Letting the World Pass By: The View On The Platform
An essay on the work of Steve Johnson by Karl Baker

> Metaphora circulates in the city; it conveys us like its inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits. We are, in a certain way, metaphorically of course, the content and the tenor of this vehicle: passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor.
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> Derrida, 'The Retrait of Metaphor' in The Derrida Reader, Writing Performance 1998 p 102

First, let us begin by prescribing a context; those words and expressions that surround any subject which, if not harnessed, and marshalled into subordinate relation, threaten to speak despite our protestations. Our context, whilst in no way forming an origin, is a beginning that, from the outset, I would like to place within parentheses. As though the context, which I confess now, is art historical, is an interruption (but not a break) from the temporal flow of narrativity running through the work of Steve Johnson.

This interruption, though forceful (for it's to do with the materiality of sculpture, duration, and the frozen aporia at the core of presence) should only briefly construct an art historical frame through which to regard this new set of work, shown here under the title 'Die Welt vorbeiziehen lassen'.

But, like *the meaning* of the sculptural work itself, this frame, however important, should not remain fixed, for our context does not necessarily offer hermeneutic possibility. The context which follows is merely an aside; an aside pushing against a trope; the meaning of the work, to my mind at least, can ultimately be found in the similarly *tropic movements of metaphor, withdrawing from reality*. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Strange, perhaps, to begin with an aside, even stranger to begin with one that may not help interpretation, but the true value of this most enigmatic work, in a sense, the heart of the matter, appears too far away at this point, too distantly withdrawn and clouded in what Bergson called the 'virtual' experience of time, to launch the sagittal trajectory of art criticism with any degree of accuracy. And so, to get closer to a perception of the work, we will need a frame, an optic to look through, which in my own narrative is situated within the linguistic supplement of the parentheses.

It is no coincidence that the display schema of these new works, and of those that preceded them, resemble the box like containers of Donald Judd. Fixed to the wall, uniform in material and aesthetic, the genealogy of Johnson's work can be traced to debates that have possessed sculptural practice since the time of Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'. Perhaps by now, the explicit reference to Judd is mostly erased, or, perhaps, more appropriately, built upon; visible only through squinted eye, or carbon black test. But the palimpsest remains, and I wish to bring the penumbra of Fried's critique back into focus, not necessarily to rehearse old arguments, but to open out onto the value of narrative temporality in Johnson's work which, although contingent, chronicles the transient critical conditions his sculptures knowingly brush against.

First published in Artforum in 1967, Michael Fried's excoriating (although now it appears more playful) criticism of the Minimalist project began with an attack on Minimalism's consanguinity with literalist art. Literalism performed, as he saw it, the ideological *positioning* of an art intent on independence from traditional modernist aesthetics; literalism

was motivated and, as Fried was reading through Adorno and Greenberg, too committed. Being neither 'this nor that', Fried reckoned that Minimalism's break with pictorial illusion (still present at the time in pop art), and the shift away from the silent imaginings of the modernist painter, was born of negation and motivated by reservation.

'Judd', he said, 'seemed to think of (minimalism's) *Specific Objects* as something other than sculpture'[1]. In Judd's terms this would mean specificity organised around the principles of phenomenology in which the minimalist object *was something in the world*, it did not depict or represent. This something, however, could not be understood in terms of art but neither could it be described, at least not fully, by the virtues of stand-alone phenomenological reduction (epoché). No discourse, no description, no materialism (dialectical or otherwise) could readily present itself to 'Specific Objects' with any degree of certainty.

Today, of course, after Foucault and Lyotard, one could counter that this negative dialectic could easily be subsumed within master discourses, one of which being art history. It can, and has been, of that there is little doubt, even if present-day notions of art history continually readdress the tenets of its own orthodoxy. But Fried's critique was important because it was structured on the principle that true experience, of the art object and indeed life itself, could never be presented, or made real, by inauthentic means. 'Objecthood', which was Fried's catch-all pejorative for minimalism, could not be projected or 'hypostatized' without recourse to the inauthentic, and radically antithetical, art-form known as theatre.

