

# kunsthalle basel

Kristin Jones Andrew Ginzel

## «Antithesis»

### Essay

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“The sense of sight discerns the difference of shapes, wherever they are . . . without delay or interruption, employing careful calculations with almost incredible skill . . . When the sense cannot see the object through its own mode of action, it recognizes it through the manifestations of other differences, sometimes perceiving truly and sometimes imagining incorrectly . . .

Ptolemy, OTPICS, Book II

The inventors of collaborative works with challenging, discursive titles including “Charybdis”, “Pangaea”, “Vis-à-Vis”, “Panamone”, and most recently “Antithesis”, have another ambitious, rambling project under way. It is a personal mission that they mention only casually but for which they appear to feel a strong intellectual commitment. Unlike their many ephemeral installations that are pressed and circumscribed by the shortest spans of scheduled time, this activity probably will never reach its conclusion even with the expectation that these two artists will live long, full, and productive lives. Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel are slowly making their way through each citation in the Oxford English Dictionary – word by word, alphabetically letter by letter. The vast, slightly ludicrous goal of reaching the final “Z” in the past five years have both proposed and refined a lexicon – a glossary of elements and structures with which to pass on their own philosophical speculations.

With rare exceptions, the subject and structure that connects all of the works is the viewer’s frame of vision and the dialectic of the proscenium that marks real from illusionistic space. With these conventional, assertive spatial devices they establish a trajectory and role for each viewer. Jones’ and Ginzel’s frames invite each participant to imaginatively supplement the project. The stationary dimensions and the quiet authority of the frame provide the physical boundary between the space of the viewer and the actual events and evocative ambiguities of the installation; it is a metaphor for the edge that connects, and distinguishes between, the apparatus of the eye and the operations of the mind. The frame is the device of filtration where the discourse on real time and a more speculative temporality, where the fallability of the human body and the sheer, expansive potential of the mind achieve a rare, revelatory convergence. The mind is fully implicated in the pictorial space because the body is physically prohibited from the deep recesses of the artists’ installation. The viewer assumes the role of a distant, slightly intrusive observer of slow cycles and material events; there is the excitement that a voyeur must experience – to be visually enticed, psychologically obsessed, and physically removed from the action beyond.

The spatial arenas that Jones and Ginzel insert in a variety of contexts and architectural volumes support characterless dramas that are slowly inhabited and animated by the questions and meditations of each viewer. Whether the invented space is deep and generous, or shallow and contained, it becomes both a concrete and metaphorical region. The physical depth, the weight of props and objects, the intangibility of smoke and steam, the slow, methodical movements of single elements, and the ultimately legible pattern of static and dynamic forms, suggest a landscape-laboratory of empiricism. Within the mind, observations are patiently completed and painstakingly noted. And yet the factor of inscrutability, the qualities of the installations that elude comprehensibility, are magnified by all the things that seem concrete, their relationships so explicit. The facts of the art appear to align clearly, but the significance is found beyond the forms and in the physical forces of the world that the human mind cannot entirely contain or control. The work proposes time and time again that meaning is not endowed, but is invented by the single mind within the culture of a community.

In Jones’ and Ginzel’s most recent project entitled “Antithesis”, the name itself connotes both a rhetorical structure as well as a philosophical reassessment of a commonly-held thesis. Within the borders of the project, contrasting regions are constructed to generate a parallel dialogue between the precision of a lighted Platonic realm and the unfathomableness of a dark, mysterious cavern. This play of rationality and inscrutability is a restless dynamic in all of the artists’ projects, but it is thrown into exaggerated focus within the extraordinary space of the Kunsthalle.

Frequently the involute arrangement of spheres and other platonic forms, broad stretches of sand, pools of water, and slowly oscillating devices occur in dark, muted settings. The nocturnal conditions seem to take place either beneath the earth’s surface – underground or underwater – or on some distant celestial body – a bleak moonscape with no atmosphere to capture light. The panorama of “Antithesis” unfolds in a bright, radiant space. Overhead skylights saturate the large volume of the gallery with natural, changing light. In a small rectangular space separated from the installation by a thin, almost invisible wall of scrim, the viewer is, once again, physically limited but optically empowered by the lens this temporary screen creates. The project rests on a platform that is raised above the gallery floor. Two immense cones extend from the floor to the ceiling; constructed of white lines, the geometric shapes are visually defined if physically insubstantial. Their circular bases overlap slightly like a Venn diagram; a slice is shared in common. This spatial coincidence is intensified by directed lights that mark the intersection – a Hegelian notion of synthesis arrived at through the dialectic of thesis and antithesis.

The base of the cone in the foreground is a plane of a white, granular substance. A rotating needle raised just above the pliable surface has both spikes and brushes mounted on the underside; it alternately scribes and then smoothes the ground. Inscriptions are made and stories are shaped that are then inevitably erased or forgotten through the needle’s meticulously – timed, monotonous rotation. The cone in the background marks the perimeter of a stepped recess. The depressed, black abyss becomes the obvious counterpoint to

the brilliant clarity of the adjacent cone of action and illumination.

At the far end beyond the platform an open door reveals a small, dark sanctuary. A constant flickering flame is tucked away from the viewers' line of sight, but its quixotic light gives this small space an animated, slightly atavistic character. It could be the secret site of some relic or ritual congregation. Whatever tales may be imagined, the small chamber suggests a spiritual egress – a potential outlet as well as a slight glimpse of the past or future. This space is not unlike the ladders and other symbols that the artists have used before to offer a symbolic, psychic respite – a faith in the bright promises of darkest bewilderment.

In all of Jones' and Ginzl's work, their simple, spare vocabulary of forms, ephemera, and the most ordinary mechanical devices constructs vessels to collect material and spiritual contents. For these artists the vessel is both container and conduit. It provides the psychic space and physical dimensions for meditation, as well as a channel to move through the tangible, concrete conditions to a spectrum of ideas where meaning achieves focus. The frame and other components of the artists' lexicon of forms provide the space and the stimulation to continue the quest for expanded consciousness and enhanced communication.

It requires a repository of both faith and courage to face the most profound, unassailable questions – to look at the relationship of the human condition to both divivable and incalculable phenomena and to attempt to concretize the scaleless dimensions of time. It also requires a certain confidence in the potential of irony to express such timeless, infinite puzzles through an art form that is ephemeral – that is restricted and conditioned by available space and the most quotidian arrangements of time. Jones and Ginzl choose to look at a very big picture with fine-tuned but temporal instruments – with an art that is magnified by its own obsolescence.

Although photographic documentation of their many short-lived projects provides a more lasting cultural record, the installations are like episodes of an unfolding visual history. These short, potent coalescences are imagined, reported, visualized, and reinterpreted; memory and desire telescope, amend, and edit through time and circumstance. The artists' faith in the legacy of vision and their wonder at its complex instrumentation reinvigorate a process for which the contemporary world has lost belief. It is true that visual data can be incomplete and misleading; the eye is delicate and unpredictable. What is seen is often refutable evidence. The challenging preoccupations of physics and philosophy lie well beyond lens and scope of vision. But the eye has always been the site of invention; what is seen – or believed to be seen – is the genesis of imaginative speculation. The instruments of the eye, the cones of vision, allow each viewer to carry on an inquiry that cannot be sufficiently explained by the phenomenal spaces of Jones and Ginzl. "Antithesis" is aesthetically resolved and refined, but thrillingly incomplete. For the inventors of temporary worlds, the satisfaction of resonance is in the work's brilliant inconclusiveness – in the stories yet to be told, in visions yet to be seen – that easily endures beyond the temporality of its ambitious physicality.