"Sing me a Song with Social Significance"
From pin via PIN to Jenni Tischer's *Pin*

Manuela Ammer

In November 1937—with the Great Depression continuing unabated in the USA—the Musical Revue *Pins and Needles* opened its premiere performance in New York with the number "Sing me a Song with Social Significance." This revue, which was to become the most successful production of the 1930s, occupies a special place in the history of Broadway shows: *Pins and Needles* is the only musical to be initiated by a union (the International Ladies Garment Workers Union) and to shed light on the plight of young factory workers in a changing world. Through songs and sketches, amateur performers from the textile industry presented their stand on, among other things, their daily struggle for survival, on workers' and women's rights and on fascism. Political content was brought to the stage in the form of entertainment.

The issue of the relationship between aesthetic and political practice is key to Jenni Tischer, so too is the consideration of how art can stage specific content.[1] Tischer is concerned with the status of bodies, materials and work processes in a post-industrial world. With *Pins and Needles* she shares not only the use of the word "pin," which lends the Vienna exhibition its name, but also the reference to textiles. Tischer is interested in the changeable history of their conditions of production (both in terms of handiwork and automation) as well as the ambivalent medial status, expressed in the varied connections between "textile," "text" and "texture," in an amalgamation of the optical and haptic, and, more recently, in discussions of digitality that refer to the textile.[2]

Tischer's sculptures, often based on geometrical forms, make use of threads, yarns and fabric. We encounter the sewn, the woven and the plaited; the eponymous needle is involved in the production of most of the works and, moreover (in the newer objects), a visible element. *Big Data I* for example, consists of a small, gray-painted wooden cube with open sides that are strung with a thread latticework. Tucked within is a soft blue cushion, the folds of which join with the strict geometry of its receptacle. An oversized pin bores through the cube and corpus from above at an oblique angle—a gesture of fixing that is as absurd as it is violent given that there is, in fact, nothing to affix. The cube itself is on a white metal stand the dimensions of which recall a high, narrow pedestal; three of the legs are stably connected to one another while a fourth stands precariously alone.

Big Data II presents another variant of the combination of frame, cushion, needle and stand: A roughly cubic cushion rests within a lilac-painted wooden cube; sewn from silver and black fabric, the cushion is divided diagonally in two. The black half is entirely studded with thousands of pins that transform the soft form into a firm body and lend the object a heaviness that causes it to sag downward, leaning to the side and jutting out of its housing. *Big Data II* confronts us with, if you will, two ways of thinking

about and playing with the cube: the strict geometry of the wooden cube that (were it not lilac) could pass as minimalist sculpture, is contrasted with the lumpy "un-form" of the cushion-cube, enabling us to immediately feel its unbalanced weight and hand-made surface.

These descriptions show that Tischer is clearly not concerned with handicraft in the narrow sense, but rather with specific activities and processes of discovering forms—such as stringing, plaiting, knotting or pinning—that emerge from working with textiles. The repetitive sticking of countless needles, practiced for its own sake, redefines a surface or a body and transports it into a different form of being. In its strung state thread can give form or stabilize; it can shape a surface or fix a position. In her objects Tischer works with contrasting elements—both on the material level and on that of form-finding. There is no point at which her sculptures deny the process of their own making. On the contrary: through the variations and irregularities introduced by manual labor the moment of process remains, quite literally, on the surface.