Judd's objects, he said, were no more than 'props', to be articulated by players, like in every common theatrical simulacrum. In this argument, props functioned like ciphers in the service of a story, or, as in Brechtian theatre, props played their part in the symbolic dissemination of message. Theatrical sensibilities, thought Fried, were the negation of art, partly because they 'concerned the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters the work' and minimalist sculpture, specifically, is an experience of an 'object *within* a situation', like theatre. Fried, like other modernists of the time, believed that whatever could be experienced from art was located, emphatically, *within* the work itself, projected from a singular, atemporal presence.

Of course, what began as a condemnatory critique of 'Objecthood', back in 1967, has since been turned inside-out, made fluid and absorbed into the mainstay of ideas pertaining both to performative artistic strategies and relational aesthetics. The theatrical sensibility is now embraced by artists aware of the unintended significance of Fried's critique where objects *are* perceived within 'an entire situation'; an entire situation which includes a beholders', or more appropriately, a perceptors' *body*, formed in relation to a subjective and ethical self, peering through their own discrete parallax perception. This relational dynamic shifts the focus of perception away from artworks suspended in time, as per the modernist object, towards artworks perceived, and actuated, temporally.

Together with the inclusion of a corporeal facticity (a body) *and* a performing subjectivity experiencing artworks within space and *over time,* the 'experience' of sculpture is irreducibly theatrical, not because of effect or mimetic trickery, but because it is durational. Time (comprehended as a progression) passes, as everybody knows, but it requires *somebody* to perceive its movement. And perception, following Bergson, is a matter of intuition.

Before we get to the specific objectivity of Steve Johnson's recent sculpture, and before we can close the brackets on our contextual parentheses, it is important to note that this paradigmatic shift in the perception of sculptures' theatricality is one that Johnson is exquisitely aware. Although critical of the explicit theatricality of, say, Juan Muñoz (whose sculpture, Johnson suggests, is characterised by a *supplementary need* for dramaturgic *effect*) Johnson's own objects share an imperative with theatrical works concerned with staging reality. But it is because the palimpsest of mimimalism's specific objectify is still written,

discernible on the carcass of the sculptures *form*, that Johnson's sculptures *withdraw* from a fully expanded, sociologically determined, theatrical practice.

This withdrawal, itself a metaphorical movement, has a secondary metaphorical meaning, which I will come to, but, unlike with Muñoz, Johnson's withdrawal from fully articulate performativity, makes apparent the need to distance the viewing perspective away from the arche-theatrical image 'play', ordinarily screened through proscenium arch.

Johnson's objects at Domobaal Gallery: 'Doppelverein' (2008), 'Imbissbude' (2008) 'Schrumpfende Städte' (2008), and 'A.M.' (2006) are complex visual reflections of real events and real places taken from his travels in Germany, mostly in Berlin. These events, however, although carrying narrative intensity, and anecdotal quirk, do not necessarily form a geometry of representation. For us all, the imaginary recollection of images (remembering) does not necessarily represent things *as* they actually are; we recall objects from the world *as* we experienced them, *as* we remember them. This ontological distinction is correlative with the phenomenological notion of *a world seen-from-itself*. And although remembering is shaped by the experience of the real, this experience is not brought back into being, either materially or objectively, without the difficult reorganisation of spatial relativity and narrative contingency, no matter how eidetic our powers of recall. Our recollections are formed by a perception of what we *must* have remembered. Operating without dramaturgical supplement, remembering becomes theatrical, once parallax perceptions are set in motion, and Johnson's objects are testimonies to theatrical occurrences of indeterminate duration which attempt to cast, in perspective, a world *seen-from-itself*.

> Our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it, which we have had or could have. For example, I see the next-door house from a certain angle, but it would be seen differently from the inside, or again from an aeroplane: the house is none of these appearances: it is, as Leibnitz said, a geometrized projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere. Maurice Merleau-Ponty The Phenomenology of Perception p 78.

