the perception of invisible relationships: “An object’s own characteristics determine its meaning. Not unequivocally, however. For these characteristics merely define a field of possible, an ensemble of virtual meanings – the contours of a blank space to be filled in by history.”⁴

The relationship between idea and form, signified and signifier is neither unequivocal nor unilateral; it cannot be associated with either realism or idealism. Rather, it is a matter of a complex interplay of interior and exterior contexts, time, and perception: Each concretized image, each artwork carries within it a mode of production and a tense which in turn are inextricably linked to mental, virtual images that both precede it as a model, form its roots, and also emerge subsequently, as an associative afterimage during the reception of the work in the viewer’s perception. Material and virtual images correlate constantly. “New images supplant old images, not only on the wall but also in heads, and it isn’t even clear when each of these things occurs and how they overlap.”⁵

Yet what happens when idea and form no longer seem adequate to the artist within the subjective, self-made system of references of his work? When real-world changes completely reframe the questions he has formulated through his work about surfaces as a storehouse of history and about the relationship between time, space, and motion?

Sibirisches Licht (2008) is not *Sibirisches Licht* (2016). And yet it is. They are two snapshots of a single work. A self-referential reference cycle.

Today, nearly 26 years since the introduction of the internet and some 40 years after that of the personal computer, the buzzword “digitalization” hardly requires clarification. The rapid and fundamental changes caused by digital technology and its exponential development, which have permanently transformed all areas of society, seem so naturalized at this point that we tend often to forget how recent many of these developments are. One example: In 2008, when *Sibirisches Licht* was created, the iPhone had only been on the market for a year and people still speculated somewhat skeptically whether smartphones with an integrated camera and internet access would really achieve widespread use and become affordable for everyone. Just a few years later, in 2010, Instagram was launched, and these doubts could only elicit a weary smile.

Unquestionably, an important essential feature of our thoroughly digitalized world is the de-materialization of knowledge, bodies, and commodities and the fact that these can be accessed, used, and shaped simultaneously in different parts of the world. The upheavals in the artistic realm do not lag far behind: “[...] the new imaging practices seem to occur in a space-time structure that is in hostile opposition to every cumulative or aggregating principle. One item of information chases (away) the next. Images are available, consumable,

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□ Translated from *ibid.*, 80.

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□ Translated from Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001), 54.

and disposable. The body itself becomes a fleeting event that has liberated itself from the inertia and density of the collective.”⁶ With digitalization, the surface, the visual and its representational quality, is no longer dependent on its physical support medium; it always carries with it its own archive, the code that produces it. Yet the processes and functions that take place behind the surfaces are withheld from visibility, or, more specifically, legibility.

Despite these fundamental shifts, the questions and functions we associate with objects in many cases remain unchanged. It is not the objects themselves, not the themes that are disintegrating, but rather their familiar form, their shape.

Ben Greber dedicates himself to this dynamic through sculptural means. By transforming existing works, which he describes as “de-object-ification,”⁷ he reflects properties of this development without abandoning either space or material. His sculptures are no longer representational or replicative in their form but composed of abstracted objects. The sculptural reflection of changes in the material world, and hence also of the change in how we deal with objects, is like an interjected, slowed-down intermediate step that represents these processes themselves and keeps them comprehensible. How, we could ask in opposition to Pomian’s thesis, can ideas and content – the virtual aspects of a work, in other words – be maintained across the shift in context and form?

In its current formation, *Sibirisches Licht (2016)* consists of three main modules, which, however, function in turn as independent works. Various characteristics of the 2008 piece have now been separated into individual aspects: In the first module the dimension of the two platforms has been maintained, but their height has been reduced to one millimeter. The massive blocks have become a flat wall object made of stainless steel; a dark-green halftone print on the plates alludes to the previous paper-covered surface. By hanging and freeing up the plates, these have now been “de-object-ified” in more than one sense and are no longer a “support medium.” They have been relieved of their platform function and of the object-ive train-object it supports. Instead, the abstract concept of light is given a concrete component through the stainless-steel surface of the plates, which reflects the ambient light. Like a tabular grid, the surface can now be registered all at once and as a whole, without the viewer needing to move. Yet the individual character of the various surfaces of the plates is more clearly apparent in another module: *Sibirisches Licht (2016)*, an open, cube-shaped brass framework in which the surfaces of the 30 plates are hung one behind another as prints on paper in the original 400 x 400-mm format. Robbed of all massiveness, they are reminiscent of freely movable index cards. Some of the sheets have been installed on the wall – though not according to any determined system. What

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□ Louise Merzeau, “Digitale Fotografien: Für einen öffentlichen Gedächtnisraum,” in Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert (eds.), *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, vol. 1|2010, Schwerpunkt Kulturtechnik (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag), 63f.

