

Thomas Wagner

## **Ecker's Complications**

### **On People, Cities, Things, Signs and Media**

#### **1. Object seduces Subject**

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*“Considering things as endlessly repressible, without rights, resolve, feelings and any need for self-determination, that is something only someone can do, who believes they had neither life nor powers. They have these things. What else would poems, pictures, verses, stories, dreams have spoken of since time immemorial, if not of the force of things? It is the megalomania of our modern day for people to think we could pry into, investigate and exploit things wantonly and boundlessly without any reckoning coming home to us in consequence. Our modern age is deceiving itself. That modern age amounts to: maintaining the self-deception; a murky, burdensome, thickheaded and, as it would say itself, mediaeval mistake.”*

*Erhart Kästner<sup>1</sup>*

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Finding our way through to what we usually call the real is never easy. Matters appear too confused, to us, regardless of whether we are dealing with people, media or things. If we do, in fact, confine ourselves to one thing, then we have to realize: neither the thing itself, nor what connects us with it, or it with us, neither the social space in which it encounters us as functional object, as product or personal object, neither the mirror it holds up to us, so that we mistake ourselves in the image it depicts of us, bring us directly into contact with reality. It stubbornly seems to evade us, it camouflages and disguises itself in the various figures by which we believe we can apprehend and comprehend it.

In 1979, Bogomir Ecker set up his *Sprungschanze für Selbstmörder* [Springboard for Suicides] on a quay wall on the Seine – nothing more than a small, angular object where the quay wall and the river meet. A ramp which separates off life with all life's sensations, interrupts the endless communicative murmuring, like a punctuation mark in a story's stream of words. It is an intervention just for the moment, only lent any permanence by photography, a sign in the middle of the city and next to the constantly-changing river we know nobody enters twice, and certainly not those who might jump into it from the ramp, intending to kill themselves. The only definite thing is: under these conditions, the possibility is available for escaping from the ceaselessly functioning city and from life. If necessary, the party in question can make their exit, jump off.

Art, therefore, adds something to the substance of the world, where the possibility of acting out of turn is retained. In the urban space, it places an entity, which persists in an in-between area and links being and non-being. Our life, as the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, observes, "... was always marked by the subject's glory and the object's misery. The subject makes history and forms the sum-total of the world."<sup>2</sup> It is "only a turning point on the highroad of subjectivity"<sup>3</sup>. Where the subject can, however, only desire, the object can seduce. Into making the leap, breaking out into a non- and different existence.

It is because Bogomir Ecker knows that, that he loves complications. What interests him is not what the subject ascribes to the object and prescribes for it, not what a thing is to be and represent in the usual way. He is driven by what the object has in store as surprises for the subject, what its potential for disturbance and destruction is and what illuminating confusions grow out of that. Instead of leading, the subject lets himself be lead astray – by results and effects, constellations and combinations, which arrive on the scene unintentionally and uncontrolledly as incite- and astonishment and descend on the subject and his agitated attention, whether he will or not. Only by way of an interruption, a rupture in the usual routine, he comes to himself.

In the first few years, it was mainly innocuous interventions arising under protection of darkness or in hidden corners of the city, where Ecker went seeking both what did not fit and the amazement about it. Later, it was symbolic, sometimes seemingly almost surreal objects, sculptures, collages, drawings and installations, where he connected up individual elements and their meaning as if in a hypertext. As he relocated and modified elements of reality, combined things in new ways and condensed them into constellations, there arose ecstasies around a sense of possibilities, which fed back into the perception of reality.

Ecker's complications are thus more than undesirable side effects, as we know them from medicine when, for instance, an infection sets in subsequent to an operation. His complications, regardless of whether he unearths them or assembles them into boxes or entities resembling prostheses, are much rather extensions, as in watchmaking, where the term complication describes all those functions of a mechanical movement going beyond the usual display of hours, minutes and seconds. One thing is certain: Ecker's works extend our usual understanding of things and situations. In this process, the fields he works in are those of things, signs and communication.

