

Nothing for All

In 1973, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an article under the headline “Encounter with Almost Nothing,” in which the author discussed an exhibition of works by the still young American artist Fred Sandback at Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Munich. With threads stretched across the room, Sandback had succeeded in redefining spaces by precisely visualizing surfaces and volumes with minimal means.

A closer look at Stephanie Stein’s artistic practice reveals that the above-referenced title might also be appropriate for an examination of her work. Since the early 2000s, Stein creates formally consistent, quasi post-minimalist works. The artist’s range of materials and techniques includes glass, metal, wood, hand-painted surfaces, silkscreen, photographic and typographic manipulation, and moving images. Like time-enduring signs, her works evoke architectural fragments, cultural techniques, historical events, Minimalist spatial drawings or sculptures, linguistic areas, and natural phenomena, allowing for associations with themes related to anthropology or natural history.

In 2012, Stephanie Stein created her first work using thin sticks of balsa wood [fig. ##], which she arranged in a layered grid. Solely composed of white horizontals and verticals, the work recalls the historical “stick charts” that served as navigational instruments for the indigenous inhabitants of the Marshall Islands in Micronesia, or the basic structures in Piet Mondrian’s constructivist paintings, which he built exclusively from horizontal and vertical lines. In the following years, building on this foundation, Stein developed a rich repertoire of filigree wooden wall works that gradually departed from two-dimensionality and evolved into a striking, larger-than-life spacial drawing in *Schadensfall* (Case of Loss, 2014) [fig. ##]. With just two black “lines”—thin, black strips of wood—she succeeds in measuring and “swinging through” an entire room of the historic Palazzo Guaineri delle Cossere in Brescia in perfect proportion, like a cavetto.¹ Here, the lightweight wood used in model making serves less as a sculptural material than as a support for the effective placement of pure color pigments in space.

For her solo exhibition *RUN RUN RUN* at Kunstraum München in 2024, Stephanie Stein has once again conceived site-specific, almost weightless works. Here, she is particularly interested in the recurring mechanisms of power and violence—how they manifest themselves in social and political structures, and how they affect humans and nature. Stephanie Stein uses very subtle gestures to play with or activate the space while opening up multi-layered thematic and semantic fields.

¹ The work *Schadensfall* was created as a site-specific installation for the group exhibition *L’avventura – Die mit der Liebe spielen*, curated by Lena Ipsen for A+B Gallery at Palazzo Guaineri delle Cossere, Brescia, 2014.

At the Kunstraum the video work *Hit* (2024) [fig. ##], in which a bright, vibrating glow appears in front of an almost black, slightly bluish shimmering surface, is being shown for the first time. The monitor is set upright so that the dancing points of light mark the center of the image as a vertical line. The endless loop turns out to be a nocturnal recording of a burning meteorite seen through the slats of a Venetian blind. It is only a brief moment that was captured in the film, now conveyed as a vague idea and yet touching on the great theme of humankind's localization in the world and the position or place of humans in the cosmos.

In the video and sound installation *Oase* (Oasis, 2022) [fig. ##], the viewer is not confronted with a single monitor, but instead is immersed in an intense space of color and sound in front of a wall-sized projection screen that initially seems as abstract as the delicate pixels in *Hit*. It is not clear on what principle the vertical stripes of light are arranged, or when and how they light up. It could be a digital composition or a randomly controlled algorithm. Here, again, Stephanie Stein refers to a specific event or, in this case, to a technology that is still in use but outdated: the sodium-vapor lamp, which continues to be utilized today for outdoor lighting and in military applications. The colored stripes, which glow from dark red to bright sulfur yellow, are an analog film recording of the illumination of such sodium-vapor lamps. The association with a sunrise or sunset is inevitable, but the glow does not bathe its surroundings in a warm light. Rather, at full brightness, it drains the illuminated objects of all color, transforming everything into neutral shades of gray. The parallel stripes of light also evoke mid-twentieth-century abstract painting; however, in their emergence and disappearance they are dynamic and unpredictable. The soundtrack by Carlo Heller is an integral part of the work and envelops the viewer with its pulsating sound, further intensifying the maelstrom effect of the video images. Upon closer inspection and the uncovering of the various levels of fact and meaning, what the title *Oase* promisingly suggests turns out to be the evidence of a technology: a human-made technique for military and civilian use, in which the exercise of violence and the prevention of violence through light are diametrically opposed. In *Hit*, on the other hand, Stephanie Stein uses the image of a natural spectacle or force of nature, which by definition is a "mighty natural force beyond human control." Also here, she explores moments of power discharge, energy, and its immense destructive power and violence.

