

Carl Trahan: Das Gleitende – 3

Bernard Schütze

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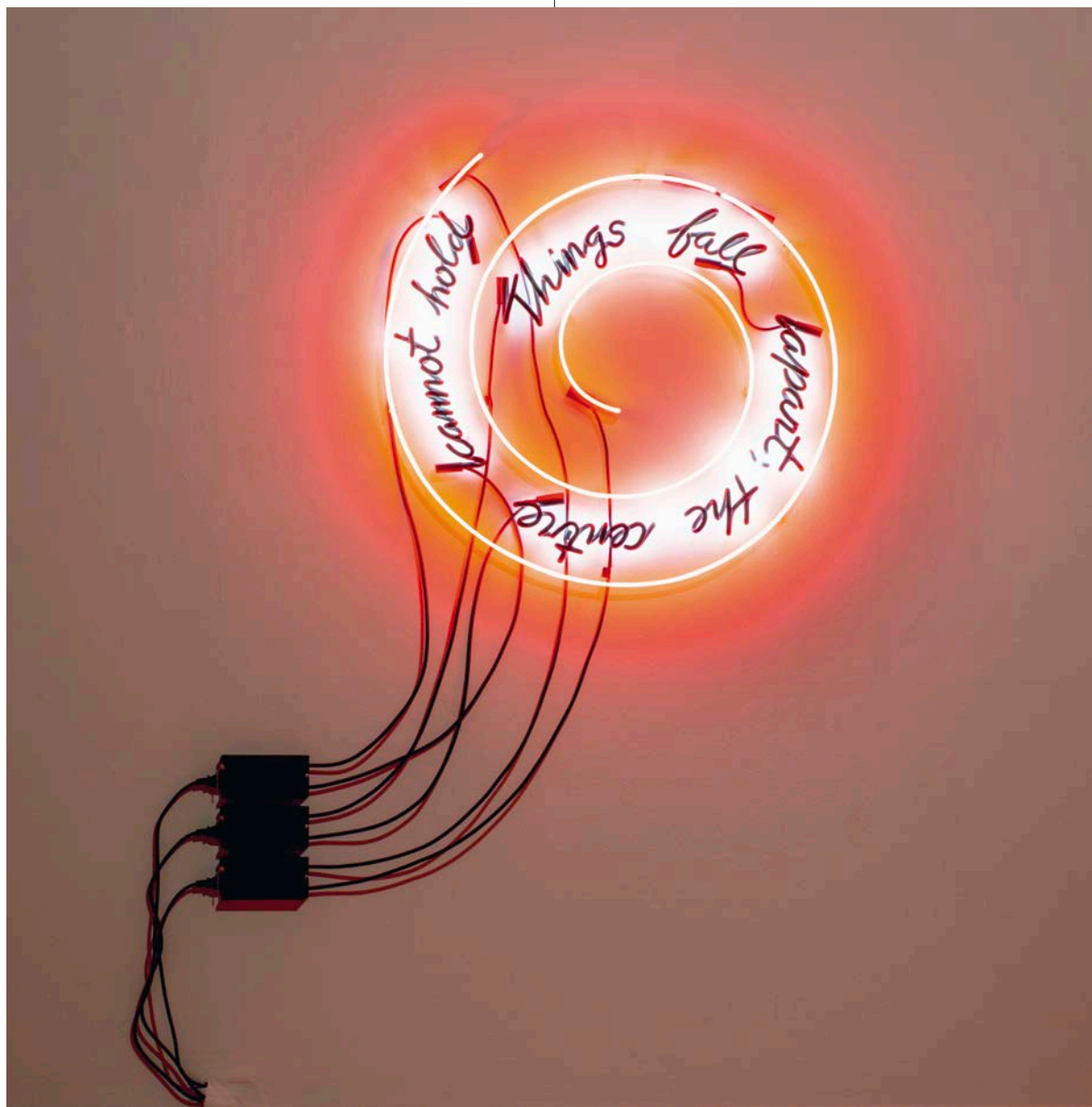
Bernard Schütze

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Disorientation, polarization and disarray are certainly accurate terms to describe the current cultural, social and political environment we find ourselves in. Our era is rife with uncertainties and tensions in relation to what appears to be a persistent modernity that seems to have run its course on several fronts. With climate change and the Anthropocene, humanity is confronted with an unprecedented planetary finitude requiring an urgent rethink of the modernist embrace of unfettered

growth and technological progress. Concurrently, the return of insular, xenophobic and belligerent nationalisms as spearheaded by unsavoury strongmen across the globe, have led to a public climate of distrust, fear and acute division. Against this background of our troubled contemporary situation, Carl Trahan's latest exhibition *Das Gleitende – 3* takes on an enhanced significance. Though the artist here focuses on the nihilism that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in response to modernity's destabilizing effects, his examination of the era's sombre *Zeitgeist*—the feel and spiritual atmosphere of an era—is revealingly parallel to the turbulent currents we find ourselves caught up in now.