In precisely calculated constellations and with the aid of innumerable complications, Ecker, therefore, succeeds in making objects into partners and in setting a few of them, at least, on the path out of anonymity. It is not for the sake of things themselves, but to get to know our own selves, which we come to recognize in them, that an existing order, one consisting of conventions, is disrupted and extended by the power of the imagination. In doing so, Ecker brings not only architecture – that of space and of things – into play but also the system of signs. Without being, in actual fact, able to break the rules of these systems constituting reality, he stops the process they present so adeptly as entities, something that, in actual fact, only corresponds to their own structure. He does this to demonstrate and grasp the schizophrenia that determines how we deal with reality. In terms of art, a recycling thus comes about, which releases things from the usual context of use and leads them back into the flows of the imaginary.

There are manifold examples of this inner dynamic of things in Ecker's work. Particularly among the *Prototypen* [Prototypes]. Yet, on closer inspection, even these do not simply emphasize what is unfinished and provisional. That is not the goal of the operation. Ecker is not a bricoleur. It is much rather the things that reveal a basic lack of freedom, which can be counteracted by artistic measures. By intervening in the functional framework of things, Ecker breaks open the casing locking them into their function and sealing them off from alternative possibilities. In a counter movement opposing their utility and availability, he opens up a free space enabling

things to be now more than just things, more than goods or mediums for a function. Suddenly, things begin coruscating in a state of exquisite uselessness.

## II Ears see, Eyes hear

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*“The dominant organ of sensory and social orientation in pre-alphabet societies was the ear – ‘hearing was believing.’ The phonic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. Man was given an eye for an ear.”*

*Marshall McLuhan*<sup>4</sup>

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Astrophysicists explain the constant noise an ear perceives in a quiet place as the distant echo of the Big Bang. A particular magic attaches not just to the event, with which some twelve billion years ago “everything” is supposed to have begun, but also to the very word, “Big Bang”.<sup>5</sup>

Bogomir Ecker’s *Big Bang* is a closed-off and closed-in area, where a cylindrical entity, with a second extruding from it and expanding conically, lies between simple, rough-sawn observation and/or listening boxes. Is it listening or is it making a sound? Is it taking sound in or is it broadcasting it into the far reaches of the future? All of its components are cast in aluminum, which lends the ensemble a provisional character, makes it, however, look at the same time like an archeological discovery. This archetypal scene thus looms over the present like an enigmatic relic from dim prehistory. However, in Ecker’s *Big Bang* something more materializes than the artistic imagining of an event nobody witnessed. The installation reveals the difference with which “everything” began rather more as one between being and noise, giving out and taking in. “Being and sound are twofold. Noise lives in events and events in noise”, is how the literature and media scholar, Jochen Hörisch,<sup>6</sup> describes what happened in the instant of the Big Bang.

Where eyes – despite all their technical extensions – do not reach, ears can pick up the echo even of far distant events. The fact that sound spreads out more slowly than light is, in this case, just fine with the artist: the delay creates distance and gives us time to perceive things. In principle, acoustic perception through the ears has the advantage of not favoring any definite perspective. Hearers cannot block out their perceptions: they are surrounded and enclosed in sounds impinging from all directions. In contrast to visual space, the world of the ears consists of simultaneous connections.

Eyes scan across things and freeze them; ears open up a space shared between events and hearers. All the same, Bogomir Ecker does not simply give sense perception its magic prerogatives back. Much rather, he tallies and totals the loss and the profit arising from perception. Neither ears nor eyes are innocent for him. Both send and receive, both take in and give out, both generate their own optical or acoustic room for manoeuvre. And what applies to the senses also applies to the media, which function as extensions of our central nervous system. Just extending one single sense or combining different media changes our perception of the world and has a corrective effect.

So Ecker hangs boxes on the wall that apparently listen like ears and simultaneously seem to resound like loudspeakers. He has torn out and bent antennae cast in bronze and hung up in a showcase – or in a protective cage – as if they amounted to archeological discoveries. Elsewhere, he sets a remote control – likewise cast in bronze – into a *TV-Nische* [TV niche] lined in yellow, sound-insulating foam rubber: the signals it sends are absorbed: communication denies its own message. And when a dead letterbox (*Toter Briefkasten*) is hanging somewhere on a wall in the city and waiting for post, communication becomes caught up in a paradox. Mute megaphones bombard eyes and ears with sound from up on a balcony: an ear-tower listens in on the city and broadcasts nothing but silence.

