

EXHIBITION REVIEW:
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ALTERNATIVA
On the Idea of the Model

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The series of exhibitions, publications, and artistic events under the common denominator of *Alternativa* started in 2010 as a two-year pilot program aiming at the establishment of a recurring large-scale, politically-informed curatorial practice in a former Gdańsk Shipyard. It is neither an art biennial nor an annual festival, but a hybrid cultural format whose distribution is accomplished across several channels. As such, *Alternativa* is less a new model for artistic production and distribution than an attempt to critically discuss the idea of the model itself. What is interesting in approaching the idea of a model is that it can “suspend” meaning; the model incorporates the relational and professional space that lies before the making of a work, which stands on behalf of something else, namely, the work and its circulation that will occur later. By refusing to open up (to a representational claim) it can keep history, and history-making, in suspension.

Materiality was the title of the main exhibition presented in the Hall 90B of the former shipyard. The curatorial team, comprised of Leire Vergara, Inês Moreira, Arne Hendriks, and Aneta Szyłak (the latter also Artistic Director of Wyspa), staged an exhibition that attempted to illicit questions about “the matter” in the clash between art and knowledge. Starting from the consideration that artists have always been struggling with the immaterial and material forms of artistic practice, the exhibition investigated how different generations of thinkers and cultural operators have

reconsidered their approach to materiality, and in turn, its political history and meaning. The project emphasized the need for the return to material stability, approaching the field of the political from the perspective of a tactile and concrete point of view. There was a vast backdrop of theoretical approaches to bite from. Rather than absorbing the works or the theories underpinning them, one could approach the exhibition as a process for the appraisal of a model. My response takes the form of delineating four types of models that correspond to four artistic positions that struck me as the most compelling.

Model 1

The “pornography of the hammer” proposed by Partizan Publik and Arne Hendriks is a striking example of the deconstruction of a model. In *Academy of Work (Gastev’s Workshop)* (2012) they unravelled, conceptually as well as physically, the ideology of the Central Institute of Labour, an adult school funded in 1917 in Moscow. The term pornography aptly sums up the emphasis of the material tools of production, both in the Soviet era and in the installation presented. The work was a re-staging of sorts of one of the rooms of the Institute, stripped down to bare essentials: the structures for production, along with documentation of the original site through newspapers and books excerpts. The Institute was the brainchild of engineer and poet Aleksei Gastev, under the attentive eye of Lenin; it was a perfect example of the epigenetic, i.e., how the environment influences the genetics in an (r)evolutionary sense. The stated aim of the Institute was to transform farmers into workers through a “social machine,” which combined the power of engineering with the seduction of poetry. That is, to my reading, how to promote an ideology of labour through aesthetics effectively, intended as the process of gathering information through the senses and transforming it into experiential knowledge. The idea of the Institute,

with its potential and its contradictions, presented a strong parallel with the current generation of neoliberal politics through the creative industries. Genius, in that sense.

Model 2



FIG. 1 Mateusz Herczka, *Functional Programming for Space to Marry Objects* (2012), installation view. Photo: Courtesy of Alternativa.

Mateusz Herczka's *Functional Programming for Space to Marry Objects* (2012) (FIG. 1) established a close connection between an object (artwork), a building (setting), an industry (context) and a conflict (history) using the very layout (that is, a model) of the exhibition for its scope. Suggesting an intimacy of an almost sexual nature between the various elements of an exhibition (the artwork, the setting, the context, etc.) and highlighting the process through which the "building matter" comes together, Herczka plunged into the realm of the materially absurd. The artist designed some solutions to "solve" the logistic, structural and aesthetics obstacles to "marry" a traditional family chapel with the industrial building that hosted it. Herczka physically coupled a full-size wooden chapel to a concrete pillar of the exhibition hall. The goal was to achieve a proper ritualistic union between human and object. Confused? So was I. In retrospect though, it was a further example of the processes of amalgamation between humans and materials to which I, too, am subject daily: getting in the car

to go to the office, or queuing up at a supermarket checkout. Only that, in most of the cases I do not recognize the sexuality, and subtle perversion (of coupling myself with an object), of such actions since they are ubiquitous and thus invisible. By applying the principle of aesthetic appreciation of the ritualistic union between human and object to contexts such as praying and mass production, Herczka revealed the model of behaviour that people obey in subtle ways.