Looking up, we chance upon the sight of a strangely familiar architecture. Quarried from the language of the model maker, if not the sentiment, highly detailed 'reconstructions' of real and part-imagined places are presented as though cut-out from the rest of the world. Anchored to the wall, temporarily halting the 'islands' from floating in an indeterminate space, we (as bodies) are immediately made aware that perspective and scale have shifting imbalances. Susan Stewart, in her marvellous book, 'On Longing', muses on the various metaphors we use to describe experience. One such metaphor is the miniature, of which she says,

> 'the field of representation in the depiction of the miniature is set up by means of a method of using either implicit or explicit simile. Each fictive sign is aligned to a sign from the physical world in a gesture which makes the fictive sign both remarkable and realistic'.

Similarly, the model maker creates 'fictive signs', reorganising what Merleau-Ponty called the 'modality of an object's movement'; that is, the object's own inherent *lack* of perspective. In order to make the model more realistic than the reality on which it is based, the model maker reduces scale to the point where an object's 'perspectives' (plural), its multiplicity, can be controlled. The ontology of the object, its 'matter of factness', is still disputed, but the inherent immateriality, captured only by the modality of movement, is made more real through miniature facsimile. Johnson's own similes, implicit and explicit, express remembered places as though they *were* models, and the ontic presence of the sculptures' 'objectivity' is to be understood in this way.

Skilfully allowing for comparisons with architectural maquettes, the reverie of utopian imagining is distinct from that of the architects' vision, however, because it is resolutely singular and *not* plural, at least in the first instance. These imaginings, made material, are Johnson's alone, because he was alone when he imagined them, and the 'models' do not reflect a desire to shape the future, plan community, syntactically organise space, or build *anything*.

These reflections, when brought back into the world, are suggestive of verisimilitude and, even though three dimensional (and therefore material), their kinship with the image, as a primary recollection of experience, is not a casual relation. They are images; but they are images culled from a world which, once brought back onto a scopological plane, withdraw into dense and material imaginings.

But it must be stressed that this imagining is not some sort of paean to existential 'angst', however closely the experiential reality resembles a formal portrayal of Heidegger's *Dasein*, or *being-there,* rising to the gloriously Teutonic *being-towards-death*, to which we will have recourse to return. For Johnson's sculptural 'models' display a theatrical sleight-of-hand which operates in a twofold manner. The model precedes the reality, as in Baudrillard's simulacra, but the durational occurrence of the events (drawn from reality), coupled with the manipulation of modal movement, 'picture' the impossibility of representation, and become plural because they make 'alterity' present through a parallax perception that travels.

It should also be understood that Johnson's 'models' have more in common with the extraordinary doublings we see in dollhouses than that of the architectural maquette. Not least because they are made, in determinedly singular fashion, by hand. Susan Stewart says, of the inanimate toy, that it 'repeats the still life's theme of arrested life, the life of the tableau' but once made animate, the toy ceases to be a tableau, occupying, instead, the realm of the daydream which runs parallel with the quotidianna of everyday life. The toy world, she says, is 'miniaturised and giganticised in such a way as to test material and meaning' and the dollhouse 'represents the tension between two modes of interiority'. The psychology of inwardness, and the house within a house, so to speak.

Johnson is aware of the interiority of the 'model as dollhouse' and emphatically, within his own models, closes off any possibility of entering into the recesses. They are not toys, if one needed reminding. Not only are his tableau 'arrested life' in the sense Stewart projected onto the still life, but also arrested and detained, is the possibility of a miniaturised 'poetics of space'. These works are imaginings in transit, captured, perhaps in reverie, but always on the move, directed towards surface. His works cannot be animated and do not offer the possibility of child's play. Any daydreaming entity wishing to enter the environs held within the interior of his 'models' will be soberly disappointed, because the sculpture represents a world of exteriority. Imagined here is the world from without, you cannot gain access. Any details visible, and there are exquisite details, are categorically modelled as surface exteriors.

That said, the simile of the dollhouse should stand, if only now by negation. Symbolically, Stewart profiles 'wealth and nostalgia' important motifs of the dollhouse, as though these two temporal conditions alone can control time and space. Johnson, aligning himself with the anonymous artisanal maker of the dollhouse, and not the wealthy commissioner, if you will, exposes, in his doublings, the interiority of the 'model' to the forces of durational perception unfettered by cosy, bourgeois interiority. Even if it is the cosy interiority *of this nature* which nurtures and breeds the unhomely, or more correctly Freudian, *unheimlich* presence of the double.

