



ADELHEID MERS

By Fred Camper

Two incidents in the late 1980s were instrumental in my decision to start writing art criticism. The first was a 1988 exhibition of work by Gerhard Richter. The second was a 1989 one-person show by Michael Paha at Perimeter Gallery. Filling a vast space with tanks with flowing water, plants, and even fish, he created an environment unlike any I had seen in an art gallery. I took from Paha's masses of shapes a deeply emotional, almost mystical quality, feeling further justified when I later read that he admired Barnett Newman. When I read a review of an earlier Paha installation that ended by wondering, "Is it art?," it hit me then with the force of a minor revelation that any art work that raises that question is likely to be of interest. The whole history of recent art has been one of expanding the definition of what art is, while the parallel history of art criticism is replete with writers who simply didn't "get it" when new work changed the rules. Many art critics, identified with particular movements at the starts of their careers, found that later movements, establishing new definitions of art, eluded their grasp. The job of a critic who wishes to remain open to all of art's possibilities includes becoming particularly cautious about rejecting something that, while perhaps not immediately provoking familiar aesthetic pleasures, seems genuinely different.

Thoughts such as these flooded my head when I first encountered, with considerable surprise and not a little disorientation, Adelheid Mers's diagrams of a book by George Lakoff five years ago. Best known for her earlier light projections, superimposed colored lights on the floor that were spectacularly lush and made complex labyrinths, Mers had produced works on paper that, with their apparently unemotional grids of relationships between ideas, seemed almost out of textbooks. Exhibited in an art context, they posed questions of how to encounter them, on what terms to understand them. In Diagram after George Lakoff: Moral Politics — How Liberals and Conservatives Think (Family) (2004), the qualities Lakoff ascribes to liberals are listed on the left, and to conservatives, on the right. Mers includes a few simple monochrome shapes, such as human figures, and only a few colors. Aesthetics, it would seem, is subordinated to an attempt to come to terms with a book's ideas. Leaving aside the "is it art" question — which usually implies inappropriate comparisons to prior art — the diagram is more complex than it first seems. A great variety of geometrical shapes emphasize texts in different ways; even the human shapes and their colors vary. Though the differences between liberal and conservative are outlined schematically, the diagram as a whole has a labyrinthine and not fully resolved quality, offering engaging intellectual and perceptual experiences that seem to open up possibilities — a reflection, perhaps, of Mers's investigative process.

"What fascinates me in any context is how people make sense, myself included," Mers has written. In an article on media theorist Vilém Flusser, who Mers cites as a major inspiration, she expresses "envy" of "quick-witted historians and philosophers." She, by contrast, is "slow and clumsy....There is no methodology, just an idiosyncratic method. That, by the way, is how I have come to define art." Reading this, I was reminded of a remark of the late avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who despite a lifelong love of poetry felt he could not be a poet because words came too easily to him, with no sense of crisis.

What Mers has done is make an art out of a process of understanding that does not come easily to her.

Mers's recent diagrams have become more three-dimensional. At the center of I-space organogram 2009 (2009) are two floor plans, rectangles that seem both titled and curved in space, with a colorful geometrical pattern that suggests a rug or linoleum. Curved lines represent flows of exhibitions from proposals to gallery, while three wheel-like shapes radiate texts naming various institutions with which I space has collaborated. Mers's spatial arrangement and bright color scheme are thoroughly engaging, just short of seductive, pulling the viewer into a journey through the diagram that traverses multiple directions and turns back on itself, perhaps mirroring her own process of coming to understand how I space functions. A variety of "secrets" are encoded too: a dog refers to I space's very first exhibit, of William Wegman photos; the letters "MA" and "AM" are visible in the floor design, standing for I space's director, Mary Antonakas, and Mers herself. But specific references are less important than the investigative process that the work encourages — which might itself lead the inquiring viewer to facts such as these. Further, by hanging a diagram of I space in the space itself, Mers also encourages viewer engagement with one's immediate environment.

