


Christoph fink : objective information and subjective experience

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“Touch time, touch space, touch experience...and we find ourselves surprised by the indescribable, the untouchable. A brief and intense moment of awareness.”

 Atlas of Movements #59–#63 by Christoph Fink

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Presentation

Christoph Fink is a Belgian artist born in 1963. He has had numerous exhibitions and participated in internationally-renown biennials, like that of Venice. He has also authored a wide variety of performances and publications. His work mainly revolves around movement and travel. He questions people's relationship to their environment and explores the links between space and time using novel approaches that combine varied methods, sources and data with rigor and thoroughness that are rarely observed in the arts and are reminiscent of scientific approaches.


Fink's approach is disconcerting because it is contrary to that of many other artists: it uses the most objective reality possible as a medium to provide access to imaginaries and subjective experiences of mobility. In his approach – presented in atlas form - he proposes a set of descriptions of what he calls movements, which he dissects in the finest detail in all their forms, to show them in the most realistic way possible, using maps, charts, calculations, photos, sculptures, sounds and detailed, timed descriptions broken down into

multiple stages. These movements are actually walks – which he mentions incidentally – that recall peregrinations, where origin and destination are unimportant, leaving ample room for the activities that take place in between.

Analysis and presentation of the concepts

Objective information in service of experience

Fink's work is a virtually total attempt to objectivize movement. He describes in fine detail all of the components using a wide variety of media: cards, notes, drawings, photography, calculations, sculptures and sound. It's probably no coincidence that he chose the term "atlas" which, by definition, is intended to be a collection of representations and measures of a reality. By pushing the objective analysis of movement so far, he provides a tool to go from the reality of the atlas to the subjective experiences and imaginaries of movement with an open mind. Juggling these two readings of movement, one enters a kind of compromise between actual mobility and fiction, imaginaries, emotions and feelings. Once we have all of the data from the objective approach, all of the information relating to it and can go no further in this direction, we can more easily turn to subjectivity and give free rein to the imagination. Objective data serves as a base, a support for the experience of mobility (Urry 2006).

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The experience of mobility

For some sociologists, like John Urry, the advent of the "mobility turn" has made travel an experience in itself. From this perspective, the purpose of sociology is to analyze mobility in all its forms, and particularly the way people experience and live their mobility (Urry 2006). Sven Kesselring distinguishes between mobility in areas of transit - which are characterized by direction and linearity and where places, encounters and interactions are but fleeting moments in view of a goal - and mobility in areas of connectivity, where travel is a veritable experience and not just a time between an origin and destination (Kesselring 2006).

Proof faced with art

Observing Fink's painstaking work of data collection quickly leads us to rethink the question of the validity of scientific work. Scientific evidence reinforces theories around assumptions and tends to occur through the objectivization of data intended to explain our realities. However, the more this data tries to bring us closer to a reality and convince us that it is one, the more they suggest the idea of escaping from these shackles and imagining alternatives. But such alternatives are hardly possible in research, among experts, operators or politicians. Art grants this freedom, thus calling into question the

experts, operators or pedestrians. The game and mobility, also taking into question the validity, and even the need, for proof.


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Perceptions of mobility

In Fink's work, the qualitative value of mobility is directly perceptible and omnipresent. The descriptions associated with specific data and images are tools that bring these movements to life. The desire to take our sensory relationship to the world seriously (Sheller 2004) can be found in this approach: the smells, sounds and emotions associated with the use of various means of travel, the animals that are passed, time as a duration, even the weather — nothing is overlooked, much less forgotten.

Stages of movement

Through his work, the artist reminds us of the extent to which movement is not monolithic, but rather is a complex arrangement of stages that follow one another, fleeting instances and experiences that are linked by the dozen, combining spaces and time. It is therefore possible to break down a trip to infinity and, more importantly, to divide it into increasingly detailed categories. The atlas of movement is broken down into multiple walks, which can further be broken down into various times and activities. All of these stages taken together offer a unique way of appropriating travel time, by living it fully thanks to objective supports.