The term "Big Data" that Tischer uses as title also refers to a dimension beyond that of the textile and the handmade. "Big Data" describes data masses that are too large, too complex or variable to be calculated using traditional data processing methods. This ranges, for example, from data that arises as a result of electronic communication and data gathered by companies and the authorities, to recordings made by surveillance systems. There is no doubting the fact that this data is stored with the intention of influencing the material world and the way we lead our lives. As to how exactly this is achieved, however, and what processes are involved—these are questions of which we generally have a diffuse understanding at best. Tischer's *Big Data* objects are an attempt to lend material shape to these abstract phenomena: if, for example, the padded cushion projects folds under the tension of the thread, i.e. if a "free" and irregular surface is set against the grid, then this can be read as a moment of resistance against the totalitarian grip of a binary logic, or as embodiment of the idea that Big Data processes are casting a net over even the reputedly incalculable.
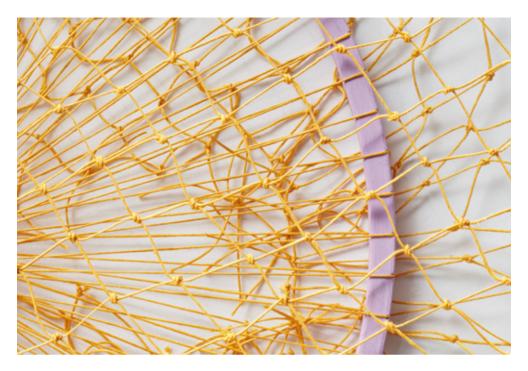
It is worth remarking that concepts of the analog and the digital interlock in the leitmotif of the "pin." Along with the textile, "pins" also play a role both as an object and a notion in the history of information storage. In the case of, for example, the 18th century punchcard weaving machine, needles scanned patterned strips: a hole meant the thread lifted, no hole meant that the thread dropped—an early application of digital technology. And in the case of computers one comes across such components as the "pin grid array," a type of casing for processors that is equipped with a series of contact pins. The PIN (personal identification number), as we know, serves to enable one's authorization by a machine, and translates identity into a multi-digit numbered code. Tischer has been preoccupied for some time now with the ways in which materials "store" information; thus, for example, the quipu references that crop up in her earlier works. The quipu was the (only in-part deciphered) communication medium of the Incas. It conveyed economic, demographic and personal relations by means of dyed strings and knots.[3] In *Pin* Tischer goes one step further: here the reference is to data

Big Data II (Detail/detail), 2014

transmission phenomena that not only allow no conclusions to be drawn about the information that is conveyed (without knowledge of the code this likewise applies to the quipu) but the transmissions themselves furthermore elude human-physical measures altogether.

Illustrating abstractions—those introduced along with the digital age as well as those that signal production processes in general—and translating them into graspable dimensions (in both the physical and intellectual senses), is an artistic claim that runs throughout the entire exhibition, from the smallest elements to the way that space has been conceived. Alongside her larger works Tischer has been working on, for instance, the so-called *Makings* since 2012, pieces in which she reflects upon her own artistic practice, putting it under the "sight glass" as it were. These *Makings* consist of round glass plates, some with central openings, between and around which the artist pins, stretches, wraps and knots yarn, textiles, fabric, etc. They are comparable to work pieces that pictorially demonstrate the materials, utensils and production processes that currently preoccupy Tischer. The padded cushion thus appears in the Vienna group—*Making Grid*—which here is "skewered" by long knitting needles in a weaving frame and pressed flat between two panes of glass. In another instance needles and nails form decorative circles around a star shaped, copper colored mesh of thread. Yet another *Making* presents a round fan made of folded colored paper, the perforations of which recall both confetti and punchcards.

Making Grid IV (Detail/detail), 2014

Tischer pursues her artistic inquiries in a playful manner in the *Makings*; they have the characteristics of capriccios and comment on the formal austerity of the sculptures in an anecdotal fashion. However, the *Makings* also represent a deliberate and program-matic confrontation with questions of display—of showing and exhibiting—that play a key role in her practice: (sight) glass and (weaving) frames are constitutive elements of these picture-objects that render it impossible to distinguish between "work" and "accessories." That which is put on show is quite literally knotted and woven into its display. Elements that play out in small format in the *Makings* continue on into the level of spatial presentation. In *Pin*, Tischer conceived "roll-out pedestals" made of blue and yellow lengths of material that can be rolled up or out accordingly. They can run down the wall or hang freely in the room; they lie on the floor and overlap one another. These roll-out pedestals can be thought of as mobile axes that serve as both base and background for Tischer's works and furthermore "weave" them into the structure of the space.

The initial impulse for Tischer's spatial concept came from the Atelier Singer-Dicker, which designed architecture, interiors and furniture in Vienna and Berlin during the 1920s and early 1930s.[4] Friedl Dicker and Franz Singer studied under Johannes Itten in Vienna and later at the Bauhaus in Weimar. Their joint efforts brought together the functional demands of Bauhaus with an understanding of form, color and material that was indebted to basic pictorial and sculptural principles. Their multi-colored

interiors and "transformative furniture," which enabled space to be experienced as adjustable through actions such as unfolding, pulling out or piling up, have been particularly important for Tischer. Her roll-out pedestals allude to, for example, the so-called "roller-blind table" that Singer-Dicker designed in 1927 for the dining room of a Viennese apartment.[5] The table, the extensions of which recall a scroll when not in use, could be extended for up to ten people by rolling it out at either end.

