

Why produce an object at all? When produced, what can an object do?

The methodical fabrication of hrönir... has performed prodigious services for archaeologists. It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future.

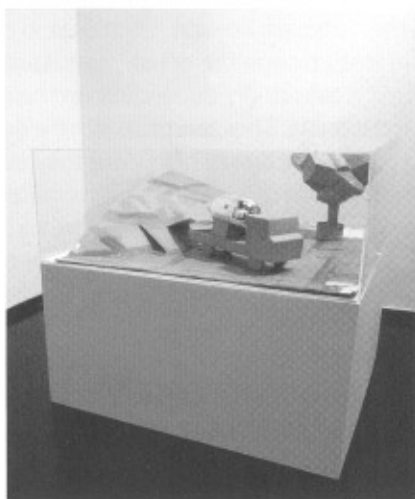
Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940)

Tobias Putrih's work takes us on a swinging movement between, at one end, notions of shared experience, the collective, and the public sphere; and at the other end, the intimate, the self-referential, and the unspeakable. Perhaps the most direct catalysts for this movement are Putrih's models evoking cinema theatres, and more precisely, their utopian lineage. Utopias and their fate appear as crooked paths in a landscape the artist investigates: intended to build the community, eventually depending on the adoption and (re)actions of the individuals. This seems to pose a series of questions: How are utopian systems created? How are they experienced by their subjects? How are they interpreted and appropriated? And perhaps most importantly, where and why do failures in utopian systems occur? If the basis for their existence fails, how can utopian systems still operate as productive systems? Furthermore, how does 'vision' meet action?

Putrih rephrases these questions and puts them and their potential answers to work in a series of simulations. Operating under hypotheses, he builds—we could say edits—objects: fragile, unstable landscapes where reasonable conditions and rules are suspended, diverted toward a state of unforeseen potentiality. The simulations seem to invite a distanced, critical gaze that is enhanced sometimes through irony, sometimes through the obstruction of legibility. But just when we begin to grasp the reason for the object's resistance to interpretation, we find that resistance paradoxically inseparable from intimacy: Putrih's scale models allow overall scrutiny, but they also open the way to fetish and fantasy. Here examination migrates into the realm of the imagination.

In a gallery space, *Movie Tales* consists of four different, though simultaneous, scenarios. Exhibited under a vitrine, as if to control environmental conditions, *Lost Cinema I* (2001) presents the viewer a cardboard desert. Upon reading the text that accompanies the object, the viewer also adds four imaginary travellers to the scene. This script tells us that we are looking at a set for a movie, and that four travellers are "trying" to speak in English to one another. We know that (mis)interpretation governs their exchange. One traveller,

Herbert Bayer, encounters one of his utopian architectural projects in the landscape: the expanded cinema, an immersive environment whose cultural and social potential remained unexplored in his own time. (Bayer diverted his attention to more "practical" ideas in service—so reads the text—of an "American business pragmatism.") Putrih poses a question: is there any context, any cultural, political and economic condition, in which Bayer might have realized his utopian cinematic vision? In *Lost Cinema*, the cardboard model suggests a negative image of the world—a photogram—where the one *positive* thing is Bayer's "dream machine," the only hope—according to the text—of bringing sense to the "packed world." Amongst so many others interpretations, there is a hint that life within the vitrine—what the movie interrogates—would indeed be a desert



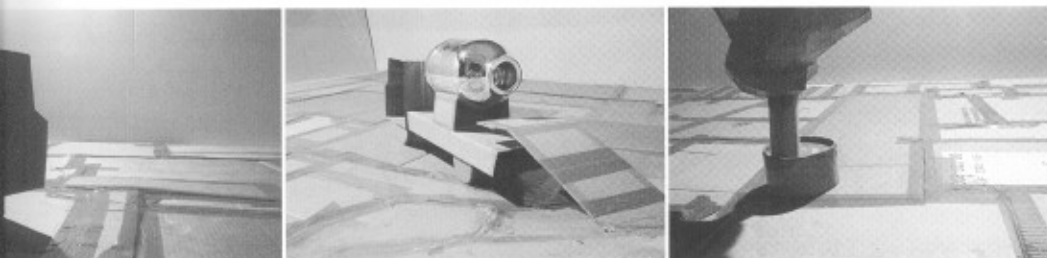
Lost Cinema, 2001.



