Message in a Bottle
Kristian Vistrup Madsen

Beautiful? Sad? Hot? What will be the accumulative effect of Lazar Lyutakov's lava lamps when installed in the hall of the Secession? I've never seen so many lava lamps in one place; it's impossible to know. It seems to me that the *feeling* that they inspire – whether excitement, fatigue, or a kind of electrically induced headache – will be crucial to what they *mean*, and so, at a temporal distance of weeks and months away, all I can do here is speculate. But the more I speculate, the more I think that the question of their effect will not be so easily answered by visitors to the exhibition, either – so eccentric these objects, so bizarre this situation. So, perhaps, I'm as well-positioned as anyone to speak? Perhaps it *should* actually be precisely for someone *outside* to say what it feels like *in there*?

On a visit to Lyutakov's studio on a cold day in February, the wax congealed inside the many vessels took some time to warm up into motion. We talked about counterculture, new age spirituality, youth movements. Something that I didn't know is that early versions of the lava lamp were envisioned as sleek desk objects for business executives, the kind that might sit alongside a Newton's cradle or a miniature Zen garden. But, of course, the shift in postwar society onto youth as its primary engine would have it otherwise. We also talked about spectacle, a problem in the lexicon of contemporary art not unrelated to kitsch. Will an object made to mesmerize be able to inspire critical reflection?

Lyutakov's work usually has, if any, a pretty oblique relationship to the spectacular. His display of metal hats at Simian in Copenhagen struck me as demonstratively cold. His collected varieties of the Feiyue kung fu shoe are almost stubborn in their plain exhibition, lined up on the floor, and the cheap drinking glasses used for beer in Vietnam even caused some public scandal in Bulgaria along the lines of "is this supposed to be art?", etc. It's just that this time, the entire *raison d'etre* of the object he happens to have chosen is its ability to wow. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord declared that "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image."[1] But as I think about Lyutakov's lava lamps in the lineage of the Feiyue shoes, the Vietnamese glasses, and the plastic lamps, also at Simian, shoddily assembled from bowls and cups, what there is *not* in his work is the static, resolved quality of "image." Rather, Lyutakov installs a sense of doubt as to what is actually on display here.

As such, I'll speculate that this is not so much a case of accumulation, but, to use David Joselit's term, *aggregation*: "an array of objects that embody entirely different values or epistemologies."[2] Deviating somewhat from Joselit's proposal in which "unlike things may occupy a common space,"[3] the hundred-plus lava lamps make a scenario in which things that are thought to be not only very alike but also very particular, come to appear contradictory by way of their multiplication. Even in the studio, it was quickly apparent how different the lava lamps actually are, how imperfect. Some are hand-filled in Britain by the same company that invented them in the 60s, others mass-produced in China. Some are space-age, others post-grunge, and others still – the jade-hued Chinese specimen, for instance – outcomes of entirely different histories. As Joselit also argues, such asynchrony is one of the main characteristics of the aggregate. And so – at least, I imagine, here, now, weeks and months away – Lyutakov's aggregation of the lava lamp does not affirm its ontological stability by dazzling its audience into passivity, but tugs at the rug beneath it. In fact, what makes the lava lamp such apt material for Lyutakov's work is that its life as an object, to a great extent, mirrors the volatile trajectories of art in the twentieth century. That is, when we talk about art, we are also talking about lava lamps, and vice versa.

When the lava lamp launched in 1963, abstraction migrated from the canvas into a glass vase in the shape of a rocket just as President Kennedy promised to land a man on the moon. Ab-Ex had tipped into ubiquity, into living rooms and discourses everywhere. The inventors of what was called The Astro Lamp – Crestworth Ltd. (today: Mathmos Ltd.), a company based in Poole, Dorset – described it as a conversation stimulant: "Everyone may not like the 'Astro' lamp when they see it for the first time, but they can never ignore it. It will gain their attention and eventually their admiration"[4] – in that sense, much like modern art. In fact, in the manual that the company sent to distributors, what they call an "an emotional product" is described as we would a work of art:

“Psychologists say that the basic, lasting attraction is Freudian. We say that the attraction lies in the ability of the ‘Astro’ lamp to portray the ever-changing patterns of our very existence. The way the whole movement begins from nothing, to rise and grow into maturity, before spreading out to cast off its ‘offspring’ and then ‘die’, is surely the very cycle of life itself.”[5]

Here, with their à la mode mix of psychoanalysis and existentialism, the Crestworth booklet answers the question of the content of abstraction that many art historians would be hard pressed to answer today. The discursive framing of the “Astro” lamp contains the intellectual ambitions of high modernism, as well as anticipates the narcissism that would be its outcome: we will be enthralled by our own self as though it was an image of the entire world.

