Stefan Brüggemann (Mexico City, 1975) has opened up a new approach to the sociological and cultural aspects of language. His oeuvre falls into the tradition of conceptual art yet should be understood critically, as a reinterpretation and an updating of the presuppositions of classical conceptualism. But it also goes one step further, prompting a cultural analysis in today's social context, even starting from contradiction and irony.

As in classical conceptual art, Brüggemann assumes language, words, propositions, aphorisms, slogans and clichés as the tools and material of his work, although his methodology includes and practices appropriation in order to suggest a dislodging of meanings, a deliberate altering of the contexts of reading and comprehension from the acknowledgement of style. Quotes and cross references are ways of formulating critique of conceptualism from a conceptual point of view. Above all, however, they shape an attitude, a perspective that takes nothing for granted and tends to seek paradoxical situations that address the art system and its languages, including of course its visual conventions and its forms of aestheticization.

Stefan Brüggemann assumes conceptual strategies concerning the use of language in order to subject the very idea we have today of this artistic movement to a relentless deconstruction. Somehow, his works confirm the effectiveness of conceptual art as a critical and self-critical tool: art as a whole is subjected to an exhaustive examination, taking conceptualism and its strategies as a case study, a point of departure and arrival. In contrast to the

dematerialisation and the ensuing rejection of the commercialisation of art work defended by conceptual artists in the nineteen fifties and sixties, Brüggemann's aestheticization is as refined as it is measured and calculated, and tends to disguise its punk content and intentions under a veil of luxury, using mirrors as supports or sculptural objects, for instance. Such is the case of *Time Paintings* (2015), a wall of mirrors measuring almost twenty-two metres in length by over three metres in height, covered in aluminium paint and vinyl texts, that was presented at Ibiza's Parra & Romero art gallery, cutting the space in two. In the industrial premises of the gallery, the contrast between the wall of mirrors, the wide empty space and the trusses of the ceiling is violent: the artistic intervention has a theatrical element to it, in a tense conflict between the sophistication of interior design and the anti-aesthetics of the industrial estate. A work of similar characteristics, *Timeless* (2016), has been adapted at CGAC to close one of the museum galleries, fitting in with the light table that hangs from the ceiling designed by architect Álvaro Siza. In such a markedly architectural space, the reflection of the mirrors prevails as an element of extreme refinement that has been smudged (the aluminium paint blinds the mirror while preserving a silvered hue that doesn't reduce the elegance of the mirror too much, at least not at a distance, for it barely hints at a sense of opacity, of misting up).

The mirrors appear as an element of spatial design, like the halls of mirrors inaugurated in the Palace of Versailles that would characterise all the European architecture of luxury salons, from the baroque and classicism to art deco. And yet the closer we get, the more we realise they reflect nothing; the mirrors have

almost been erased and only give back glints, a sparkle that highlights the dirt and the opacity; the reflections are fragments, shards.

Trash Mirror Boxes (After MV), of 2015, is a set of forty-four boxes with mirrors on each of their sides on which we read the word 'trash' printed in different letters, reproducing the shape of the cardboard boxes sealed with tape that are used in removals. This work is like a sculpture well adapted to its spatial conditions, and yet with great flexibility it also enables the construction of different narratives and interpretations, stacking the boxes against the wall, in small groups, in one single pile or scattered throughout the space. Here, the cardboard box with its references to temporariness, to moves, to changes, to cleanliness as a container of domestic waste, but also to the shelter of a homeless beggar, is made of mirrors to reflect its surroundings. Rather than pointing to the interior or the possible contents of the box, the word 'trash' refers to the entire exterior, to what is reflected on its surface.

Luxury and trash form the first line of equivalence based on the contrast between appearances and definition, between the material (mirror) and the word-sign (trash). A second line of equivalence is the one that marks the superposition of sign-word (trash) and any reflected object. The definition/description of the concept of trash becomes a syllogism thanks to the reflection of objects and situations favoured by the mirror. These are forced tautologies, or rather false tautologies that reveal the traps of linguistic

conventions. These works establish a certain climax of tension between the appearances of reality and the paradoxical contradictions of language.

The core of the problems lies in what we could define as the ambiguity of communication contexts, of conventions, in the association of ideas and in the ordered forms of expression of thoughts in a society governed by the mechanisms established by the mass media. Indeed, Brüggemann's oeuvre places the core of the problems in what we could call language games, a complex concept that implies frictions and slips between form and content, between essence and appearance, to which we shall return later.