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□ Translator’s note: The German word used here is *Entgegenständlichung* (from *Gegenstand*: object), which encompasses the notions of representational, objective, realistic, concrete, palpable. My use of a hyphen in “(de-) object-ification” and “object-ive” is intended to underscore the reference – inherent in the German term *gegenständlich* – to a real object.

we are dealing with here is an almost analytic disassembly of the surface that allows us to view the individual parts as individual objects.

The third module contains individual linkages and parts of the former train wreck. In this case its materiality has been preserved, but we can only make out the previous form or dimension up to a point. Neatly divided with a side cutter, the elements have been embedded in rectangular epoxy-resin frames stacked one on top of the other. Moreover, the individual parts themselves are coated with resin, so that base and object now form a single entity. The cardboard elements' green and yellow color shines through the gray-tinted, half-transparent resin as if through a thin layer of ice. While the train has been materially archived in this structure as the original, superficial form of *Sibirisches Licht* (2008), the module remains a reference to the previous state. It is not possible to reconstruct the train's form.

Yet does this mean that the train itself is no longer present? What determines an object, a train?

Similarly to how the train wreck in *Sibirisches Licht* (2008) represented a frozen state, a moment of standstill, *Sibirisches Licht* (2016) shows a compact, archive-like system in which individual elements of form, materials, and qualities seem to be preserved permanently.

For Ben Greber, there is only one *Sibirisches Licht*. Yet there are various states of the work. And these allow us to question the dynamic relationship of form and meaning, thing and sign.

“What we lose in matter through successive reductions of the soil we regain a hundredfold in the branching off to other forms that such reductions – written, calculated, and archival – make possible.”⁸ Bruno Latour describes the process of abstracting the material world as a means to an end, of enabling a scientific examination disconnected from the site and actual soil samples through a two-dimensional dataset of diagrams and number codes. Latour identifies the *pedocomparator* – a suitcase-like instrument with a gridded interior – as a key moment of translation in this process. The extracted clumps of earth are sorted into the compartments according to the defined points of exploration. In the process they become a spatially compressed and comparable dataset of the examined area, which, in a subsequent step, can be transposed into a two-dimensional diagram. However, as Latour points out, in these and many other partial steps a “gap” always remains, a blurring of sorts that results when, for example, the actual color of a clump of earth is replaced by a numerical color code from a color scale.⁹ However small this gap may be, in research as in art, the representation of an object (or subject) remains an approximation, a negotiation. Yet the processes of abstraction allow us to better understand and answer questions about the material, or rather about the world. Yet ultimately the interpretation of the data – as Latour also points out – is influenced by the type of questions asked about the material.

The same is true of Greber's de-object-ifications, which in this sense can be classified as intermediate steps in the extensive process of abstraction around us. Here, similar to the *pedocomparator*, it is still a question of

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□ Latour, 55.

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□ See Latour, 58ff.

singular, material arrangements – though these already exhibit decidedly digital qualities.

The artist does not subscribe to any myth of authenticity, but asserts the dynamism of form instead. He tangibly illustrates that the object-like thing, the sculpture, does not represent a permanently self-contained, completed system either, and draws attention to the embeddedness of the form in a specific, immaterial (possibly also individual) chronological and discursive order. Inverting the logic of Pomian's semiophores, he subjects existing works of art to a veritable shape-shifting of form: He adapts the material sign in order to keep the questions and content associated with it legible even under altered external conditions. As an artist he is familiar with the idea that reality can be constructed, is constructed. What counts is the internal coherence of purported reality, which in many cases is measured through mental images, through a *virtual reality*.

Greber examines how we access the world, which – even beyond science – increasingly involves abstracting this world and making it available.

There is also a gap in his de-object-ifications. For, unlike the research followed by Bruno Latour, Greber's transformations are irreversible. The sculpture refers to itself. Yet the reference dissolves – as a material state – with the transformation. The only possible direction is forward.

And that's fine, since we are moving in Ben Greber's individual reference system, which is not subject to the constraints of objectivity but rather captivates through its dynamism – its radicalness, even.

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