Model 3



FIG. 2 Hiwa K, *It's Spring and the Weather Is Great So Let's Close All Object Matters* (2012), installation view. Photo: Mateusz Herczka. Courtesy of Serpentine Gallery London.

Hiwa K's installation, *It's Spring and the Weather Is Great so Let's Close All Object Matters* (2012) (FIG. 2), made of musical instruments and stepladders looked like child's play in the best sense of the term: simple, resonant, and effective. But it was not for children, nor for play. Without denying the complex design of both utilitarian and aesthetic objects, Hiwa K managed to build juxtaposition into a multilayered work that spoke out of necessity and desire, death and language, human nature and collective contract. The work linked the "place of elevation" as the dedicated space for both the possibility of free speech, and the last word from the condemned. This act of elevation was not only a material solution for both acts; it defined the model for both acts. I found myself

linking this model (of free speech and subjugation) to daily occurrences of my life. When trans-coded to the Internet, the model suddenly becomes apparent, with the plethora of social networks and platforms for critical evaluation, visibility and control. This is also the case when transferred to the work/business organization model, the context in which people strive, fight, survive, or succumb. Overall, the piece was playful and seductive, until I realized how disturbing it was.

Model 4



FIG. 3 Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *The Freedom of Speech Itself* (2012), installation view. Photo: Courtesy of Alternativa.

A voice recognition pattern (“voice print”) sculpted in 3D, *The Freedom of Speech Itself* (2012) (FIG. 3), was the installation by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Picking up one of the more subtle, yet scientifically fascinating, current technologies of biopolitics, Hamdan uncovered a politically and humanitarian knot that mostly escapes attention. Voice recognition patterns are used for immigration analysis by border control forces in Western countries and by police officers within nation states. It is not only about having the freedom to say what one thinks (which is never granted, and always in a process of becoming) but also to choose the way one is heard. Since it is not only dependent upon the speaker but also upon the listener, socially and politically this is a far more troublesome matter. Accent tests (LADO, Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin) are rou-

tinely applied in EU border immigration interviews to see if the speech matches the “standard” accent of the claimant’s declared origins. Such a standard depends on how a government defines administrative and cultural borders. However, phonetic borders shift continuously and change with time. For instance, my fellow Italians struggle to grasp my origins since my accent has changed from living abroad for many years. I would fail a test for the standard accent of my alpine region. As a model for speech, the voice provides, in principle, a possibility to be a vehicle of information but it is immediately withdrawn by societal and political structures as a channel of communication. Hamdan’s work was a socio-linguistic “experiment” that defined socio-political indexization. Both the cultural practice and the artwork are scary.

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There was a lot to take in from the exhibition and rather than enumerating the rest of the other works, I am going to take a conceptual detour to give an impression of my general experience in Gdańsk. To start, there is a difference between a representation and a model—to make an artwork that “represents” something is to declare a concrete aspiration with an abstract example. To make a model for that something is an abstract aspiration but with a material set of examples. I stated at the beginning that *Alternativa* was less a new model for artistic production than an attempt to critically discuss the idea of the model itself. As the relational and professional space that lay before the making of a work, the model is therefore an act of translation—not of language, but of context. Taking matter from one context and translating into another, using aesthetics as a tool of translation, as if a dictionary for converting one language into another. In this perspective, *Alternativa* seemed to demonstrate that art has meaning only when it points beyond its own structure and relationships—to realize possibilities around and within the viewer’s own self.