This latest presentation is the concluding leg of a three part exhibition project in which specific aspects of 19th century and early 20th modernity are brought back into view through the prism of literary, philosophical and artistic reflections. The first part, *Das Gleitende – 1* drew inspiration from Goethe's *Faust* to reflect on the emergence of the action-driven, restless individual that is a central feature of modernity. In the second, the artist turned his gaze to the spiritual crisis that accompanied the withering of traditional belief systems as science and technology



transformed our understanding of the cosmos and our role in it. *Das Gleitende – 3*, the most ambitious and far-reaching instalment of the series, goes to the core of the civilizational malaise that arose in the face of modernity and its apparent failure to ameliorate the human condition by way of progress and reason. As in his previous work, Trahan here assembles literary and philosophical citations using a range of visual transcription, transcoding and translation approaches to bring historically situated material to bear in a contemporary framework.

Taking up the entire space of the main room at the Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides (MAC LAU), the exhibition is comprised of a wide array of works in various mediums (drawing, sculpture, neon signage, video) in which text and its transcription remains the central feature. All of the displayed works can be viewed as a variation on the theme of *Zerrissenheit* (rift, inner strife, disunity) and its relation to the philosophical notion of nihilism, understood as a negation of certainties, grounded truths and belief systems. The notion of disunity, disarray and disorientation accompanying this philosophical outlook is conceptually conveyed by way of selected citations from the texts of seminal authors such as Byron, Baudelaire, Hofmannsthal, Nietzsche and Yeats, to name but these, and made sensorially present through the textual material's various aesthetic embodiments. For instance in the neon light sculpture *Things Fall Apart; The Centre Cannot Hold*, the eponymous line is rendered in black letters placed along a glowing red neon spiral. The sense of vertigo and disorientation the poem conveys is thus given a direct sensory expression in the outward spiralling form. Facing this imposing spiral is another neon sculpture, this time without words, that relays and intensifies the ambient sense of vertigo. Titled *Gyre Infini* (Infinite Gyre)—another reference to a Yeats poem—this work consists of a red neon sign in gyre form that is encased in a glass box. The reflection on the four walls of the box creates the impression of an infinitely proliferated gyre. Here, as with the most of the other works, Trahan provides the viewer with well researched texts that sum up the historical and cultural background of the selected references and their relevance to the exhibition's theme. Among other things, viewers are thereby introduced to Yeats' theory of the gyre symbolism and how it addresses the characteristic chaos of the times.

The conceptual breadth and complexity of the 19th century understanding of nihilism is brought into view in a looped video that transcribes a central and particularly sombre text by Nietzsche on the subject. In the video *Was taten wir?* (What have we done?), the philosopher's dire diagnosis of the times appears in a series of charged aphorisms that slowly appear one at a time in white letters cast against a black background; the thoughts thus file past in at nervous pace that endows them with an utterly modern feel, which is fitting for a philosopher who championed rupturing with the present. This and the other works contribute to bring a general feeling of upheaval, doubt and disillusion throughout the exhibition where the viewer moves from a drawing pronouncing "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothingness?" to an imperious looking graphite rod with the letters "In Nothingness Sinks My Gaze" etched on it. Moreover, the exhibition's guiding word, *Zerrissenheit*, is brought to life on a blackboard where Trahan first transcribed this German word and then all its translations from a French dictionary and the resulting words backs into German, then repeating the sequence with each new word until the blackboard space is exhausted. In this shuttling back and forth across the linguistic

divide, the original word and its permutations evoke a polysemy that reinforces a feeling of rupture, strife and disunity. Yet, however forceful each of the works may be on their own, it is primarily the artist's careful establishing of relations between the works that makes the exhibition come together as a coherent whole in which the fragments coalesce to bring forth the vision and feeling of a shattered and disillusioned world.

With *Das Gleitende – 3*, the artist thus revisits and reactivates certain elements from modernity's recent past to transpose them into a contemporary context in which the still active forces of history continue to exert their influence. However, in focusing on nihilism and its concomitant rupture and disenchantments, Trahan not only casts his gaze at the recent past, he also enables these somber reflections to illuminate our present. The interrelations and correspondences between the various works thus not only reflect on this period of spiritual and intellectual disarray, they also evoke the feel of an era characterized by a vertiginous slipping and sliding into an unknown future. Thus, in capturing this *Zeitgeist* with its multiple intelligible and sensory inflections, Trahan places today's viewer before a not-so-distant mirror in which a fragmented double of our own disjointed times tellingly and ominously takes shape.

Bernard Schütze is an independent art critic and curator. His essays have been published in numerous art magazines. He has written various catalogue articles and artist monographs, and has presented talks as part of several art-oriented events mainly in Canada and Europe. Originally from Germany, he lives and works in Montréal.