("Response - Art and the Art of Criticism - catalog contribution, 2009)

FRED CAMPER

By Adelheid Mers

First, I want to say what a pleasure it was to spend an afternoon with Mary Antonakas to learn about I space. We also had some of her mother's cookies - the cookies had an anise seed stuck in a little bump on the top.

Fred has responded to my work since the mid-nineties. He has written about my light installations and about an exhibition I co-curated with Jackie Terrassa at the Hyde Park Art Center. He has given a talk at Art Chicago in 2002 and written about my diagrams for the Reader. A long time ago, we even created a small multiple together, for an auction. Engraved in a circle on a magnifying glass where the words thoughts, reading, thoughts, reading, thoughts, reading.

I appreciate this companionship. Checking in every other year or so, it has been going on for 12 or 13 years now.

It is great to have a record of another person's perception of my work, particularly since this observer makes a point of looking carefully, and then presents clearly and succinctly what it is he has seen. This is not unlike my own practice of reading a text, or of listening to a lecture, or of trying to understand how an organization works, and then reflecting it through a diagram. In fact, isn't there a potential for another circle? I read a text and diagram it; then Fred reads a diagram and writes about it. I should next make a diagram of his review, just to see how he might respond to that. In fact, I think I will just go and do that now.

(audio transcript, <http://ispace.uiuc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/adelheidfinal.mp3>)

THE ORGANOGRAM

By Mary Antonakas, Director, I space, Chicago Gallery of the College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In 2007, an exhibition organized by the Chicago Art Critics Association was proposed for I space, Chicago gallery of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Each critic in Response: Art and the Art of Criticism was asked to select an artist, and write about the work for the exhibition. The exhibition was finally realized, with 13 critics, 13 artists and a catalogue featuring essays and full color reproductions of the work at I space in April of 2009. Fred Camper, one of the participating critics selected work by Adelheid Mers for the exhibition. Mers proposed an Organogram about I space for the exhibition which would involve research and an in depth interview with me, the director of the gallery, since its inception in 1992. My contribution was to give the artist all of the relevant information dealing with the way the gallery functions within its community over the course of the 16 years the gallery had been in existence. This involved thinking about and researching the museums, galleries and other institutions we have worked with. Connections to Cultural Embassies from Canada, Japan, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Spain were illustrated. Small details involving our programming and the way the gallery functions were given symbols and icons that were meaningful to those involved. It also detailed the various connections the gallery has with our home campus at Champaign-Urbana and our relationship to the entire University of Illinois as a whole. This information-not always clear to visitors to the gallery-became a graphic example of these connections and relationships in the Organogram.

Mers process of visually synthesising the activities and relationships the gallery has participated in was enlightening. Our reach was far more widespread than we were aware. The relationships developed over 16 years were a credit to the faculty, students and staff involved with I space and it was gratifying to see these relationships—so integral to how a university art gallery functions-mapped out and on display. The work was based on facts, and offered concrete evidence of the effect this gallery has had on the lives of artists in our community. At the same time, it offered an opportunity to participate in the creative process that Mers has been exploring in this new body of work. And in its presentation, the work was informative, amusing and visually intricate; offering a challenging viewing opportunity for everyone attending the exhibition in the gallery.

The process was also somewhat bittersweet as news of funding for I space was becoming more and more dire. Although the Organogram did not deal with any of our financial issues, it did outline for us, as a gallery supported by a research institution, the value of our work in our community. It also inspired me, and several other people who saw the Organogram and the exhibition to continue to work harder to ensure our presence in Chicago. At the time of the exhibition, our tenure in our current location was to end soon after the end of the exhibition. With help from our landlord and a genuine belief that we can continue to operate the gallery in Chicago, our lease was extended through December of this year. Work continues to ensure the gallery will continue here for another 10 years. It would not be correct to say that the Organogram saved I space, but the process of revisualizing the gallery, of looking back at what has been accomplished did, in a meaningful and unique way, give a perspective on the role of I space in Chicago, and beyond.