Underground Cinema, 2001.

of creativity, a "packed world" ready to use, with rules fully defined, settled once and for all—just as in utopian systems. There is something that dismantles this possibility, though, as the imaginary inhabitants could not possibly share a perfect common ground to live by those rules: they all speak their own "creative" version of poor English.

In *Movie Tales* the models are crammed with an endless flow of scripts and images. They re-enact implausible stories, a-historical encounters and open space-time loops, generating a plane of indeterminacy where they each can be reimagined. In doing so, Putrih explores the fascinating qualities and potentials of unrealized, visionary objects, devices, and architectural spaces that posit new methodologies for participation. How does one productively interpret structures that were meant for individual people conceived as a



Lost Cinema, 2001.

collective body? Where does the collective lie and how does it behave in the production of social systems? How does community generate itself? How does it relate to the idiosyncratic possibility of the individual? What can the role of the object be in this search?

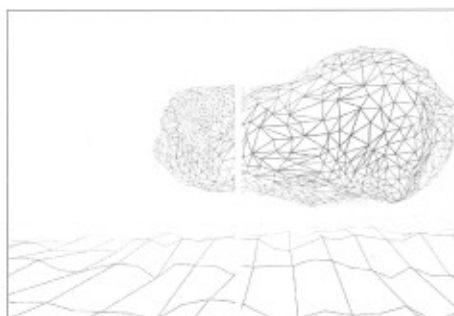
If Putrih approaches answers to these questions, it is because he understands his practice as a participatory mechanism. It activates narratives and involves the viewer in the production of hypotheses. Art and science, after all, have both historically appeared "under glass;" by presenting some of his models under vitrines, it's as if Putrih draws a wry connection between his pseudo-laboratory simulations and museum display practices. And yet it is this very removal from the object that allows viewers to engage with the model by populating it with stories of their own as they experience it. Objects like these act as a mediation between author and viewer, and are a key element, as J. Rancière puts it in "The Emancipated Spectator," in a process of emancipation essential to build a model of community based on equality, not on *authority*: "both parts can refer to it, but it prevents any kind of 'equal' or 'undistorted' transmission."¹ This can happen when there are no directions stipulating how the object should be interpreted, or exemplary implications about a kind of communitarian power of the work. On the contrary, each viewer will translate the work in his/her own way, as the artist himself does. When Putrih gives directions, his abstract, simple instructions act as triggers, not agendas.

If translating the work into one's own imaginary realm is a productive, participatory action, Putrih brings the experiment one step further by involving people in the actual production of objects. Simulations built collectively will open themselves up to multiple, contradictory, simultaneous fields of relations in a kind of topographic, organic process, in which the artist negotiates variable positions while aiming to accompany his collaborators, rather than direct their actions.

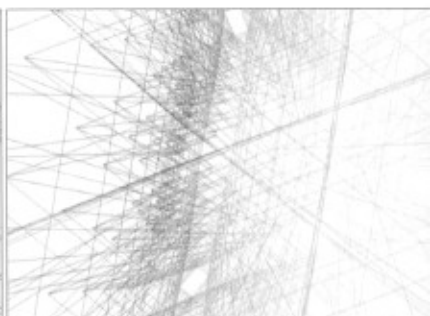
1. "The Emancipated Spectator" was the title of a talk given by Rancière to open Frankfurt's Fifth International Summer Academy of Arts on August 2004. There is a transcription of this talk at www.v2v.cc/node/75. The text was printed by *Artforum* in its March 2007 issue, featuring Jacques Rancière in "Regime Change. Jacques Rancière and contemporary art."