The idea of 'luxury' blemished, subverted or insulted is emphasised in the various recent works made in 2016 for his solo show at New York's Hauser & Wirth gallery. These are works conceived parallel to the installation *Headlines & Last Lines in the Movies* presented at CGAC, and should be read simultaneously and complementarity to the hall with the graffiti. They belong to the same series, they share the same title and work methodology, i.e., they are sentences taken from the press headlines of the days during which he made the works, combined with the last sentences of some films. The difference is that while at CGAC the graffiti invades the walls of the museum hall, in the New York gallery the artist has used colour sprays on surfaces of (white) Carrara marble and black Markina marble. Mirror and marble are the typical materials of court or church architecture used in baroque and classical constructions in order to express the power of power. Today, these materials (and marble, even more

intensely) have taken over banks and corporate spaces, but also private houses, where in floors, kitchens and bathrooms they create a wide range of stand-ins for poorer economies. The graffiti on these surfaces is like an aggression, an insult, the expression of a protest governed by a war to death. It is in this violence of materials that a certain punk intention.

His works, particularly in the CGAC show, tend to recreate atmospheres and climates that are densely aesthetic yet also pungent, with a certain bitter aftertaste. These are installations that challenge the order of concepts, the logic of social rules, but also the norms and conventions of the art system, where quotes are corrosive, negative examples or elements violently extracted from their context.

In these installations, a certain satisfaction with design goes hand in hand with and designation of the void it entails. This highlights a situation of extreme friction: the materialisation and commercialisation of an oeuvre that begins with the 'immaterial' condition and aspiration and yet is defined in a sophisticated atmosphere where the text is at once the design, the architecture and the message, literalness, tautology, quote and paradox.

As opposed to the premises of classical conceptualism, dematerialisation isn't directly linked to the denial of commercialisation. Somehow, this dematerialisation adapts to the conditions of distribution and digital storage of archives, although it is inserted in the distribution circuits of art as a commodity.

A highly significant part of Stefan Brüggemann's task consists literally in the drastic reduction of his works to sentences that will be reproduced on vinyl and hung on the walls in **Arial Black** type. In 2014, *Text Pieces*, a work still in process, was the object of a retrospective that included works from 1997 in The Wall (http://thewallsouthkensington.com/content.php), a wall measuring a hundred metres in length on the corner of Queen's Gate and Harrington Road in the London district of South Kensington. The Stefan Brüggemann show marked the launching of this project, and was accompanied by a catalogue in the form of a serious newspaper (halfway between a tabloid and a broadsheet newspaper), where each text is commented by Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, who structure the pieces in four parts or chapters following thematic criteria.

It is worth our while to reconsider the titles of these parts in order to understand the artist's intentions more precisely:

Part 1: This part examines the institutional context of the work.

Part 2: In this part, art works become products.

Part 3: This part reflects on the contended field of artistic authorship.

Part 4: Silence and the void are discussed in this part.

The publication is completed by a conversation between the artist and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Each of the *Text Pieces* is an edition of three, and the pieces in the CGAC exhibition belong to a single private collection. Only two of

these pieces are complemented by mirrors blinded with aluminium pain that, in turn, blind or partially hide the texts to highlight the aspect of revealing/concealing (that finally connects with a certain element of poetry and of sociological analysis) in Stefan Brüggemann's oeuvre.

This kind of dematerialisation and dissemination of an oeuvre in text archives and vinyl editions for walls is not new of course; suffice it to think of Lawrence Weiner's extensive vinyl works. However, Stefan Brüggemann radically eludes any aestheticization of these texts. He avoids colours and diacritic signs, reducing works to messages halfway between obviousness, criticism, paradox and even folly and provocation, even if the ultimate meaning is articulating 'four truths' to whoever is willing to hear them. These pieces are ambiguous as to their intention or their purely philosophical meaning: they touch on the realms of philosophy and, above all, on that of sociology applied to language as a provocation and a critique.

While it is true that the digitisation of archives and linguistic documents favours the outcome of total dematerialisation, these strategies are also a critical documentation of the technical-cultural context of the present.

In actual fact, his oeuvre presents a methodological freedom that recalls the references and the position of representation in painting in the nineteen eighties. Indeed, Brüggemann doesn't only resort to the procedures of conceptual art, but also turns to pop art as a strategy of appropriationism and

recomposes a stark aesthetic with references to minimalism, all in a highly critical manner. It is somehow a generational trait.

In the CGAC exhibition we could be tempted to think that the display is a sort of 'imaginary critical museum' of the post avant-garde, from conceptualism to Minimalism, through the (humorous and rotten) filter of pop and punk.

