

An Extraordinary Adventure Which Happened

Maybe the best way to begin a discussion of Vadim Fishkin's work is with a reference to Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem right at the start – as the title: after all, the poem speaks in a remarkably subtle way about a strategy, or better, a language, that is constantly present in Fishkin's art.¹ Fishkin builds in his works on the tradition of the historical avant-garde and its utopian dreams,² while at the same time introducing his own distinctive poetics, thus creating constant tension between the different elements in his work. Consequently, it is practically impossible to “anchor” his poetics securely in any of the various trends in contemporary art. Although the present discussion relates only to a specific segment of Fishkin's art, his “language” is clearly recognizable even outside this limited field (which deals mainly with the question of the ephemeral) and can, in a way, be applied and detected throughout the artist's body of work. Given the nature of his individual projects, Fishkin's unique artistic language cannot be reduced to any common denominator. It is, however, possible to highlight a number of specific aspects and features that appear continually throughout his art and are more or less present in all of his works – whether this is an examination of the relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the space or an interrogation of the function of technology, its potential for the absurd, and the connection between this absurdity and the artist's personal poetics and sense of humour. Still, as I have said, in the present essay we are not trying to encompass the entire thematic range of Fishkin's work but are rather focusing in particular on the question of the ephemeral within the artist's practice, an issue that on the thematic level he began to examine more systematically in a series of exhibitions titled *Light Matters*.³ The ephemeral has always been part of the artist's thinking about art: as he himself has said, ephemerality is a category that, alongside its non-materiality, or rather, its apparent existence on the edge of material presence, is at the same time entirely physical. Ephemerality as a category operates as a kind of “invisible presence”, a presence that directly transcends the visible and haptic aspects of our surroundings. And for this very reason, it is in a way

¹ “An Extraordinary Adventure Which Happened To Me, Vladimir Mayakovsky, One Summer In The Country, 1920”, in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, ed. Patricia Blake, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1975, p. 137

² Zdenka Badovinac, “Moving Star”, *Muzej na cesti/Museum in the Streets*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2008, p. 34.

³ In the period between 2011 and 2013, Fishkin produced the exhibition series *Light Matters*, which attempts on various levels to examine the role of the ephemeral within the artist's individual projects. These are primarily works that treat the fields of light and sound. The series comprised the exhibitions *Light Matters*, KiBela, Maribor, Slovenia (2011); *Light Matters 2*, Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin (2012); *Light Matters 2/3*, Galerija Gregor Podnar, Ljubljana (2012); and *Light Matters 4*, Galerija Škuc, Ljubljana (2013).

completely intangible. This idea is at the heart of the exhibition series *Light Matters*, and therefore also of the present publication. The category of the ephemeral, which often finds itself on the margins, now shifts to the centre and becomes a kind of mooring to which the conceptual premises of the individual artworks are tied.

A Poetics of Tension

Vadim Fishkin's work strategy and artworks are not tautological, since both visually conceptually they always open up a field for individual reflection. Fishkin seems to capture an almost incredible balance in his works – a balance between Frank Stella's statement in 1966, "What you see is what you see," and Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art," from a couple years later, in which the physical reality and visual aspects of a work are seen as merely secondary to the idea or concept on which the work is based. The balance, or tension, created between these two symbolic entities underscores an idea from the historical avant-gardes – that of "broadening" the field of art, in which medium and idea are understood not as isolated monoliths, but as a kind of heterogeneous interdependent structure. The tension that arises between materiality and something on the edge of material presence – between the visual and the non-visual – appears as an extraordinarily complex and often multilayered unity.⁴ Fishkin's often remarkably minimalist recontextualizations of everyday objects, and his no less minimalist interventions in everyday objects in a certain space, are usually quite subtle, especially if we compare them with the more traumatic and directly politically charged practices of post- and neo-conceptualism. His simple gestures also embody a kind of "romanticism", which in an extremely poetic way reflects a vision that portrays human and everyday life in a humorous and often quite pointed manner. While the artist's "manifestos" may differ from each other in formal terms, they all display an awareness, whether as objects or installations, of the various realities that exist, and, in their process, they simplify these realities through conceptual and poetic gestures. In a number of works, Fishkin interrogates the role of the viewer on the basis of the viewer's "ideological" experience of the space; at the same time, however, he directly invites the viewer to participate in the work – he exposes the interdependence between the artist and the viewer and "warns" of the ever more frequent absurdity of our fascination with new technologies. While a poetic element is more or less present in the majority of the artist's works, those involving the plane of the ephemeral are,