Bogomir Ecker has not just extended sculpture, as a visual-tactile art of bodies and space, with the dimension of listening and hearing, he has rehearsed ways of communicating, of observing, hearing and monitoring sculpturally and has gone on reworking them until they exhaust themselves in endless references and loops. It is only where it paradoxically cancels itself out in this way that the everlasting massage by the media captivating us comes to an end. In the apparently useless perception of useless things, meaning and interpretation practice letting signs just freewheel and open up a terrain, where possibilities and ways of being appear that lie beyond medial fixations. In feeling out the city's surfaces – concretely on the walls of a reality both formed and constantly changing – and in playing freely with things, Ecker thus discovers the possibilities of a form of sculpture, in entities oscillating between sender and receiver and sensing those complications that result where the senses, the media and communication are seeking to track down what is real.

In concrete terms, that means: Ecker sends out probes into the reality of functioning but hidden environments. “Environments are invisible”, as Marshall McLuhan<sup>7</sup> drily declares. Ecker listens, picks up their sound and investigates their noise; in doing so, he uses his entities like a membrane, which separates and connects. If something of what happens between people, in all their worldliness, rubs off on things, then Ecker reads off a communication, which remains limited to where it happens amid the media's possibilities, from their databanks by means of artistic-aesthetic sensors. In the process, his objects and sculptures reveal what happens to perception and what eludes it, when it is anaesthetized by media familiarity and media use, what it encapsulates, overlooks, fails to hear – and what reality it is forced to tolerate. Their counter move is to mobilize the power of magic and to free things from the constraints of their functioning and of a significance closely limited by convention. Ecker does not perform the hermeneutics of things. He does not interpret what they mean. He registers what disappears in their circulation and in their conversion into goods, what is masked, erased, consumed and overlaid. He uncovers what happened to them and frees them from the burden of not being able to be themselves and hence enriching humanity by forming a counterpart to it. In this way, things become, on the one hand, the site of a struggle, which has marked them, whilst, on the other, there is a different form of reality living on in them.

### **III The Glow around the Edges**

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*Another rabbi, a true Kabbalist, once said: to bring about the kingdom of freedom, it is not necessary that everything be destroyed and a new world begin; rather, this cup, or that bush, or that stone, and so all things must only be shifted a little. Because this “a little” is hard to do, and its measure so hard to find, humanity cannot do it in this world; instead this is why the Messiah comes.*

The perception of outward appearances creates for itself the dead letterboxes in a form of communication which separates and connects, reveals and conceals. It is a case of closing down its incessant medial operation, if we want to reach open ground and, in actual fact, a substantial contact and exchange. Ecker knows that there is nothing certain to be gained about the – medially determined – state of the world. Who is doing the sending and who the receiving? Who is the perpetrator and who the victim? Signs are swapped, sending and receiving go on – we do not need to know more than that. It is no accident that Heinz von Foerster has extended his hermeneutic principle – the hearer, not the speaker, determines the meaning – with the principle of the constructive observer. That is because the experience (on which the second order of cybernetics is based as a cybernetics of observed systems<sup>9</sup>) has long since become quotidian: everything said is said by and to observers, who are themselves being observed.

Ecker's sculptures and installations thus subvert the simple schema of sender and receiver by entangling it in complications. At the same time, they translate communication's Janus-faced nature into plastic entities, which function like non-trivial machines<sup>10</sup>. As the inner state of such a machine changes with every operation, so that nobody knows how it will react, how imported information will be processed, observers' perception begins to oscillate between different possibilities and is repeatedly thrown back onto itself.

Ecker is, therefore, not concerned to give a certain stability or freedom back to subjects or their counterparts, things. On the contrary. Only with increased complications comes the promise of relief. So it is not the state of things but their limits, that Ecker shifts, just a little, and as a result their meaning too. We could also say: he changes their way of operating, redeems them from trivialization. This change happens on the margins of things. A fundamental alteration remains unattainable. However, the possibility does persist that, even after things are complete, they can be "other", harboring an insoluble aporia. How are things supposed to be finished, immutable and perfect unto themselves, and simultaneously "other"?

