Please Wait!

A catalogue essay written by curator Marianne Dobner on the occasion of Stecklow's solo exhibition at mumok, Vienna.

Installation View: *Terminal*, Museum Moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna

To Wait—"transitive verb 1 a: to stay in place or remain inactive in expectation of: stay for [. . .] b: to hold back in expectation of: delay in hope of: defer until [. . .] intransitive verb 1 a: to remain stationary in readiness or expectation [. . .] c: to linger expectantly at or near a place [. . .] 2 a: to look forward expectantly"[1]

Merriam-Webster has several definitions of "waiting" that to me seem more familiar today[2] than ever before. A time of permanent acceleration was succeeded by longing, standstill, boredom, fear, frustration, and loneliness, but also slowing down, relaxation, and anticipation. A paralysis of the system that caused a standstill—but also allowed for reflection. Objective and subjective perceptions of time came closer and closer together; past, present, and future coalesced.

Amidst this dichotomous condition, Jesse Stecklow's practice appears timelier than ever. Practices of collecting, analyzing, and circulating material data constitute the foundation of his artistic work. Viewers encounter the data collections compiled by Stecklow mainly in their sculptural form. He describes his approach as follows: "A lot of my interest has been around pursuing modes of aggregating material or more specifically data collection, and how that might manifest and function through a sculpture. I've been thinking about art objects as human assisted traps through which information can flow."[3]

When we talk about data today, we predominantly think of digital data collection. A myth Stecklow challenges by thinking the concept much broader and more elementary: "[. . .] I like to consider technology with a really broad view; like a knife as a technology for cutting. In that sense, I take a zoomed-out idea of data, as I'm not only interested in using new modes of collecting information but also concerned with how these systems might apply when referred back to the larger realm of materials and structures. [. . .] Data could manifest as the spores of a mushroom or glue-trapped insects or any kind of material that was leaving an informational trace, like a sort of drawing. It's important for me to keep the term 'data' open. It has been sequestered to a tech area that I feel is limiting. There's something intimate and specific about concerning oneself with the movement of airborne material through a room."[4]
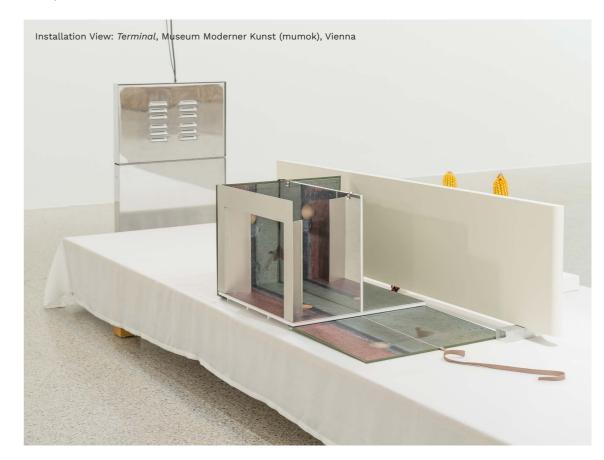
In developing a "system of ecological data collection,"[5] which manifests in the form of technically trivial works such as using fly tapes in *Text Trap i* (2016) just as much as it does in technically sophisticated objects such as the *Air Sampler* (since 2014), Stecklow counteracts the ostensibly objectivizing digital data craze of our times. He creates a cycle in which the material data he collects—more precisely, its analysis—influences the further evolution of his works and is thus the conceptual anchor of his practice.

Countering the idea of a hermetic masterpiece, Jesse Stecklow's works engage a limited repertoire of objects oscillating between sculpture and painting on the one hand and text, image, and sound on the other. In so doing, he is never interested in the individual object as such but always in different narratives that arise from contextual shifts and novel constellations.[6] His objects take on multiple identities in the form of diverging versions: a development resembling a steady process, as current works always refer to their future iterations: "A dominant interest for me is pulling material information to have this large chain of works that never feels complete or resolved. They are always in this unstable space. They start to build their network containing feedback loops between themselves."[7]

Stecklow started this circuit-like process in 2014 with a work group entitled *Air Sampler*, which deals with a method of microbiologically analyzing the air in a given room.[8] Enclosed in a container of polished, anodized aluminum, the microbial air sampler is presented as a sculpture. While the respective exhibition is on view, the *Air Sampler* acts as a guardian of sorts, recording all the changes in its environment invisible to the human eye—changes that are triggered in large part by the viewers themselves, making them a vital part of the work although their contribution to the object's future appearance remains an unconscious one. After the exhibition closes, the air sampler's recorded data is analyzed in a laboratory. The results, in turn, serve as the conceptual basis for the next version of the *Air Sampler*.