The works of the Atelier Singer-Dicker have, for the most part, been destroyed. Friedl Dicker had to leave Vienna in 1934 as a result of her political activism against National Socialism and emigrated to Prague. After being deported to Theresienstadt she was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. In 1934 Franz Singer also left Vienna for London,

Atelier Singer-Dicker, Entwurf für ein Gästehaus der Gräfin Heriot / Design for Countess Heriot's guest house, 1932—34

where he continued to design flats and furniture. Today their collaborative work can be reconstructed only by means of colored drawings (which often resemble abstract color compositions rather than technical plans), black and white photos and descriptions. Given this backstory, Tischer's reference to their work is clearly not an attempt at reconstruction but rather an achievement of the imagination, of empathy and rendering: how could it have felt to lie on a Atelier Singer-Dicker folding settee stretched with wickerwork? Or to sit on a collapsible chair at a retractable desk? And what was it like living in a room that had a blue floor with red and yellow walls in which the bed must be pulled out each evening from beneath a podium?

The fact that in Tischer's *Pin* her preoccupation with Atelier Singer-Dicker designs—lost and destroyed works that symbolized certain social and political ideals, a certain life praxis, an ethic of production and a culture of material—comes in contact with a confrontation with digitality is no coincidence. Tischer addresses social processes of abstraction—the looming loss of a human proportionality—with strategies of empathetic embodiment that she develops from the historical designs that are themselves abstractions. If sculptures in the exhibition allude to electronic components or computer language then they simultaneously resist, in a physical sense, that which they represent. The surface structure of the *Pin Grid Arrays*, for example—cushioned frame-shaped objects of black and yellow fabric—is based on the appearance of the eponymous processor cases. Copper nails and silver colored pushpins have been knocked into the padded "display sides" of the sculptures in the manner of contact pin grids. Tischer's conscious use of discernible contrasts, however, of metal and fabric, hard and soft, volume and emptiness, counteracts a high-tech look or high-tech logic. The minimalist technoid elements are linked with reference systems that allude to another corporeality, to other kinds of production and other modes of experience.

The same is true of a work like the floor object *Hard Coded* that consciously misinterprets the concept of "hard coding"—which actually means the fixed, unalterable elements of a program. Its hard black case—a metal cube with foldable side walls—is affixed differently from one presentation to the next by means of white threads of yarn. And *Pin Thru*, a 120 cm in diameter metal ring hanging on a yellow roll-out pedestal that stretches across the room, links allusions to the "through hole" or "pin in hole" technology (a form of mounting with electronic components) with the simple picture of a thread passing through the eye of a needle.

With this image we return to the year 1937, to the Broadway stage on which the amateur performers of *Pins and Needles* demand a "Song with Social Significance." Tischer's exhibition can be understood similarly, an attempt at packing pressing social issues into a story and staging them in the form of an aesthetic, experiential revue. Her story *Pin* concerns the eventful history of textiles, manual labor and production processes, social (housing) utopias from Vienna of the 1920s and 1930s, the dystopias of the digital age and, last but not least, what it actually means to play on an exhibition stage. The thread that connects the entire story—its implicit main theme—is a preoccupation with corporeality: with the thinking body, the acting body, the perceiving body, the body of objects. The insistence on the singular body is Tischer's artistic response to the current yearning for a "Song with Social Significance."

1   The title of Tischer's 2012 exhibition *Soliloquy* in the Bielefeld Kunstverein, for example, makes reference to a form of dramatic monologue in which a figure reflects on its role and the plot of a play, thus offering the public insight into the author's intention.

2   A highly readable study on the relationship between digitality and the history of textile production is Birgit Schneider's *Textiles Prozessieren. Eine Mediengeschichte der Lochkartenweberei*, Zürich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007.

3   Tischer referred to the quipu in, among others, her 2013 work *Making VI*. Additional information and media theory reflections on the quipu can be found in, for example: Galen Brokaw, *A History of the Khipu* (Cambridge Latin American Studies, volume 94), New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

4   A very good overview of the life and work of Friedl Dicker and Franz Singer is offered in the exhibition catalog *Franz Singer – Friedl Dicker*, exh. cat., Vienna: University of Applied Arts Vienna, 1989.

5   Cf. ibid., pp. 26—27.

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