The work entitled 'Doppelverein' (2008) slowly reveals itself by first analysing the title. A composite neologism, nonexistent in German, doppelverein can be translated as 'double-association' or, more loosely, 'double-club'. The work is based on a likeness taken from a

particular, though utilitarian, building in Treptower Park, Berlin, which houses a 'gartenverein' or garden-association. Specific to Germany, gartenverein are voluntary organisations that promote self-sufficient, small-scale vegetable cultivation and horticulture, akin to allotment gardening in the UK. The building, in Treptower Park, from which 'Doppelverein' takes its form, is the allotment clubhouse. Metaphors of 'cultivation', housed in the ordered environs of shared epistemologies, civilising processes, and the entropic birth-rebirth of the life cycle are corralled by virtue of the activities that may take place in such a building.

Projecting myself up on the platform for a moment, my own vertigo notwithstanding, I try and imagine the view from 'Doppelverein'. Berlin and Treptower Park have vanished, the world according to phenomenological reduction has been bracketed, and all pleasurable city park activity is suspended. As I walk gingerly along the vertiginous edges of what is left of the world, I notice that Doppelverein has erected a mean looking picket fence, a flag has been unfurled atop its roof, not celebrated in Germany in the latter half of the twentieth century, and 'someone' has tagged the pristine door that marks the entrance to the club's threshold. The graffiti is illegible, as usual, but someone has been there, marking their alienation or belonging.

This sense of belonging marked by a tag, often a name or street moniker, is territorial and signatory. And the flag, any flag, symbolic of national unity, (amongst other less benevolent signifieds) is again, a territorial signification of presence. In 'The Battle Of Proper Names', 1967, Jacques Derrida annihilates the notion of self presence contained in the proper name, revealing the illusion behind what they no longer signify. The transparency of difference; in the chatter of nomenclature, amongst the noise of other people's names. Difference; *differing* and *deferring*, suspending, indefinitely, the notion of belonging.

> 'It is because the proper name has never been (as the unique appellation reserved for the presence of the unique being) anything but the original myth of a transparent legibility of the present under obliteration…The proper name retains the traces of difference…and when the time comes, it can be transgressed, that is restored to obliteration and the non-self-sameness at the origin'.[2]

Like Jonathan Swift's Gulliver, every traveller must momentarily turn and face the 'other' in themselves. It doesn't last long, for most, as we begin to claw back our self identities, as quotidian realities re-establish themselves, or new ones are found to replace those left at home. Susan Stewart, rapping on Gulliver's trip to Lilliput, draws attention to our hero's descriptions of Lilliputian scale. Speaking through the extraordinary prose of Swift's pen, Gulliver says: 'Nature hath adapted the eyes of the Lilliputians to all Objects proper for their view: They see with great Exactness, but at no great distance.' And the reverie of scale continues, in the descriptions of birds, no bigger than flies, invisible needles threaded with invisible silk, seven feet trees, four inch horses, and sheep, no more than an inch and a half. Reduction follows reduction, in a miniaturised continuum of arrested still life, in infinite detail. 'The miniature does not attach itself to lived historical time', explains Stewart, '…the metaphoric world of the miniature makes everyday life absolutely anterior and exterior to itself. The reduction in scale, which the miniature presents, skews the time and space relations of the everyday world'[3]

And so with 'Schrumpfende Städte' (2008), (Shrinking City) and the melancholy figure stranded, waiting, perhaps forever, at the bus stop, reflecting on the anterior 'before-ness' of the *world-seen-from-itself*. However, abstract notions, according to Derrida, always mask a 'sensory figure'. And the history of metaphysical language, and phenomenological epoché, must always erase the sensory figure in the 'usure of its effigy'[4]. The word itself is not

pronounced, says Derrida, but one may decipher the double import of 'usure': erasure by rubbing, exhaustion and a crumbling away. This figure, up high on the floating platform, is a sensory effigy, modelled on the human *being (Dasein)*, erased in the process of metaphysical duration. 'He' is not there, and yet he 'speaks'. This last, prosopopeia, (a figure of speech in which an imaginary person is represented as speaking) is a rhetorical mouthing of the action of metaphor.