His *Sci-Fi Sketchbook Drawings* (2002) use computer graphics to show an evolving spatial and visual interaction. In *QR/construction* (2004) a whispering voice narrates the virtual development of a geometric structure. The accurate truth of computer programs swings to be told as an almost inaudible, inspiring fiction.

As the named author of his participatory projects, Tobias Putrih establishes their rules and designs the furniture and setting in which participants are left to build their own relationships. He does not anticipate the final results (as in the case of his series of sculptural "experiments," in which the participants are sometimes unaware of what the artist intends to do with their contributions). This methodology performs a critique of determinism, challenging the production of reality through programs that anticipate its outcome and therefore lock down the future. If the question is, "What can an object do?" then it is paramount that the answer not be inscribed in or suggested by the question. There can be true openness because deviations, minor mistakes, misreading and "states of distraction



Sci-Fi Sketchbook Drawings, 2002.



QR/construction, 2004.

and forgetfulness"—the conditions of production of *hrönir*, those simulations which eventually replace reality in Borges' tale—destabilize the instrumental reason of science and the directive rationale of the author. The question (and the hypothetical object it implies) can be the experimental locus of a practice open to new conditions of possibility.

Re-interpreting *Cloud Nine*, Buckminster Fuller's utopian concept for flying cities, Putrih again addresses the dynamics of authorship. Historically, social utopias are designed as abstract, hierarchical systems whose equilibrium depends on their subjects' abiding to inflexible laws. Every citizen has a precise function and place in these systems—they are prisoners. To break free of these constrictions, "pseudo-" or "quasi-" structures are to be created, structures that accommodate the singular, so that, in Putrih's words, "one can find his or her own shape, his or her own deformity."² Building structures collectively allows for them to be critically

2. Tobias Putrih, project notes, *Quasi-Random*, 2003.



Buckminster Fuller, *Cloud Nine*, 1962.

rethought from personal experience. The possibility of finding a sustainable order through imperfection, heterogeneity, uncertainty and chaos is suggested by a series of projects aiming to achieve a better understanding of interactive systems of exchange.

The Baltimore Experiment (2004) started as a series of laboratory tests designed in collaboration with Aljaz Ule from the Institute for Experimental Economics and Political Decisions in Amsterdam. Each stage of the game involved the collective production of objects based on very simple rules: "Add n foam cubes to a foam-cube structure on a table and then move to the next table," for instance. At what level does collaboration happen following such a program? Is there any place for it at all? The test was performed under the hypothesis that in the most abstract, non-competitive situation, with no explicit goal and no interpersonal communication, the players of this game would eventually find a common purpose and implicitly agree to create a more or less concrete image or shape. Is the hypothesis right? Is this the work of a community? Putrih's design of the game environment, together with the institutional contexts that facilitate them, play a major role in the equation. This elicits further questions: What do these experiments (later versions were carried out in The Hague in 2004 and in Graz in 2005) tell us about an art institution's explicit and implicit rules? How do those rules affect the players, and



Baltimore Experiment, 2004.



their conscious and unconscious decisions? How does the artist's design interact within these contexts, and how does it inform the results of the game? What can an object do? Current interpretative models in economics or the arts are not able to measure or even "speak" these results—the object is to call for new models.