In this context, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, points to Thomas Aquinas and his treatise on the aureola or halo. According to the thesis, the beatitude of the chosen ones comprehends all faculties necessary to be able to complete the undertakings of human life in a perfect manner. That is why nothing of any consequence can be added to the state of beatitude. And yet, beyond that, there is something that can be added to it, an "accidental reward that is added to the essential", something "that is not necessary for beatitude and does not alter it substantially but simply makes it more brilliant (*clarior*)."<sup>11</sup> This ingredient, this supplement is the aureola. Agamben designates it as "like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges."<sup>12</sup>

Not that Ecker would be concerned with beatitude or perfection in the religious sense. Scepticism and failure are much too firmly embedded in his thinking and his work for that, and perfection is a chimera not worth chasing after. All the same, Agamben's reflections do provide a model, which can help in describing some of the features of Bogomir Ecker's work. That is because his work on things is work on a supplement: on what is added to them, what can complete them, although they may remain imprisoned in the way they are. With Ecker, their

particular radiance is a sort of communicative gleam around their edges, which has maintained itself even in the triviality of simple things. The radiance is that zone Ecker transfers banal things into, for instance when he fixes a bell equipped with its own resonating system of metal pipes onto a radio set. Or when he has a turntable rotate without the pickup arm belonging to it. The firm contours of things become blurred in such an act of merging<sup>13</sup> them. In this way, we can recognize how matter in Ecker's sculptures is not simply enclosed in a form. With a plethora of possibilities for being this or that swirling around them, they are surrounded by a radiance enabling them to shine out freely.

#### IV. Massaging and Overlaying Media

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*“All Media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. An understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.*

Marshall McLuhan<sup>14</sup>

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What Ecker develops is the sculpting of seismographic forms. His objects and installations are always more than casings or solids. They function as instruments recording the tremors issuing from an environment completely shaped by media. The media work us over, so Ecker works the media over, until they disclose the insight into their structure as environment. One example may suffice: Ecker takes a page from a newspaper and blanks out the text printed on it by painting over it with aluminum, hammer-effect lacquer. Fragments of the text shimmer through the layer of paint only here and there, like a memory slowly growing weaker. Subsequently, he draws patterns, paths, passages, objects, bodies, perforated patterns, intertwining bundles of lines, and occasionally ciphers and measurements too, with a blue ballpoint on the silvery ground. A few pages are written over with a stencil and bear titles like “Prognose für das Jahr 2117” [Prognosis for the Year 2017]”, “Versprechen” [Promise] or “Blick in den Maschinenraum” [View of the Engine Room]. Sometimes additional holes were punched into the paper, perforating it and rendering it porous as the carrier medium. The images left visible in the process of over-painting or overlaying, often show apparatuses, machines and experimental arrays, or faces, eyes and ears. It is worth noting that Ecker ceased working on the series, consisting of several hundred sheets, at the end of the nineties due to a change in the print media – when newspapers introduced four-color printing and color photographs along with it.

In these drawings as well, Ecker is investigating complications in the way media appropriate reality. At the same time, he is collecting ephemera, particles and fragments of a reality, which is being permanently over-painted, changed and manipulated by the media. In isolation, the pictures do not just strike us all the more strongly, they are also freed up – by shedding the context they are forced to appear in – for associations and alternative meanings. Tattooing the surface with the ballpoint adds to the effect and one more time shifts the meaning of what was erased and what was left. Ecker does not come upon reality passively; he intervenes. What interests him is the impulse that changes things, not the result.