In his essay for the exhibition *The Whole Earth*, Anselm Franke posits that the first photograph of Earth seen from space, published by NASA in 1968, replaced the mushroom cloud as the most emblematic picture of the 20th century. With that picture, he argues, “the expansion into the exterior of space now produces the ultimate, immanent planetary interior … the expansive gaze, previously directed outwards, returns on itself to spread the paradoxical message that there is no longer any outside.”[6] As Crestworth Ltd. also asserted, the lava lamp presents both the expansiveness of outer space and the limitlessness of the human interior, “certainly not just a lamp but the embodiment of tranquility, mystery, romance and fascination.”[7] Freud taught that the Ego, which we tend to think of as autonomous and unitary, is merely the facade for the vast unconscious of the Id. But perhaps he underestimated the “mystery” and “fascination,” the religious feeling that such vastness evokes. It’s something to get lost in, Freud admitted: “It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.”[8]

And yet, much technological innovation seems to have sprung precisely from feeling. All the guests at Apple founder Steve Jobs’s memorial service in 2011 were given a book about spiritual enlightenment: Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). “If you look back at the history of Steve and that early trip to India … he had this incredible realization that his intuition was his greatest gift,” Jobs’s friend, the software billionaire Marc Benioff told *Business Insider* after the event. “He needed to look at the world from inside out… his message was to look inside yourself and realize yourself.”[9] His parting gift encapsulates how the lava lamp became the screensaver in the same way as “the ever-changing patterns of our very existence” made the blueprint for network technology.

The relationship between spirituality and abstraction as formal innovation in modernism, of course, was evident from the beginning, say, in the shared interest of Hilma af Klint and Wassily Kandinsky in Theosophy. But it is clear that neither Freud nor the Viennese Secessionists who shared the city with

him in the first decades of the 20th century were naive about what would come of this modern preoccupation with the human interior. Looking at the contorted bodies and piercing eyes in Egon Schiele’s intensely psychological (self-)portraits, certainly not Yoganandic enlightenment, CIA-sponsored Ab-Ex Freedom, Silicon Valley’s tech-utopia, or the lava lamp’s promise of “boundless amusement.”

Rather, Vienna’s early modern moment was characterized by the same anxious deadlock that dimmed the lights on the 1990s. Gustav Klimt’s so-called *Faculty Paintings* (1900-1907) for the University of Vienna – meant to depict Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence – were all rejected for being too moody and mysterious. They were, like lava lamps, “emotional products,” interior portraits, but at a time when the outside had not yet, as with Franke’s “Earthrise,” disappeared. When the lava lamp came back in fashion in the 90s – like the recent Netflix documentary about another 60s reboot, Woodstock ’99, titled *Trainwreck* also showed – it did so as part of a drug-fueled, nihilistic meltdown. If, as Karl Kraus assessed, Vienna before WWI was a “laboratory of destruction,” in the final decade of the last millennium the experiment was being staged again if only for the hell of it.

Woodstock and the lava lamp were both signifiers detached from whatever they used to signify – counterculture, youthful optimism, peace and love – and accumulated, in Debord’s words, to the point where they had become a spectacularly empty image. From the Laboratory of Destruction, through the Summer of Love to the End of History, the idea, famously purported by Jean-François Lyotard, that postmodernism is modernism’s “nascent state” becomes so literal as to collapse the entire timeline of the century into a single moment of distress in the same way that human consciousness and the universe was made to fit into an “Astro” lamp.[10] It is this darkness which, from my perspective of months away, I suspect will creep into Lyutakov’s exhibition, too – brightly lit though inevitably it will be. Because there is in the silent movement of the wax blobs, the aquatically shimmering glitter, and the blank lab-like grid structures and carts that hold the lamps, an over-arching sense of post-ness, of something abandoned – hopes, ideas – whether political, scientific or aesthetic.