Putrih further uses form's deviation and gaps in communication as a way to explore interactive production. In the *Macula* series (2005-2006), irregular, apparently random objects arise from an accumulation of small imperfections. Participants repeat a simple action, the drawing of a circle, something it is almost impossible to do the same way twice. Though there is no direct interaction between the participants, the result, the creation of a sculptural form through the aggregation of their "mistakes" (tracing the singularity of their pursuit and failure to perform the most perfect shape), is, however, collective. The result is a strange, alien structure, containing each intimacy in unaltered form. *A Place by Two* (2006) re-activates Yona Friedman's concept of a "mobile city" in which the architect is a mediator who suggests multiple solutions to be adapted to the unpredictable needs of a building's users. In Putrih's experiment, two participants were asked to describe their perfect home by following simple abstract rules: build an object with Lego bricks; choose a favorite location; run your eyes in a line over a photograph of that location and trace the wandering line on the photo; repeat. The results of these tasks came to form a back-door entry into a wish list for a perfect dwelling. Putrih's resulting models were intimate random landscapes of their own, and their unexpected materiality embodied a unique interaction between two people. The models are departure points, objects ready to be questioned, re-appropriated in their familiarity and strangeness by the participants. What can an object do? It seems the hypothesis throughout is that the object can push forward new ways of holding the singular and the shared in order to see things anew.



A Place by Two, 2006.

Issues raised by these projects would find a new context of application, this time specifically related to education, in another experiment, *Mudam Studio* (2006). Namely, how does an author (artist, designer, architect) account for the needs and attitudes of others? How does s/he think and make decisions for unknown, abstract users? How can the object be educational, foster emancipation and avoid manipulation? *Mudam Studio* was an environment created specifically for the education and public programs of Mudam, Luxembourg's museum of contemporary art. It was commissioned to be a flexible, mobile, autonomous structure inviting various types of circulation and participation; an environment in which it would



Macula Series B, 2006.

3. This and all subsequent remarks by Tobias Putrih and Sancho Silva are from the collected correspondence between them and the author, Winter 2005—Spring 2006.

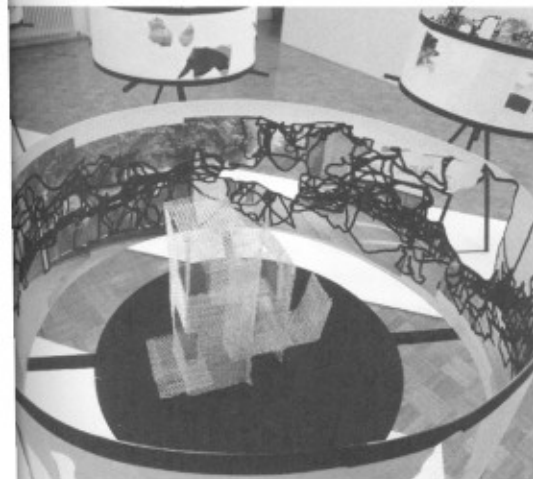
be possible to engage in specified participatory or individual activities, as well as search for other, unspecified uses. The structure was conceived as a playful, experimental interface that would stand as a metaphor for the education program itself. Manipulated and transformed by its users, every moment of its existence (its "objecthood") would be an exception, a concrete trial, a unique interpretation. It would be a place where everyone could learn, meet, share, question, and discuss ideas with the artists, critics, and the museum staff—a complex, stimulating, poetic system.

From the beginning, Tobias decided to produce the work in dialogue with artist, architect and mathematician Sancho Silva. Putrih's idea was "to design modular furniture made from plywood elements,"

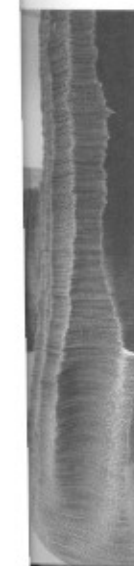
a kind of "morphological vocabulary," where "no bond would be permanent and users would be able to change and move the structures constantly, and also create non-functional structures."³ Very quickly, their dialogue focused on the idea of *resistance*. The artists wanted to prevent users from too easily "finding a way out to normality" based on the functional aspects of the structure. And yet they had to balance the destabilization of functionality with accessibility, as the structure had to be open enough to promote uses if visitors wished to create them. Resistance also implied the wish to overcome a more fundamental obstacle: the fact that, despite the