> The exposition of Dasein's boundedness towards death and,
> therefore, to freedom marks the apex of Heidegger's ontological
> anthropology, of the attempt to ground the nature of being in that
> of man, and man's everyday existence in this world.[5]

Gulliver, of course, experienced various changes in scale whilst travelling. Each manifestation a mirrored image, reflecting and radiating, the alterity in himself. And when his travels take him to that 'floating island in the sky', manoeuvrable by magnetic levitation, called 'Laputa', an image difficult not to equate with Johnson's own image-schema, Gulliver is transfixed by the unrecognisable language spoken by inhabitants that cannot communicate unless first 'flapped' by servants with a stick. The 'flapping', you may remember, acts like a kind of bell, breaking the reverie of the inhabitants' preoccupied with 'important thoughts'. Without such 'flapping' Laputians could not communicate with 'others' because their heads were filled with geometry, mathematics, music and reason, and all other enlightened abstractions. Swift's satire was, of course, directed at 'the Age of Reason' and the violent foreign policy of early eighteenth century England. Johnson's own satire is fixed upon the presence of the quotidian. As though, no matter how much of the world is 'deleted', and no matter how much of the world is reduced in the poetic imaginings of the phenomenologist, certain of its characteristics will always re-establish, once the reverie is broken and the everyday comes back into view. Johnson's 'theatre of being', displayed on floating platforms, played out in the stillness of imagining, is metaphorical, and only then, because the theatre of being can be nothing else.

> At least, I can only stop this floating vehicle, which is here my discourse,
> which would still be the best means of abandoning it to its most
> unforeseeable drifting. The drama, for this is a drama, is that even if I had
> decided to no longer speak metaphorically about metaphor, I would not
> achieve it; it would continue to go on without me in order to make me speak,
> to ventriloquize me, metaphorize me.[6]

In 'The Retreat of Metaphor' Derrida characterises Heidegger's *Dasein*, revolving around the question 'what is the being (das Sein) which renders possible all being (das Seiende)?' as a concept caught in the linguistic tautology of metaphor. For Derrida, there is nothing outside of metaphor, other than its capacity to make difference visible via its 'durational' movement between one 'idea' and another. The phenomenological 'imaging' of a world-*seen-from-itself* cannot be described, or performed, without recourse to metaphorical driftings. Metaphor is temporal, therefore; it drifts because it is always in the process of substituting one meaning for another in an endless stream of shifting signification. Heidegger's *Dasein*, ultimately 'residing' in *being-towards-death,* cannot escape its own metaphorical status. Being, dwelling now in metaphor, *withdraws,* as one missed metaphor drifts passed another, figuratively incapable of capturing *Being-towards-being-towards-death*. Both 'figures' are equally inaccessible. Here, the action of representation consists in bringing one of these two forms of metaphorical invisibility into the place of the other, in an 'unstable superimposition' – and in rendering them both, at the same moment, at the other extremity of the perspectival drama.

Johnson's sculptures dramatise what is essentially doubly invisible, his objects *withdraw* because they are metaphorical.

Furthermore, and at the risk of some kind of performative word play, sub-Derrida, the notion of *withdrawing* can be cast over the relationship between Johnson's sculpture and his works on paper. Johnson's two dimensional works form a bridge between recalled experience, formed in the imagination, and the apostatised immateriality of his sculpture. Like the phenomenological imperative: *seeing-with-the-world* opposing *looking-at-the-world,* these watercolour images depict a sensibility that conjures the facticity of the world captured as a *with-drawing.* The immateriality of his sculpture occurs simultaneously, and is therefore commensurate, *with drawing.* Withdrawing from view, in a dramatic perspectival distancing, as sure as the world disappears beneath our feet.

'Imbissbude' (2008) would need to be translated as 'snack bar'. Again, in the silent imaginings of this theatrical scene, the drama is uncertain. What is happening has, either, already taken place or is yet to unfold. All The works picture a mental landscape much more than a physical one. Johnson says that he is 'trying to expose nature's indifference underfoot. People pass over these sites', he discloses, 'literally with their boots, indifferent to the surfaces they walk upon.' They are not direct copies of places that exist, not intrinsically, at least, but he is drawn to details, which can be seen from the superficial certainty of the surface. The quotidian trans-actions, that we know must occur in these familiar settings, are arrested and deferred, by a form of theatrical closure. Clearly they are not homes, in the strictest sense, nobody lives in any of these places, particularly not snack bars, but they are dwellings, however temporarily the body may reside there.

