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Max Vollmer: *Die Bücherstube des Dr. R.M.V. / The Cabinet of Dr. R.M.V.*

Human reason is to be understood only in connection with human non-reason.  
... a human being's bonds with his generation and his society are of his essence; we must therefore know what these bonds really mean if we want to know the essence of man.

*Martin Buber*

Two free-standing bookshelves, desks with computers, a chaise-longue and reading lamps make up this small private (public?) library. It is watched over by an attendant (a library assistant (?), Buchhändler(in) (??)) Several small collages in box frames on the walls and a coffee table with a sculpture that looks like a miniature mountain complete the inventory. 'Die Bücherstube' had its first showing in the foyer of the School of Fine Art at the University of Leeds the last week in April. With ca. 500 books the work is still in its infancy; it will grow to several thousand volumes in the coming years.

Max Vollmer has previously constructed temporary site-specific installations with books: The last one in the Thirsk Old Courthouse Chamber with its original late 19<sup>th</sup> Century architecture. Here he build cells, towers and passage-ways from thousands of books that challenged visitors to crawl into or through them or to re-live their adolescence hiding away with a book. (The cells had reading lamps installed).

Vollmer, now in his early 60s, is of German descent but spent half his life in Britain. He had been a geochemist (for many years based at Leeds University) involved in research on questions of the history of the Earth but had turned 10 years ago to sculpture. So the artist spans national cultures as well as art and science. Both are reflected in his new work.

Browsing titles and authors the writer confesses at being confused: at first glance no order is discernable apart from a row of red or green books or another that have lost their spine. I find a volume of Ibsen's collected plays and then discover another volume clearly of the same edition on another shelf in different company. Labels seem to give some help: 'Previous owner: A – D', 'smell' ... And more darkly: 'protagonist imprisoned', '- murdered', '- suicide'. It is not the help I expect. But then: I have never been tempted before to explore books by their smell.

Turning to the computer screen you see a kind of book again with numbered pages. Flicking through them you discover a catalogue that lists the usual details: title, pages, publisher etc. Other details are less familiar from book catalogues: height, weight, colour of Kapitalband (this turns out to be called in English a 'headband' and few English books are adorned with it) and many others.

As the catalogue is computerised you can easily search the listed features, for example find all books published in 1960, or those that are 30mm thick, or, at the click of the mouse-button, list all 'books for readers whom booksellers try to fool' but are then left to find out for yourself just how booksellers try to fool the reader. Basic information can be found: an author's year of birth and death, mode of death (accidental, murdered ...) and links to internet sites to follow up. But also more unusual information: Did you know for

example, that there are national differences in the density of books? This may tell you something about paper quality and the status attached to books.

Following one lead, then another and another coming back to familiar places on the screen, looking up books on the shelves, getting lost in the pages: while experiencing the pleasure of discoveries you are getting lost in a labyrinth. I am reminded of Borges (whose books can be found on the shelves) and perhaps it is no accident that one class is labelled *time* (more of *time* later), neither perhaps that a previous work of Vollmer had been a maze constructed from books.

Form is of little importance: This work grows and spreads like dough or an oversized amoeba. But relations and the act of relating (*sich beziehen* / *sich hinwenden*) are important. Take for example classification: how much is a book's assignment to a class governed by chance? How spurious (*zufällig*) or provisional is it?

A central theme of this work may be the web of relationships: the dialectic between authors/writers – publishers – buyers – readers – the artist – the visitor/viewer and its history and presence in the traces of physical marks – inserted cuttings, stamps, inscriptions etc – that are left and recorded and may now be followed.

Among the relations that are explored are those between art and science. In the archetypal example, Leonardo's anatomical drawings, these two aspects constitute two separate layers – a scientific and aesthetic layer - that never quite meet but are like the two sides of a coin: The viewer switches between one and the other. In the *Bücherstube* art and science are inseparably intertwined. The work may be playfully engaged with but its underlying structure – classification – is a scientific concept and an enquiring mind can gain knowledge about the sociology of book production ( for example, how has book design and manufacture changed over the last century in England and Germany?) The 'miniature mountain' is the rendering in a physical and aesthetic form of the relation between classes that employs a scientific mapping method. No doubt, posing the question of art and science is a legacy of the artist's own experience. Are there any indications that the *Bücherstube* may then be regarded as a kind of self-portrait?

I am told that these books are selected and reflect Vollmer's range of interests. But a self-portrait would need to go beyond this. A possible sign is the theme of exile running as a *Leitmotiv* through this work. *Exile* was the title of one of Vollmer's early book installations. The theme is taken up here again in a different form.

Half the books are in German half in English; the title *Die Bücherstube* / *The Cabinet* is bilingual and 'bilingual' is the name of one of the classes under which books are classified and shelved. The books in German (the majority from his parents' library) span 20<sup>th</sup> Century German cultural history including its dark and violent side. As the artist's life bridges German – English culture so does this work.

Being in-between cultures is a form of homelessness: although familiar with both one is not at home in either. But it also heightens awareness: details will stand out clearly which would blur with growing familiarity and without the contrast provided by another culture; differences of perception, of expression, of ways of imagining are tied to language and even so closely related languages as English and German often lack precise one-to-one correspondence between words. Language is embedded in – and in turn acts upon – non-verbal cultural substrata, the dialectic between language and the living and changing culture that is never precisely mirrored even between related cultures. The theme of *mapping* (*Abbild/Zeichen*) is broached through classes labelled 'with map' and 'bilingual'.

From inscriptions Vollmer discovers and re-assembles thoughts and ideas that had pre-occupied his parents at various times in their lives. For example, as a young woman his mother used to number the her books. This now allows Vollmer to trace his mother's quite extraordinarily single-minded quest for knowledge.

*Time / Zeit* is a third theme that runs through the work (again hinted at by a class labelled '*time*'). On a straight forward level, it takes time to explore the work even without starting to read the books. On a different level, all the books show signs of aging. Like persons, some may age gracefully others are ravaged by time. To me a deep melancholy pervades the work. Books, stories, writers are resurrected here that already slowly sink into obscurity. Many books have been rescued from being dumped. These books here may survive a little longer but will ultimately share the fate of most their authors who have laboured a lifetime over them. No longer read, withdrawn, discarded, mutilated they hang on to a precarious existence.

Undecidedness:

1. Art or no art?  
visitors to the space (mainly students) took Die Bücherstube as Art Library extension & the artist as a librarian
2. neither included nor excluded:  
Books included in the database may or may not be physically present
  - some are locked up in the special collection
  - some are in another library
  - some may be lent or stolen
  - some may have never existed