museum's good intentions, the whole experience of the work would be mediated by the implicit rules of a body historically linked to ideas of hierarchy rather than equality (the construction of meaning, value and status being mastered by the institution), and where contemplation and distanced, visual experience have long prevailed over the actual manipulation of physical objects. In the worst-case scenario, "everything would become sculpture." Silva posed the problem thus: "How to design a space that is sufficiently free of design to the point that it allows for the unexpected?" Too aware that the setting for the laboratory itself was a modernist building, Putrih explains that

the general problem with a museum is the idea that exhibition design should be neutral or functional in a way that it democratically welcomes every possible position. On the contrary, what you finally get is a highly predictable and regulated space, which has hijacked our minds even before art happens. I don't want to challenge its democratic principle, I just want to avoid the terror of political and spatial correctness ruling the exhibition space.



A Place by Two, 2006.



But how can an audience be expected to use an object that offers resistance, and why would they choose to deal with resistance at all? Putrih argues that resistance can engender intimacy, an unexpected adaptation of the body provoked by form:

The problem posed by an autocratic system is how much freedom to offer; if too much freedom is offered there is a risk that the system will fail. With mobility, modularity and functional distortions we somehow favor or even presume a more intimate relationship between the visitor and the space. But is it possible in such a regulated environment as a museum? Is it possible in general to achieve intimacy in a public space? (...) I think the openness of a structure can work as an invitation to the user, as a promise that the space can be structured according to his actions and his body. But to create an open space—how much can we offer the user without forcing him to think our own way? (...) The only way to be consistent would be to select a dedicated group of individuals and guide them through constructing their own platform, their own design for their own needs, which nobody else could use or own in a proper sense. But then such a process has no place inside the public space of a museum. The openness I have in mind is self-contained and possibly inaccessible for a public. Does it mean we are compromising something?

As a dialectical response to Putrih's strategy of modularity, Silva proposed an open cell that helped "to create the conditions for the unexpected." The awkwardness of the entrance seemed a good way to partially block institutional control, creating a zone of ambiguous jurisdiction. Tobias saw it also as another phase in the cycle of autonomy: "I like its secretive character. It's time for conspiracy."

Madam Studio, which I curated with Putrih and Silva, works in the museum as a catalyst and a mirror, and it proposes unforeseen solutions for fundamental problems concerning education and group participation. As an object of sorts and a permanent installation, it also presents problems that require both conceptual and logistical responses: at certain moments the structure becomes, indeed, sculpture. But even here we confront the swinging movement, which seems foundational to Putrih's work, from object of distanced contemplation to fantastic platform for individual secrets and collective conspiracy.



Mudam Studio, 2006.

Moving from a Slovenian upbringing under exhausted socialism to Germany as the Berlin Wall was about to fall, then to the United States, Putrih is a privileged witness of the interpretations that East makes of West and vice versa. His work traces a political position in a landscape where personal experience meets a cacophony of paradoxical narratives. Putrih seeks the potential of open collaborative dynamics, played out in specific situations and resulting in extremely engaging, beautiful structures. He thus searches for the best way to explore the viability of social engagement as an artist, knowing that his generation was already ironic vis-à-vis socialism, and believing that "activism" in art is a western cultural construct. Putrih has perhaps experienced how aspects of the past and its utopias have been "modelled" into "cardboard deserts," hence the need to "breathe," to work—as in Borges' tale—towards a "no less plastic and docile" future based on new grounds.

As he has proceeded along his shared path, a number of disciplines and theories have fuelled Putrih's experiments and played into the production of his objects: poststructuralism, constructivist epistemology (namely Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana's research on autopoiesis), Stephen Wolfram's *New Kind of Science*, Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Rancière's ideas on anarchic equality, the museum as imagined by Alexander Dorner, the Campana brothers' furniture design, Oliver Peters' Mudam typeface, Friedrich Kiesler's and John Eberson's cinema theatres, Chris Marker's cinematic use of time, space and image... all these and many other contemporaries and predecessors come as the scrolling final cast and crew list of an imaginary movie. All respectfully translated, "misinterpreted" as problems requiring solution, in the best tradition of pataphysics.