> 'All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home…the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter.' [7]

By this I do not wish to suggest that Johnson's metaphors represent some kind of longing for home, or, indeed, that home is somehow embedded in Johnson's metaphors of being. These metaphors cannot be paraphrased, not in a singular sense. It is to the temporal, durational quality, *of* metaphor, rather than any representation *by* metaphor that forges *a posteriori* similarity with the world, up high on the platforms of Johnson's image-schemas. The unstable drifting and withdrawal at the heart of Derrida's conception of metaphor exposes what I have called the frozen aporia at the core of presence. Johnson's sculpture, and his drawing, exposes the impossibility of representing the world at all, without recourse to imaginings that promise only withdrawal from any likeness that can be rendered through modelling.

Jacques Rancière in '*The Politics of Aesthetics'* declares three ways in which the aesthetic arts commune with the political: 'the surface of depicted signs, the split reality of the theatre (and) the rhythm of the dancing chorus'. These forms, he says, are definitive expressions of how art, irrespective of an artists' imperative or 'guiding intention', is manifestly political.

With Johnson, the aesthetic 'politicity' of his work is readable through the contrived reality of the sculptures' form: its theatricality. To follow Rancière's terminology, the contrivance, through the split reality of the theatre, is where Johnson's games of proximity and distance are played out on the staged reality of the vista. But it has an ironic turn. By 'turning away' from his 'mother tongue', and retaining German titles for the works he has 'brought home', Johnson, perhaps with a knowing futility, for it is always futile, faces the *other* in himself. And with a tropic turn, the fiction of himself, other than an already erased sensory figure, is revealed, and cast adrift, in the strange reality of commonplace alterity, fixed in another's language. Mieke Bal:

At the heart of an aesthetic that 'works' is a break between these two pairs of opposites (visibility and formlessness): formlessness does not entail invisibility; in other words, the choice is not to see either fully shaped forms or to see nothing, but to 'train' (Singer's term) a 'visual habitué' (Silverman's term) that enables us to learn to see what, by lack of recognizable form, seems invisible. This learning process is itself translation – a translation we are all involved in, in the mobile contemporary world.

'This new work develops my sculptural obsession with 'deep-time' (time concretised through the stratification of compressed civilisations underfoot) and its juxtaposition with our contemporary surfaces'. Johnson's imagining of 'deep time' is clearly a reference to that order of time known to geologists and geophysicists: vast, (almost) unimaginable duration, beyond history and without reference to human conceptions of scale.

The reference to compressed civilisations acknowledges what Kafka called a 'continual state of history', history occurring in the present, and the auratic aesthetic Benjamin thought destroyed by reproduction. And yet, with the inclusion of the adjective 'deep', the notion of 'beyond' here is expressed with a spatial and durative qualifier. Unimaginable duration, in a sense, is wrapped around a qualitative and quantative metaphor, which engages with the ethics of Levinas's 'il y a'[8] or 'there is' (existence *without* Existents). An ethics of humility, in the face of the absolute terror we feel when contemplating a world *without* human witness.

The palimpsest of 'specific objectivity', compressed in the 'unyielding', uncompromising matter beneath the viewing platforms, moves Johnson's work towards a second order theatricality. With art historical references and an imaginary take on phenomenology, 'Die Welt Vorbeiziehen Lassen', Johnson says, 'juxtaposes deep-time with buildings suggesting escape, retreat, and revelry. The new sculptures', he continues, 'belong to the *vanitas* tradition, in the sense that they are contemplations on the transience and uncertainty of life. They do not carry a moral message; there is no redemption'.