⁴ See Igor Zabel, "Umetnost na robu vidnega", *Eseji I*, Založba / *cf., Ljubljana, 2006, pp. 390–391.

perhaps, the most immediately poetic, primarily because of their fragility and the way they place the viewer in an unsparing tension with the artwork. The creation of tension between two elements is, then, a key feature of Fishkin's practice; here through tiny conceptual gestures and a dash of humour, he succeeds in creating incredible tension between historical ideas and contemporaneity, between experience and non-experience, between the material world and what is on the edge of materiality, and between the visual and the non-visual. But this endless tension between two elements, which literally permeates the whole of Fishkin's practice, also introduces, very subtly, a "hidden third element". In relation to the viewer, this appears as a direct unveiling of what is "behind the scenes" of the individual work, by which the artist seeks to fully demystify the work and thus open wide a field for the possibility of individual reflection.

From Ephemerality as a Physical Category to the Technological Absurd

The investigation of tension and the creation of balance between elements in a wider field have in a sense been the focal point and essence of artistic inquiry since the 1960s, and Fishkin too, of course, is part of this tradition. We can highlight, especially, the way he dematerializes the artwork,⁵ which as a work strategy has been somewhat "adapted": the ephemeral elements in Fishkin's work – such as sound, light, or ideas – acquire a physical and material aspect through the context and manner of their presentation. The series of exhibitions titled *Light Matters* seems to be an attempt to examine the conventions in which we become enmeshed over the course of our lives. The more we operate in harmony with conventions, the less capable we are of true perception, especially the perception of things that exist on the edge of materiality – light, smell, movement, sound, ideas, words... Such an existence becomes merely the physical experience of our surroundings, the experience of something we can touch and whose existence we can prove rationally – the proof of something that happens in three dimensions and can more or less conveyed by the concept of the haptic. At this point, then, it is perhaps best to ask about the relationship between the material and the "non-material" in the context of Fishkin's work, and especially about the way that ephemeral elements become physical categories. Here there is always a play between several elements, which in their mutual "choreography" act complementarily and not as independent monolithic

⁵ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1997.

entities. Especially in Fishkin's installations, we can speak of a tireless and ongoing investigation of space through the ephemerality of sound and light, which Fishkin "anchors" in various conceptual premises. The viewer, then, through his own experience of material reality and sense perception, completes the artwork as a whole. As a result, Fishkin also poses questions about spatial limits. Are the limits of a space found in its physical barriers, or is the space demarcated by the viewer's possible inability to move from the haptic to the conceptual level in perceiving the work of art? In Fishkin's work we sometimes find tiny rational and sensual impulses that address the viewer directly and interrogate the relationship between what the viewer witnesses on the visual level and the pure idea. The artist thus shifts the boundaries of perception as he plays directly with the viewer's experience of the material reality of the world. But everyday experience and the material reality of the world are also encompassed in the everyday objects Fishkin often uses in his work. Through his reinterpretations and recontextualizations he tries to place objects in an entirely new relationship to the space or to assign them completely new roles. Fishkin's principle for treating and recontextualizing objects was perhaps best described by Viktor Misiano, who wrote: "Yet in Fishkin's execution, the avant-garde utopia seems touched by gentle irony. In his work, Kant's 'starry sky above' appears as an ordinary light bulb hanging on a wire, while technological optimism is represented by the 'scientific discovery' that a bulb attached to a working hairdryer will start to revolve in a circle."⁶ Fishkin is, it seems, quite "loyal" to the original appearance and properties of his chosen objects, which is why their recontextualizations are, as a rule, conceptual in nature and not based on the medium. At times Fishkin seems to be a chronicler of the age in which he creates his art: like Duchamp,⁷ he strolls through stores, choosing new, clean, and entirely ephemeral and unremarkable products from everyday human experience. Most often these are simple technological objects – direct indices of progress – to which Fishkin assigns new semantic values; he "prunes" their primary functions and points to their capacity for the absurd. Fishkin's work strategies, it seems, include a kind of ceaseless reflection on the tradition of the historical avant-garde; such reflection, meanwhile, is ceaselessly entwined with new technologies and science, thus uncovering unlimited possibilities for artistic expression. Given the way he connects art and technology, Fishkin, who began working in the 1990s, might "at first guess" be ranked among the new-media artists – but this is not the case. His works are more likely to steer clear of the conventions of new-media art than to approach them.