The point of departure for this expansive video and sound installation are philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914–1916*, artifacts directly related to the war. They were written during his deployment to the front during World War I while he was on the lookout for enemy fire. To avoid losing his sanity, he made philosophical notes and recorded private desires, fears, and thoughts. Against the backdrop of the global pandemic of 2020–2022, Stephanie Stein also used the writings as an opportunity to reflect on the effects of sensory deprivation and isolation. In *Oase*, she succeeds in transforming a physical paradox into an artistic work: A forced, massive restriction of the senses can

simultaneously produce a special sharpening of those sensory perceptions.

The theme of violence is particularly evident in the work *Macht Nichts* (Never Mind, 2021) [fig. ##], as well as in the works conceived for Munich. On closer inspection, it echoes just as clearly in the very delicate, wall-mounted glass sculpture *L'autre* (2022). The floor work *Macht Nichts* consists of four almost symmetrical white elements that descend to the floor from a raised central plateau in two larger and four flatter steps to the right and left respectively. Formally, they are reminiscent of Minimalist sculptures, such as Donald Judd's concrete cubes in the barren landscape of Marfa. Like those, Stein's work is concerned with the sculptural questions of materiality, proportion, and spatial experience. However, in her work the forms and proportions of the steps are derived from the concrete site of a monumental demonstration of power: They are based on the dimensions of the Zeppelin Tribune at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, which was built in 1935–1937, just a few years after the Nazis seized power, and then used by the Nazi government for marches and propaganda events. *Macht Nichts*, however, is not made of solid stone but is a folded form or surface made of Acrystal, a plaster-like acrylic resin. The stage-like quality and fragility of even the most monumental constructions and proportions are thus particularly evident.

The work *L'autre* [fig. ##] consists of recycled glass tubes used for neon lettering, which are bent at right angles at the ends into square brackets and mounted onto the wall in seven closely stacked rows. The distance between the two halves of the brackets is approximately one meter, forming a space adapted to the human body. In a written text, square brackets indicate an omission or can accommodate an additional comment by the editor, in mathematics they denote a matrix. With this very formally restrained work, Stephanie Stein also refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein, both to his *Notebooks 1914–1916* as well as to his *Lecture on Ethics*, in which he had developed his own logical system of signs and references.² The square brackets typed on a typewriter stand for “fits to.” As empty brackets, however, Stein leaves open what fits to what, or what kind of space or interstice has been created here.

Similarly minimal in materiality and form are the larger-than-life spatial drawings *Far from Hot Baths* (2024) in the Kunstraum, which float vertically in space like paper silhouettes [fig. ##]. Connected at the top by quarter circles and horizontal beams, the elements are vaguely reminiscent of archways or arcades reduced to the essentials. They redefine the space and the movement of the viewer. This is reminiscent of Sandback's multiple settings for Kunstraum München in 1975, in which he developed sixty-four different possible spatial combinations using three threads, thus illustrating how minimal interventions have a fundamental influence on the perception or usability of space [cf. fig. ##].

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, ed. Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelina Valentina Di Lascio, and D. K. Levy (Chichester 2014).

But Stein's work can also be read as a formal reference that recalls, on the one hand, the buildings of antiquity—architectures of dialogue and contemplation—and, on the other, the architecture of power in more recent history, from ancient Delphi to the monasteries of the Middle Ages, from monumental places of worship to the museum buildings of the nineteenth century and the state buildings of the twentieth century, all of which were intended to demonstrate grandeur and often authority. However, these concepts are inevitably accompanied by a distance that clearly and sometimes violently positions object and subject against each other and organizes them hierarchically. This reference to everyday, historically evolved, and socially legitimized violence is a central issue that Stephanie Stein also refers to in the title of the work, *Far from Hot Baths*, which she borrowed from Simone Weil's text "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force" (1939).³ In that text, Weil dissects the mechanisms of power, the forms of violence, and the seductive power of ideology and understands that the *Iliad* and the Trojan War it sings about are archetypes of modern warfare and collective blindness.

The surfaces of the two reliefs *Echo I* and *Echo II* [fig. ##] are reminiscent of the fluted surface of a column, which is now presented as a flat cutout. The even distribution of the two pieces on the wall activates the space between them, and the objects themselves appear even more like cutouts. Almost as if viewed through a microscope or magnifying glass, their surfaces appear enlarged and prepared for close observation. At the same time, it becomes clear that this is a section of a column, which, since antiquity, has been an element of statics, sovereignty, and authority used primarily in public buildings.