'Die Welt Vorbeiziehen Lassen' was conceived under the working title 'the Architecture of Pleasure', and the metaphorical drift floats further into peril by the anchoring of the work to irony. According to Paul de Man,[9] definitional language fails irony (but not necessarily the impulse that drives it). Using Northrop Frye's idea that irony represents a pattern of words that becomes a trope in a 'turn away' from direct meaning, de Man prepares the ground for the most ironic of meditations, namely, defining irony. The trope (or tropic movement) does not, in itself, define irony but conditions a secondary problem- how do you know irony is present? Or, how do you know someone was not pretending to be ironic, as with Johnson, when he says he wishes to expose nature's indifference underfoot? The spirit of irony is contained in both conditions (as a turn away from meaning) but spirit is not, linguistically speaking, a definition. Linguistically, again according to de Man, definition is related to Schlegel's 'On Incomprehensibility' or 'On the Impossibility of Understanding' where the trope signifies a potential annihilation of meaning as it continues to turn away from meaning. To want a concrete definition is to wish to stabilise irony and unhinge the satirical impulse, a proposition that in irony, linguistically, never ends. Johnson's meditations on the condition of *being-there-towards-death-in-miniature* rolls onto this ironic, satirising impulse.

De Man says Irony can be opened up to three legitimate but problematic conditions. He goes on: You can reduce irony to a mere aesthetic practise or artistic device (or absorb it into a general theory of aesthetics as free play) but in this, satire is diffused (and as a trope this can never be, once the satire finds its target or once the turn away from meaning takes place) You can reduce it to a 'dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure'. And in this Johnson ironically ponders the notion of self from the 'other side', as a kind of auto critique from *without*. You can reduce irony (although it is an immense reduction) to a dialectics of history. That is, it

always proposes the pattern of the dialectic even if not directly proposing the condition common to a synthesis forged from an antagonistic antithesis. Irony is not itself antagonistic, it is tropic.

De Man says 'from the moment language can thus posit the self, it can also, and it has to, posit the opposite', the negation of the self.

Irony is the effect of positing truth-values and the negative imprint of those values (and this is not a judgment) turns away from meaning- endlessly. This concept is further complicated by the doctrine of the sign where language does not, in fact, have any of the properties we associate with stable meaning. Thetic (positive statements) and judgements abound, as in, 'man is free'. But according to de Man 'freedom', like Giorgio Agamben's Bare Life, is asymptotic, and thus can never be truly reached.

Infinity therefore, as with Johnson's notion of 'deep time', is a concept that is in language. 'Deep' and 'time' are metaphors, durational, and without end, and the allegorical nature of described experience, is equally asymptotic or metaphorical. Infinity is at play in every linguistic occurrence but irony pulls it to the surface in a turn away from meaning that can never be reached in the first place. This is not simply an aesthetic game but a linguistic reality. Johnson is fully aware that he is trapped in this linguistic reality, and his sculptures represent the ironic imaginings of an escape from this permanent, unceasing condition. And yet the world can still be gazed upon, as though it truly is indifferent. De man reminds us of Lawrence Sterne and his continual use of parabasis in Tristram Shandy, that is, narrative disruption (often by the author, see the screen shattering look to camera by Oliver Hardy pulling the audience into narrative complicity) or Johnson's silent prosopopeia spoken by the erased figure at the bus stop.

Traditional rhetoric is structured on this theatrical parabasis and 'Letting the World Pass By' acts as a continual reminder of the incompletion at stake in the exhibition's own rhetoric. (De Man reckons Schlegel considered Irony 'permanent parabasis' and is equal to continual 'anacoluthon' defined as 'a break in the syntactical expectations of (narrative) pattern' Both anacoluthon and parabasis can (and should) occur at any given moment, the interruption and disruption is a condition of the rhetorical nature of language. Tropes define what is missing in meaning and are therefore allegorical; they say what cannot be said any other way, as with metaphor. De Man finally comes to his ironic conclusion that Irony is 'the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes', and is in itself, the story of metaphor.

And who, finally, is the permanent parabasis, distorting and discontinuing the narrative efficacy of the silent imaginings of Steve Johnson, aimed at? We, of course, situated in the truly theatrical ranks of the Chorus, looking up at a floating world, passing by indifferently.

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Notes

[1] Fried, Michael (1992) 'Art and Objecthood' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* p. 823. Blackwell publishers

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