The contradictions and paradoxes of medial communication cannot be either ignored or resolved. They can, however, be literally “overdrawn”, contained in entities and condensed into hybrid things. Just like the confusing separation of sender and receiver, production and reception cannot be eliminated, but can be undermined. According to Baudrillard, the reason is that: “From now on they are separate and indifferent under the sign of television and the automobile, under the sign of behavior models inscribed everywhere in the media or in the layout of the city.”<sup>15</sup>

## V. Short-Circuiting Media

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*“So the sense of possibility might be defined outright as the capacity to think how everything could ‘just as easily’ be, and to attach no more importance to what is, than to what is not.”*

*Robert Musil*<sup>16</sup>

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What happens when antennae do not either broadcast or receive any more, but hang like archeological discoveries in a glass cabinet – thin figures with small heads in the swirling data flows? Bogomir Ecker is involuntarily an archeologist. He thinks in layers of perception and loops of it. He operates like an investigator who fastidiously uncovers the complications a medially extended perception has to tolerate. His hearing observers and his seeing hearers are curious but also melancholy as they describe a world caught up in loops, the purpose of which it is to ensure the interminable massage by the media keeps going. At the end of the day, the point is: the medium is the “message” and “massage”, message and stimulus. It informs and massages us incessantly. Only when the system is short-circuited with the power of imagination and the sense of possibilities does it reveal itself as the system forming reality.

What then, if sender and receiver, the recorders and the scanners all break down, and the deep freezes, where they are bedded down to icy rest, do not freeze any more, because a short-circuit has knocked them out, at least symbolically? Will things return home from their exile? Will they again be anything more than mere goods? Will they suddenly stand before us in a new light and teach us how we ought to deal with ourselves so that we are spared their fate? Or have media and economy together long since laid a curse on us, which we can describe and analyze but not break?

We still have, so Ecker’s works instruct us, a sufficient sense of possibilities available to us, to be able to imagine that there are quite other pictures and quite other experiences than those a program prescribes for us; experiences which do not fit onto a screen or under a banknote. “See”, Julien Offray de La Mettrie writes, “that bird on the bough: it seems always ready to fly away. Imagination is like the bird...”<sup>17</sup> How long will the reserves last? The productive forces have been fighting over supremacy for quite a long while now. Simple opposing positions – here the products of the media (which, so McLuhan maintains, have replaced the old productive forces), there the phantasms of the imagination – are, by the same token, not what we are talking about. That is because the power of imagination, if it wants to articulate itself, is dependent on media. That is what makes the issue complicated. Everything runs round in the same circle. Even the leap from the ramp ends for the potential suicides in a paradox. The scream, even if it remains silent, does, however, stem directly from

the brain: Bogomir Ecker has fitted a suitable funnel onto the brain. What goes in, what comes out? Ears listen, and eyes see. Those who can, do hear and do see. But surprisingly, Marshall McLuhan, the propagandist of the media message, quotes Meister Eckhart: “Only the hand that erases can write the true thing.”<sup>18</sup>

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1 Erhart Kästner, *Aufstand der Dinge, Byzantinische Aufzeichnungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1973, pp. 160/161 (Translation: Stan Jones)

2 Jean Baudrillard, *Kool Killer oder Der Aufstand der Zeichen*, Berlin 1978, p. 13. (Translation: Stan Jones).

3 Ibid.

4 Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message. An Inventory of Effects*, London 1967, p. 44.

5 See Jochen Hörisch, *Der Sinn und die Sinne, Eine Geschichte der Medien*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 22 ff. (Translation: Stan Jones)

6 Hörisch, p. 23.

7 McLuhan, *The Medium*, op.cit., p. 84.

8 Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, translated by Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, p.158; see also: Giorgio Agamben, *Die kommende Gemeinschaft*, Berlin 2003, p. 51.

9 See Heinz von Foerster, *Kybernetik*, Berlin 1993, p. 89. (Translation: Stan Jones).

10 See Heinz von Foerster, *Short Cuts*, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, pp. 6/7 (Translation: Stan Jones).

11 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, translated by Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 54

12 Agamben op.cit., p.54

13 See. Agamben op.cit., p. 55.

14 McLuhan, *The Medium*, op.cit., p. 26.

15 Jean Baudrillard, *Kool Killer or the Insurrection of Signs*, anonymous translation accessed at <http://www.lpdme.org/downloads.php>, 15 December, 2011, p. 29.

16 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, translated by Eithne Williams and Ernst Kaiser, Secker and Warburg, London, 1979, vol.1, p.16.

17 Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, anonymous translation accessed at <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/LaMettrie/Machine>, 15 December, 2011.

18 McLuhan, *The Medium*, p. 147, p. 84.