

## Zoë Gray

### *Small confusions*

On the day I visited *People and Events will be the Decoration* – its first day, to be precise – the exhibition was accompanied by the sound of running water, which I initially took to be part of the installation, but which turned out to be the February snow melting noisily overhead on the metal roof. This unintentional soundtrack provided a fittingly Zen-like atmosphere to the show, in which five freestanding works were poised on the grey concrete floor, like the carefully placed rocks in a Japanese garden. Although there was clearly no moss or raked gravel involved, the exhibition reminded me of a traditional *Kaiyu-shiki* or Strolling Garden, which requires the visitor to walk through the composition to fully appreciate its subtle complexity. As I wandered amongst Berendes' sculptures, the initial frontality of the installation gave way to an interplay between façade and framework. Two works that had seemed solid turned out to be backless, and the bright colours of the three metal screens became muted when seen from behind, glowing haloes of paint visible through their pierced surfaces.

The “Japanese” frame of mind in which I found myself as I enjoyed the exhibition was perhaps prompted by an earlier conversation I had had with the artist, in which we discovered that we had both spent the same two months in 2009 in Tokyo. While I was looking at the work of Japanese artists, Berendes had been looking at architecture, and noticing echoes of the radical Italian architects Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* in the tiled façades of various public and private buildings. A tile pattern appears in her exhibition at S1, spray-painted onto the two untitled horizontal forms that seem to fluctuate between being plinths, display stands and independent sculptures. Atop each of these cardboard structures sit three found ceramics, colourful jugs and vases arranged by the artist as a kind of still life. Indeed, Berendes even referred to buying these ceramic elements as choosing her palette.

The title of the show – a quote from an unnamed architect – suggests an inversion of the usual hierarchy in which people and events are central, while their surroundings provide the decoration. In this exhibition, installed in a way that evokes a stratified stage-set, we become actors while remaining spectators; we admire the work around us as we play the role of the decoration. Formally, the decorative aspect of the installation comes to the fore when you see the show from the entrance to the gallery

(or while huddled against the space's lone radiator). From this perspective, the pastel shades of the sprayed metal sculptures – purple, grey, yellow, black, white, gold, pink, blue – and the coloured glaze of the six ceramic pieces are arranged as if in layers, against the backdrop of a white curtain. The sloping black grid sprayed onto the white cotton, distorted by the gentle undulations of the fabric, echoes the more rigid grid of the low white structures, and is picked up again in the brass frames that allow the pierced metal sculptures to stand up: a broken geometry that moves across forms. As one strolls through the show, however, this decorative quality dissolves into a shifting sequence of images, creating a moving palimpsest, not least because several aspects of the installation are translucent, like an open-weave tapestry.

Tapestry, ceramics, furniture and interior design are, in fact, all important references for Berendes. From the human scale of her works – which she chooses to keep to a size she can manipulate alone in her studio – to the materials she employs, the applied arts feature as a touchstone. For Berendes, it is predominantly a question of reception, of how we have a more tactile approach to the applied arts, a greater proximity to the way items are made, as compared to our reading of fine art, where the concept has become all-important. And while the applied arts of the modernist era are clearly influential on Berendes' work, she is also intrigued by postmodern design. For example, the work of the Memphis Group (1981–1987) has been influential on her recent productions, and their extreme application of highly colourful patterns to furniture, products and even buildings was anathema to the anti-decorative stance of modernist design. The very different aesthetic of Brutalist architecture also makes an imprint on Berendes' visual language. Its echo is visible in the two small plaster reliefs on show, for which the artist adopted the technique of cladding that leaves the trace of the wooden mould visible in the plaster, as in the concrete surfaces of many Brutalist structures. In speaking about these two enigmatic wall-mounted white casts, Berendes mentions the “small confusions” provoked for the viewer by the contrast between her painterly sculptures and her sculptural paintings. The wealth of cultural references evoked by her work can also induce confusion, as we try to get a grip on her inscrutable structures, and yet the overall feeling projected by the exhibition is one of harmony. It is upon these “small confusions” that Berendes' works thrive, drawing energy from the many apparent antagonisms that they contain.

Zoë Gray is curator at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, where she curated the group exhibition *Making is Thinking* (Jan–May 2011) featuring Berendes' work.