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Travel time

Travel time has gradually taken on qualitative value, the value of time, that opens up new perspectives in research, particularly by focusing on the use that is made of it in mobility (Lyons and Urry, 2005). The value of time

The disappearance of the interactive dimension of travel

What's surprising in Fink's work, however, is the apparent absence of the collective dimension of mobility. Bodies are rare, and interactions minor, the latter tending to occur between the artist and the environment he is exploring and that surrounds him, with his body as the medium. Yet, in so doing, he suggests the gradual disappearance of the interactive dimension of travel, which numerous scientific authors condemn, in favor of the dehumanization of transport and automated user services.

Man—man and movement interactions

Many travel-related inconveniences seem to be the result of the automation of traveler services, among other things. At the same time, the individuals who once served as relays (ticket punchers, station managers, conductors and others) are gradually disappearing from spaces of mobility. This gradual disappearance also reflects that of social interactions during travel (Tillous, 2009)

The eradication of technological determinism

The massive development of information and communication technologies, most often associated with the idea of novelty, has ascribed a mythical status to distance communication that is associated with mobility. This myth is not found in Fink's work, or at least not explicitly. Putting aside these technological media, Fink makes the body a medium of movement capable of communicating with its environment, the diverse urban morphologies it experiences and the modes of travel it uses. The concept of *de Bewegung* in German literature comes close to this idea of mediation between the body, movement and society in general (Klein, 2004; Alkemeyer & Brümmer 2009). This body is invisible in the image, but we very much sense its presence, and with it the motor skills of which it is capable (Thomas 2004). The eradication of technology is recurrent in the techniques used by the artist, like drawing, simple notes and images. In his work, one almost forgets the omnipresence of virtual communication (computer systems, networks and mobile telephones), which in the scientific literature seems to lend to its enchantment. In this way, Christoph Fink suggests ways to anchor ourselves in a given environment, and to inhabit space as much with our bodies as with our senses.

Mobility and technology

Technology plays a key role in the social construction of mobility (Kesselring 2005) in that it occupies an important place in daily life and mobility.

New forms of mobility allow people to paradoxically be both present and absent or, more specifically, present in their absence, and even allow for a certain kind of ubiquity, especially with ICT (Urry and Sheller 2006).

Motor skills

Motor skills has to do with our perception of our environment from a practical and sensitive standpoint, and with the body's capacity for expression. These functions allow it to develop and accumulate motor skills, which can be used to predict trajectories (even someone else's) and adapt one's route and activities.

Peregrinations and multimodality

The movements and walks in question here take the form of peregrinations and do not hierarchize modes of travel: no one mode of transport seems to be highlighted more than

another. There is a kind of neutrality of judgement – be it on foot, by bike or by plane. Instead, each allows for its own unique experience of movement and for a specific relationship between space and time, which is grasped through their unfolding.

Movement and peregrination

Movement can be directed (between and origin and one or more destinations) in a more or less precise way, but can also occur in a less intentional way in the form of peregrinations, with no real origin or destination (Kaufmann, 2011).

The link between mobility and territory

The vision Fink proposes from his body as a medium of movement is the same one he proposes for the link between mobility and territory. The territories he shows us have the peculiarity of combining very urban photographic representations with the strong presence of nature and vegetation. This link is therefore not only that of the city and mobility, but also of the built environment and the nature therein.

How the artwork influences research: artistic interdisciplinarity

Like other artists, Fink uses a wide variety of techniques, approaches and rendering methods, so that it is possible to talk about interdisciplinarity in his artistic work, a bit like in scientific approaches. With this artistic interdisciplinarity, he manages to combine the strict rigor of a scientific approach while giving free rein to mobility imaginaries. Thus does he bring subjectivity and imagination to a reality presented as objectively as possible. Such is the unique approach of the artist, who proposes that we completely reconsider our movement and our relationship to mobility.

¹ <http://www.merpaperkunsthalle.org/projects/view/169>