Let's think, for instance, of works like *Monuments for the Ceiling (I-X)*. Replicas of Dan Flavin's white fluorescent tubes, Brüggemann places them on the ceiling in order to restore their function of lamps and lighting, while others are divested of the objective and sculptural qualities originally granted to them by Flavin. In 2011, this work, made up of ten pieces, was displayed for the first time at the Fundação de Serralves in Oporto, another space designed by Álvaro Siza. The pieces share the same hall but are located at two levels parallel to the ceiling. At CGAC, these works form the core of the exhibition; they are the thread that runs along the ceiling of the three main halls with their characteristic light tables. In the first-floor galleries, where the light uniformly bathes the space, the presence of fluorescent tubes as a path of light increases and doubles the intensity of the light, both of the walls and of the general atmosphere. In this way the fluorescent tubes recover their original function, and become an instance of dematerialisation, decontextualisation and appropriation.

We must clarify that Stefan Brüggemann's view of conceptual art and its strategies is not based as much on its connection with analytical philosophy or

the philosophy of language, which is the case of classical conceptualism, that is closely linked to at least one very consistent part of this approach to the mechanisms of mathematical logic and techno-scientific language. Or rather, we could state that it establishes complicity and re-contextualisation, with a sociological analysis that is naturally connected to language but above all to the appearance of forms and styles of writing, to how they are used and interpreted.

It is thanks to this sociological connection that his works adopt and appropriate a far-reaching idea of the notion of language game that appears in the thinking of the 'second' Wittgenstein, combining humour based on provocation and a critical intention addressed at the conventions of political correctness and those of the art world. Therefore the importance of the core of his work doesn't lie specifically in his analysis of language, in the concepts, the propositions or the content of his messages; rather, he places special emphasis on the way in which the different forms and styles of writing assess, interpret and enhance ideas. A printed text isn't the same as a handwritten note, a mural isn't the same as a photocopy; we don't consider a list that reproduces the order in a classification or an archive as prestigious or valuable as a graffiti. In this sense, writing is understood as a shape or a sign that establishes the truth-value of a specific text message. The form of writing is at once a framework for the representation of language, and constructs the meaning of social, inter-individual and communicative relationships.

This is how Stefan Brüggemann approaches appearances as a contradictory realm and at once a distortion of Wittgenstein's language games. The procedure consists in moving the graphic style of writing towards an antithetical or paradoxical understanding of the message, and subverting the codes and contexts of its reading and reception.

Today we perceive Wittgenstein as an outstanding figure in the field of philosophy and philosophical criticism, and also as a more idealised figure, an author read transversally and incompletely, albeit a figure closer to dispersion.

From the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gradually came up with a definition of language games, feeling his way, as it is a truly wide and polysemic concept. In §7 he compares them to learning and to the instructions that signal both actions and definitions, finally adding, 'I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the language game.' Further on, in §23, he specifies that 'Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life'. He then goes on to list a series of communicative actions like 'reporting an event' or 'asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying,' but also some purely reflective actions like 'solving a problem in practical arithmetic' or 'translating from one language into another.'

It is precisely in the action-game of translation where we find a new key to understanding the work of Stefan Brüggemann: his oeuvre is embedded both in

the operation of translation and in that of transcription, a strategy for displacing meanings and altering contexts that transforms the criteria governing truth and authority but also coherence.

When we read a newspaper headline, particularly if it has managed to acquire a reputation for seriousness and informative rigour, we tend to consider it as the description of a true fact or event; in short, we consider it to be true. If the same headline is transcribed on to a wall with spray paint, we tend to keep our distance and are even sceptical of it, unless it matches our own ideology or confirms our suspicions; in any event, the graffiti denotes a situation of precariousness. The same thing happens if a certain sentence is written in a well-designed and emphatic printed letter. This is perhaps the reason for sticking to one and the same type of letter, funnily enough a letter characterised by its strength: **Arial Black**.

This consideration, made from writing and its situations, displaces Brüggemann's view towards sociology and the critical analysis of interpretative contexts.

In 2012 the artist published a slim pocket size book, containing just over 150 pages of glossy paper and black-and-white pictures, with a white flexible cover on which we read the title *On Sociology* above the name of the artist, written in italics and in a much smaller typeface. Funnily enough, no information regarding the edition or the project to which it relates appears either on the back cover or

inside the book. However, some of the quotes that touch the images actually shape the artist's statement: 'Life itself is a quotation. *Jorge Luis Borges*.' It's almost as if with this quote he were placing his work inside the idea of quotation.

IDEOLOGY IS OVER, on the other hand, is like a cultural and sociological analysis and establishes a precise context for his work to be understood as political in post-ideology.