In *The Promise* (2023), Stein reduces this reference to a single flute, which has been transformed into an inner cavity by doubling it and folding two of the flutes on top of each other [fig. ##]. This gesture makes it very clear how closely interior and exterior spaces interact, and that a space can always be conceived and defined as negative or positive. The work is reminiscent of Walter De Maria's *Olympic Mountain Project*, which the artist proposed as a public art project for the Olympic Park in Munich in 1970–71 [cf. fig. ##]. De Maria proposed drilling into the Olympic Mountain, a large hill composed of war debris, by boring a hole into its interior that was three meters in diameter and 120 meters deep. This would have penetrated the mountain vertically by sixty meters and run another sixty meters into the ground. For the surface of the Olympic Mountain, at its center, he proposed a bronze slab five meters in diameter and thirty centimeters thick.⁴ This would serve as a vantage point for viewers, but also as a place of meditation. Walter De Maria formulated his requirements for the sculpture as consisting of two parts: "One visible / one invisible." Standing on the bronze slab, users would become aware of the special nature of the site and their own existence above the airspace. Only a

³ Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force" [1940], trans. Mary McCarthy, in: *Chicago Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1965, pp. 5–30.

⁴ See: Corinna Thierolf: "Never Give Up! The Proposals from American Artists for the Program of the Olympic Games in 1972," in: Elisabeth Hartung and Anton Biebl, *Art and Society 1972–2022–2072. From the Art for the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972 to Artistic Design Concepts of the Twenty-First Century* (Munich 2023), pp. 72–85.

fraction of the sculpture would have been visible, but it was intended to develop the power to visualize the history of the earth and civilization, as well as the relationship and place of the individual within it. It would have been a unique work of Minimal Art and Land Art for Munich,⁵ using minimal means to achieve the greatest possible effect and, in the best case, providing the viewer with a kind of transcendental experience.

Stephanie Stein does not push the concept to such an extent, but she is certainly concerned with the core of human existence, humankind's place in the cosmos and the environment, and the power and organizational structures of human interaction that are not always clear, visible, or recognizable as such. Her approach echoes that of American artist Nancy Holt, who consistently questioned humankind's place in the world by exploring relationships between perception, systems, and place. In works such as *Sun Tunnels* (1973–1976) [cf. fig. ##] or *Locators*—sculptural “viewing devices”—she directed attention, and thus visual perception, to a specific location or cosmic phenomena, such as a particular position of the sun.

Sometimes the gestures of power in architecture or the rigidity of social conventions are so entrenched that they have become almost invisible. Like Holt, Stephanie Stein seeks to sharpen our focus on what is ubiquitous but not seen. Especially in pacified Europe, gestures of power and violence have been cloaked in peaceful forms since the end of the Cold War. In postwar Germany, architecture was intended to create the image of a cosmopolitan, transformed, democratic society, and was achieved, for example, in the modern and transparent buildings of the Olympic sports facilities in Munich. Today, however, the historical and political climate seems to be changing ominously again, and it is becoming increasingly clear that, from a geopolitical perspective, even democratic societies cannot seem to get along without demonstrations of power or violent gestures of threat.

In her artistic practice, Stephanie Stein seeks to hit this neuralgic point between visibility and invisibility—that state of suspense between clarity and ambiguity, openness and closedness, interior and exterior space, positive and negative, everything and nothing—as precisely as possible in terms of both form and content. In terms of materiality, aesthetics, and formal language, she draws on the works of Arte Povera, Minimal Art, Land Art, and Conceptual Art. Through minimal shifts and aesthetic choices, she succeeds in redefining spaces as well as spatial and visual experiences and also succeeds in opening up extensive fields of meaning that she has encountered in her literary, historical, and art historical research. What at first glance appears to be both aesthetically beautiful and very restrained—in some cases almost invisible—reveals upon closer inspection to be a demonstration of how a structurally determined distribution of violence or power shapes the relationships between

⁵ In an adapted concept, Walter De Maria realized the underlying idea in his work *The Vertical Earth Kilometer* for *documenta 6* (1977), which became a permanent work in the public space on the Friedrichsplatz in Kassel.

individuals, specific social groups, and state authority. And where the breaking points of those systems lie. This is hardly an “encounter with almost nothing.” Rather, a quotation from Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988) seems to be a lodestar for Stephanie Stein’s artistic approach, which she pursues single-mindedly in her search for the perfect state of suspense:

*“There is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we all know that there is a lightness of frivolity. [...] Lightness for me goes with precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard.”*⁶

With such a precise lightness, she confronts the elementary questions of being human that affect all equally. Nothing for all.

Dr. Friederike Schuler, Berlin, 2024

⁶ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, MA 1988), pp. 10, 16.