In the mumok show *Terminal*, Stecklow structures the constant repetition of his repertoire—that is, the presentation of his objects in different versions—using four displays representing a hybrid form between baggage carousel and dining table: a decision that can be attributed to the shifts between public and private spaces during the pandemic, as Stecklow specifies in his conceptualization of the exhibition: "As the pandemic has progressed with travel minimized, airports went through periods of low attendance and the spaces meant for directing droves of people were emptied. Conversely, dining tables have densified as they become home offices and school desks. I am interested in continuing to pursue these hybrid themes in the installation as their associations have shifted in interesting ways."[9] And so, each of these four structures features works

from his repertoire in different states, but it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the timelines of the individual objects—the past coalesces with the present and the future.[10]

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That the different versions are the results of earlier exhibition settings[11] hammers home how strongly the spatial situation influences the evolution of the individual objects and how well Stecklow understands the exhibition format as a critical part of his practice: thus, not only the various workgroups are interrelated but also their presentations.

Stecklow dedicated a whole show at the Sweetwater gallery in Berlin (2019) to this special aspect of his practice. Its title, *Ditto*, is an allusion to the almost mirrored exhibition situation in the gallery's formerly adjoining rooms. They are almost indistinguishable at first glance, but a closer

look elucidates that here too the artist used different versions from his repertoire instead of mere replicas. The viewers found themselves amidst a constellation—a kind of "before and after"[12]—that not only heightened the awareness of the spatial environment and one's own experience of the surroundings but also called into question what is or isn't visible to the human eye—a thought Lucy Chinen was also sure to impart to visitors in her accompanying press release, paraphrasing a conception of the Aymara, a people indigenous to South America: "the past is known and seen while the future is unknown and unseen."[13]

This game of seeing and not seeing, things familiar and unfamiliar, past and future, shows itself not least in Stecklow's graphic design of his own artist book arranged in a strict separation of images and text. It is only by overlapping the pages of the fanfold that the text and image blocks are allowed to enter into a dialogue.

That the concept of waiting also plays a significant role for the mumok exhibition is already discernible in the title *Terminal*, according to which Stecklow understands the exhibition space as a waiting room of sorts: "I often think about an exhibition space as a transient waiting room, like a train station or bus stop, where artworks go to rest and sit before their next appointment or movement."[14] As I suggested at the beginning of my essay, the objects in Stecklow's exhibitions are always waiting for their future iterations: standstill and uncertainty marked by impatience and anticipation—sensations and conditions that the pandemic has not ceased to illustrate in powerful clarity. Our age is one that confronts us with the question of whether we take a step into the future and look ahead or rather take a step into the past and return to patterns tried and true. A question eliciting a sense of torn-ness, whose answer, however, leaves us waiting. Which is why the following is true not only for Stecklow's object repertoire but also for us: "Please wait!"

1 "Wait." Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, accessed August 6, 2021, https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/wait.

2 I am writing this essay one and a half years after the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic.

3 K. R. M. Mooney in conversation with Jesse Stecklow, "Something Adaptable," Mousse, 48 (2015), 224–230, 224.

4 Ibid.

5 I am using a term first chosen by Alex Bacon to describe Jesse Stecklow's form of data collection. See Alex Bacon, "Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age," Rhizome, May 24, 2016, n.p.

6 Stecklow describes his objects as characters taking on various roles as the context around them changes.

7 Mooney/Stecklow, "Something Adaptable" (see note 3).

8 For more information about how air samplers work, see "Air Samplers for Microbiological Monitoring of Air Quality" Rapid Microbiology, accessed August 11, 2021, https://www.rapidmicrobiology.com/test-method/air-samplers: "In a typical impactor sampler air is drawn into a sampling head by a pump or fan and accelerated, usually through a perforated plate (sieve samplers), or through a narrow slit (slit samplers). This produces laminar air flow onto the collection surface, often a standard agar plate [. . .]. When the air hits the collection surface it makes a tangential change of direction and any suspended particles are thrown out by inertia, impacting onto the collection surface. When the correct volume of air has been passed through the sampling head, the agar plate can be removed and incubated directly without further treatment. After incubation, counting the number of visible colonies gives a direct quantitative estimate of the number of colony forming units in the sampled air."

9 Jesse Stecklow, concept for the exhibition Terminal, n.p.

10 The seven works of each structure have been generated from the following work groups: Metronome Light, Air Sampler, Box Set, From Ear to Ear, Anagram, Sound Stanchion, and Ear Wiggler.

11 Specifically, from Stecklow's 2018 solo show Staging Grounds at M+B in Los Angeles, Ditto at Sweetwater in Berlin from 2019, and the 2019 group show Transmissions at Vin Vin in Vienna.

12 An exact timeline for each object is impossible to reconstruct, however.

13 Lucy Chinen, press release for Jesse Stecklow. Ditto, Sweetwater, Berlin, April 27–June 22, 2019, n.p.

14 Stecklow, concept (see note 9).