In this sense, it is interesting to see the names that appear on the pages of quotes in the little book: Jean-Paul Sartre, Leonardo di Caprio, Freud, Žižek, Scarlett Johansson, Steve Jobs and, of course, Ludwig Wittgenstein on the last page: 'The limits of my language means the limits of my world,' closing the volume.

This aphorism, which reveals the Austrian philosopher's solipsism in its first stage, as expressed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is a metaphor that parallels Brüggemann's own methodology: drawing a limit in order to transgress it.

The key to the transgression of limits and the following expansion lies in the appropriation, the integration and the insertion of quotes that serve the exclusive purpose of explaining situations through paradox and contradiction, never of analysing the actual content of the quotes that are often combined or derived from one another.

An especially meaningful case is that of one of his most outstanding pictorial series, *Joke & Definition Paintings*. Each painting presents dictionary definitions, as do Joseph Kosuth's works, superimposed on jokes taken from magazine cartoons, as in those by Richard Prince. These crossed references explain the genealogy of Stefan Brüggemann's oeuvre, but they also lead us to the post-ideological order that allows us to visualise the Conceptual movement in a less radical way, domesticated by aestheticization.

His methodology triggers both appropriation and a gaze interested in the critical rereading of the symbols and the visual iconography of the history of recent art. In their turn, the texts create a kind of jigsaw puzzle, an intertwining of references from high culture and from the broad range of popular cultures. Sometimes, the meaning of a sentence is of secondary importance and the main thing is the artist's ability to construct rhetorical figures like the oxymoron or the tautology, as in the language of practical politics where the triumph of populism has left truth or credibility as signs to be validated by the appearance of discourse or the aesthetic of the printed text.

The forms of aestheticization of written language are determined by the prevalence of the printed text in contemporary visuality, not only through advertising but specifically through the omnipresence of computer and smartphone screens. All this takes place at a time when reading as a social and educational activity is gradually declining among ever-increasing sectors of

society, while the (printed) text is assuming an aesthetic status thanks to the recovery of a certain authority and prestige of the decorative.

In the first exhibition hall at CGAC, the walls surrounding the empty space have been covered in wallpaper from floor to ceiling and the visual effect is that of a slightly bluish grey colouring, yet when we come closer to the wall we discover that this tone of colour is determined by the printed presence on paper of a tiny sentence: **conceptual decoration** repeated ad infinitum.

As an idea, *Conceptual Decoration* (2008-2016) is a contradiction, an oxymoron that opens up one of the crucial debates in the art of today, albeit without actually tackling it: the tension between an art of ideas, concepts and suggestions for action, and an art of painting that is considered responsible of the decorative. Appearances, however, are always deceitful. This very sentence has been used by the artist on other supports, such as a bright neon sign. In each case, even if the message be the same, the debate assumes different nuances: the bright sign elicits references to the oeuvre of Bruce Nauman, but also to a certain post-pop gaze, a melancholy perhaps yearnful for spectacularity, and yet the sentence printed on the wallpaper becomes a corrosive, almost invisible virus that is imperceptible in the quick glance, that challenges the authenticity of a presumed anti-commercial radicalism of conceptual art. In its printed format, *Conceptual Decoration* is a self-definition of the work, a description that tells us that even in the absence of ideology, decoration lives on, more as a need than a desire. Political and social correction

and conventions have favoured the emergence of a puritanical aesthetics of containment that has established a certain triumph of decorative attitudes assumed today by conceptual art. Stefan Brüggemann ironises about this and takes it to the limit, establishing spaces of interference, complementarity and contrast between each of the various environments. Thus, between one hall and the next we are able to visualise the friction between the different writing systems. In this contrast of nuances and details lies the spectacular yet subtle, sharp yet complacent strength of these works: the wallpaper fades before the graffiti, which erupts before a numbered list of sentences that are imaginary and possible exhibition titles printed on black vinyl in **Arial Black**. This work alternates humour, absurdity, inventiveness, imagination and a criticism of the conventions of political art, increasingly subject to an ideological correction aligned with simplicity and clichés, with the bombast of a naïve rhetoric that some have ironically defined as 'paternalistic.'

Among the list of over two thousand numbered entries in the form of an archive, the title chosen for this piece—tautologically called *Showtitles*—is precisely the title of this exhibition, **TO BE POLITICAL IT HAS TO LOOK NICE**, which deep down is a polite way of saying that the revolution must be placid, that some rebels are moderates. Doesn't this remind us of the newspaper headlines reporting the war in Syria?

Such is the contradiction of our age, its cynicism, or could it be its virtue?

Translated by Josephine Watson