

## Welcome to the “synapse filling station”

Opening talk by Vitus Weh for the exhibition by Nikolaus Gansterer

At Galerie 5020 Salzburg, on November 12, 2003

In case you don't know exactly what a “synapse filling station” is, basically, every good art exhibition, that is, every one that stimulates thought and communication, is a “synapse filling station.” Synapses are those incredibly small connection points in the brain through which our thought process are carried out. And when art exhibitions are good, then a true flood of transmitters rush across these bridgeheads of perception. To that extent, I hope that this exhibition by Nikolaus Gansterer artistically recharges your personal batteries, fills your transmitter reserves, and truly puts to the test, your synapses' potential for action.

Along with this generally applicable meaning, “synapse filling station” also has an intentionally technoid, alienating effect. The title thus aptly prepares us for what is seen concretely in the exhibition: altogether rather strange-looking things. There are two Styrofoam boxes with batteries under them, a plateau landscape with social constellations of little figures as well as an entire wall with sensitively spanned rubber bands and match heads.

The situation on location looks more like an abandoned laboratory than a conventional art exhibition. Also the drawings on the wall, with their primness and black-and-white aesthetics, are more reminiscent of scientific illustrations. In their refinement and captions, they fluctuate between sociological maps, tables with test readings, and technical construction drawings.

Of course, Nikolaus Gansterer's installations and drawings are more associative than scientifically rigid and exact, more ironic than earnest. But mainly, they are exemplary rather than aiming at an assessable result. The models that Gansterer provides us with here allow a march through the currently valid scientific view of the world. And it looks far less colorful and juicy than expressive painting; instead, “thin” and “translucent.”

This “diagrammatic” view of the world is, essentially, an early nineteenth-century discovery. Already back then, the tangibility of things was beginning to steadily wane: the closer one looked at them, analytically, the more things began to disappear, substantively. The neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer paradigmatically described this discovery in 1910 in his book *Substance and Function*. His theory: “All of our knowledge, as perfect as it may be in and of itself, never offers us the objects themselves, but instead, only signs of them and their reciprocal relationships.”

Cassirer's philosophical treatise reacted at the time to the latest thoughts in the natural sciences. The experimental physicist Hermann von Helmholtz had already formulated the new school of thought in 1890, as follows: “Every characteristic or quality of a thing is, in reality, no more than the ability of the same to have certain effects on other things ... should what we call characteristic always signify a relationship between two things, then such an effect can naturally never depend on the nature of the one agent alone, but instead, exist, if at all, only in relation to, and dependent on the nature of a second, which is acted upon.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus from a scientific perspective, realities dissolved into relational and vector systems of their in-between spaces. Everything suddenly became mere “function.” While the common impression of objects still seemed uncomplicated and substantial, for the natural scientific experience—and the same applies since then to philosophy, psychology, sociology, linguistics — relationship superseded identity. Or to use Nikolaus Gansterer’s term: the brain was superseded by the synapse filling station.

- 1 Hermann von Helmholtz, *Die neueren Fortschritte in der Theorie des Sehens*. Braunschweig 1896 (fourth edition), p. 589.