With the pensiveness it inspires, the lava lamp is an object that inherently defers meaning in the same way that the meaning of this exhibition is deferred to me. We could say that lava lamps stage a situation of limbo, something begun but always-already never resolved. The limbo’d temporality of the lamp – and the history of the twentieth century that it relays – brings us back to its status in Lyutakov’s work as aggregate. Modernism, argues Joselit, has been displaced by “loosely related aesthetic tendencies”[11] such as postmodernism and pluralism, which together make up the idea of “*the* contemporary,” not as an adjective but a noun. One problem locked into the notion of the contemporary is that it “unconsciously reinscribes a model of temporal

progression that was fundamental to modernism."[12] Except, the con- of contemporary means "with." Here, in this "innocuous 'with'," modernism's claim to the *avant* is replaced by a willful obliviousness to "the dramatically uneven development of globalization." Uneven development, concludes Joselit, "carries with it asynchrony, not contemporaneity."[13]

And so it is to their asynchrony that we should pay attention if we want objects to come alive as aggregates. Lyutakov's work, we might say, makes a display of difference as asynchrony. Summed up into a prefix, his series of pendant lamps, begun in 2006 – almost-familiar assemblages of bowls, cups, and various other household vessels – are not *con-* as in "with," but *a-* as in "without," connoting a kind of dissonance or lack of resolve. The lamps signify in every possible direction: at the frayed edges of the homemade, the mute coldness of mass production, the aspirational homeware of the "Former East," and the bourgeois design world that stretches from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from Alessi through Vitra to Fritz Hansen, the bounty of a certain class. A certain class: a Venetian Palazzo in summer and the Vietnamese glasses that took on the air of Murano, the cultural dignity bestowed by the over-educated and underpaid people that fly in to inflate the historical significance of what is shown there. You change one thing and it changes everything, and still nothing at all has changed: The object-aggregate remains.

The aggregate – Joselit again – "exemplifies the deep structure of globalisation,"[14] and as such, from a European perspective, contains within it the loss of one-way, capital-H, History. Lyutakov might now be able to look back to the Bulgaria of his childhood and the supermarkets with their single type of oil or flour or laundry detergent and think that it was beautiful in the exact proportion that capitalism has lost its shine, its colorful plurality become a language of destruction. In these objects, so much lostness, so much past, and so many realities in the place of whatever we think was there to begin with. Perhaps the story of every aggregate is the story of globalised capitalism in the same way as when we talk about art, we are also talking about lava lamps – *and vice versa*.

For the lava lamp – as we meet it in Lyutakov's installation, too – exemplifies this "deep structure." From the first specimens out of Poole, Dorset, to the swollen aquaria collected by keen connoisseurs today, and the collectively sublime, though individually poor, jade plastics of the *Wall of Entropy*, asynchrony abounds. Some lids are off, some wax has clotted, some wistfulness to their childish appeal. A scent of anxiety, perhaps, even – this I can only speculate – to the heat that they emit; a feeling of being already way past the point. The collection is not even encyclopedic or archival, but fairly arbitrary, subject to availability, affordability. When we talk about lava lamps, modernism starts to lose its bearings. Here is a great inside but with the doors unlocked and windows left wide open, as if it was all just a game we played

and it would be possible to simply walk back out. All that talk of newness, innovation, self-realization. *The Autobiography of a Yogi*. The first personal computer. The End of History. Pure language; just a game. We could do as children do and say that we are not playing anymore. We could decide, right here and right now, in a room full of lava lamps, that the game is over.

1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, p. 24.
2 David Joselit, "On Aggregators," in *October*, vol. 146 (Fall 2013), pp. 3-18, p. 13.
3 Ibid.
4 "Astro Lamps Stockists Manual," http://frink.machighway.com/~edwardcr/keepbubbling/crestworthastrostockistsmanual.html (accessed April 14, 2023).
5 Ibid.
6 Anselm Franke and Diedrich Diederichsen, *The Whole Earth*. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2013.
7 "Astro Lamps Stockists Manual," http://frink.machighway.com/~edwardcr/keepbubbling/crestworthastrostockistsmanual.html (accessed April 14, 2023).
8 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. XXI. Edited by James Strachey, translated by Joan Riviere. New York: Vintage, 2001, p. 65.
9 "The Last Gift Steve Jobs Gave To Family And Friends Was A Book About Self Realization" https://www.businessinsider.com/steve-jobs-gave-yoganandas-book-as-a-gift-at-his-memorial-2013-9 (accessed April 14, 2023).
10 Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the question: What is postmodernism?" in *Anthology of Literary Theory*, p. 416.
11 David Joselit, "On Aggregators"
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.