⁶ Viktor Misiano, text accompanying Vadim Fishkin's work *Moving Stars*, in the international group exhibition *Azioni molto semplici senza uno scopo preciso* (ARTRA Gallery, Milan, 2009).

⁷ See Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Allworth Press, New York, 1999, p. 288.

The observation of society and progress – and, consequently, also technology – may well be the characteristic, that “hidden third element”, which is constantly in the foreground in Fishkin’s work. And this is probably why his works always feel so current, so contemporary – not because of the period in which they originated but because of their “forward-looking view”.⁸ By taking some technological phenomenon to the absurd, Fishkin assigns it new semantic value; he literally resists the conventions of presenting new-media art, which often fall into a tautological fascination with technology and the technological age. Moreover, Fishkin’s artworks are often based on quite elementary technological discoveries: in this way the artist only further demystifies his position while at the same time, by removing its utilitarian and practical aspects, he turns technology into a poetic artistic invention, which, in the spirit of the historical avant-garde, points the viewer towards utopian dreams.

Light Matters

In his artworks, Fishkin seems to be constantly crossing different planes of art without ever really stopping in any of them; instead, he simply “grazes” them for a moment and, in a poetic gesture, connects them in a new and meaningful whole. Because they “resist” various conventions, the artworks operate as if liberated from the fetters that are alien to a perception of the contemporary work of art; the relationship and tension between what is material and what is non-material, however, must elicit doubt⁹ and make possible a completely new experience of the world – an experience with a forward focus. In thinking about the *Light Matters* exhibitions and publication, then, there can be no categorical separation between the material aspect and what exists on the edge of our perception of the material aspect; rather, we are dealing with the creation of a mutual relation through which both components can equally inhabit the space, point to an absolutely mutual equality, and thus transcend such questions as what is and isn’t art, what is and isn’t material reality, and what is imaginary and what is real. The artworks engage the viewer in an unpredictable game, which, on the one hand, offers a sense of security, since it is “constructed” on an experience that derives from our everyday activities and recognitions, while, on the other hand, these same artworks, set in various contexts and spaces, pose new questions about how they should be perceived. Although the present text focuses on particular aspects of works that primarily concern the field of the

⁸ Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time”, *e-flux journal*, no. 11 (December 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/>.

⁹ See Zdenka Badovinac, “Prostori bližine Jožeta Baršija”, *Arhitektov bilten*, nos. 131–132 (1996): pp. 42–43.

ephemeral, it is also possible to see in these aspects a vertical line – a common thread – that runs through Fishkin’s entire oeuvre. The artist’s friend and collaborator, A. J. Weissbard, has nicely summarized this element in a few lines: “Fishkin’s works, though conceptual, are filled with wonder, humor and a sense of accessibility which he generously transfers to all who are fortunate enough to experience them. Each of his creations encourages us to question what we know about the world around us by contextualizing physical action and space while doing so with everyday objects and ideas.”¹⁰ The artist’s tireless thoughts about the medium and how to “anchor” it in various conceptual premises are in a very surprising way connected by his poetics, which allows the artwork to do something more, for it does not enclose the work in hermetic discourse but rather opens it up to the outside. This is true particularly in terms of our perception and understanding, which are not reduced to a monolithic view of form and content but rather create a mutual dependence between these two components. Thus art is able to involve an entire range of roles, whether ongoing rational processes or quite intuitive actions – both, indeed, reflect a powerful creative drive that helps us transcend the gaps with which we are constantly contending. And it does so somewhere between utopia and the reality of everyday life.

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¹⁰ A. J. Weissbard, “Batteries Included”, written for Fishkin’s solo exhibition at the Amanei Gallery, Santa Marina Salina, Isole Eolie, Italy, 2009.