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## Crossmapping Germann — A Foreword to the Work of Florian Germann

For the announcement of his cycle of works *The Poltergeist Experimental Group (PEG) Applied Spirituality and Physical Spirit Manifestation*, which he developed for his solo exhibition at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, Florian Germann used a photograph of a man working on a piece of sculpture. As anyone socialized by today's media immediately recognizes, sculpture is a model of the friendly green ectoplasm ghost from the movie *Ghostbusters* (1984). On the one hand, Germann is playing with a quotation from pop culture; on the other hand, he weaves a motif familiar from art history into the title of his cycle: the artist in his studio. Yet Germann's appropriation of a visual source not only points to the question of the artist's role, it also opens up an intellectual space for the motif between the fields of culture, science and nature, and their apparent contradictions. The figure of the "ghost-maker" who, taking a hands-on approach, blends physical labor with scientific knowledge to venture into the "supernatural," experimenting with it and finally making it his own creation, can be read as a poignant oxymoron, a figure that dissolves such apparent contradictions. Many artists of the twentieth century addressed the chasm between culture, science and nature, and sought to bridge it; see, for instance, Marcel Duchamp in the 1910s with the deliberations that led him to the *Large Glass (La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même [Le grand verre]*, 1915–23), or Joseph Beuys in the 1970s with his multiple *Rose for Direct Democracy* (1973). The latter is a glass measuring cylinder from a laboratory, which contains a rose. Beuys reinterpreted the sharp contrast between these materials as a rallying cry: a social model (direct democracy), spiritual culture (the rose), and the sciences (the measuring cylinder), as achievements that reflect a positive development. So the photograph Germann uses is not just an artist's self-portrait; it also represents a figure of thought that is central to his art—the rejection of Hegel's dictum that art as a vehicle of the quest for truth has come to its end—and distances itself from the idea that art's efforts to achieve autonomy are a process of reflection whose only reference is now art itself. In the world of Germann's art, the fields of art and science, far from being isolated, fluidly pass over into each other; their marriage allows a genuine kind of truth to emerge.

Germann usually presents his works as parts of larger cycles. From the perspective of their formal aesthetics, these look like an assortment of physical instruments and modernist sculptures that, in the exhibition room, take on the appearance of an experimental arrangement whose overarching meaning slowly spreads over them like a finely spun web. At the content level, Germann often uses historic figures, like Napoleon, as points of departure for these experimental arrangements, or motifs from mythology and fantasy, such as lycanthropy (which is to say, the werewolf motif, from the Greek *lukos*, wolf, and *anthropos*, man), or spirit apparitions. He subjects these motifs to a revision that interweaves factual and fictional elements. The resulting narratives always also respond to Germann's interest in physical processes and the transformation of energies. The same interest is apparent in the tactile qualities of his works: many of Germann's objects and sculptures—often made out of materials such as brass (*Saint Helena / Riches from the Depths of the Mountains*) or silver (*The Werewolf of Vienna*)—undergo processes (of activation) in the form of "actions," legible to the beholder only in the residual traces they have left on the works.

As the title implies, the cycle *The Poltergeist Experimental Group (PEG) Applied Spirituality and Physical Spirit Manifestation* is the creation of an anonymous collective that investigates the phenomenon known as a “poltergeist,” a spirit whose operation belongs to the realm of parapsychology. The term is used to describe knocking sounds, electrical disturbances, or movements of objects that cannot be traced to an immediate physical cause. Two American parapsychologists, Joseph Gaither Pratt and William G. Roll, have argued that poltergeist phenomena primarily occur in the presence of the pubescent and people with paranormal gifts, and described these manifestations as “recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis.”<sup>1</sup> The poltergeist, in other words, is not a “real spirit” but rather a mental projection, a discharge of energy that can take the form of a “psychokinetic effect” in teenagers and others. This paranormal phenomenon marks the center of the mental landscape on which Germann’s current cycle of works is based. From this center, he draws a variety of connections and feedback loops that extend, for instance, to the rituals practiced in the boy scout movement (such as the nocturnal baptism ceremonies), but also to the material qualities of organ pipes.<sup>2</sup> The latter are made of an alloy of lead and tin that is highly malleable even at low heat. But an ensemble of organ pipes also forms an instrument that occupies a central position in community life during the liturgy—its sounds can entrance an entire group of people—and so they are a symbol of spirituality as well.

It would be overly simplistic to call Germann’s approach, which takes up literary, filmic, historical, and also scientific figures, motifs, and fields of knowledge, mere “sampling”: the artist is particularly interested in the 1—See William G. Roll, *The Poltergeist* [1979], Paraview, New York 2004. 2—Robert Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* [1908], Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004. P23370\_Buch\_IH.indd 14 17.04.12 11:47 Crossmapping Germann 15 interstitial domains such associations open up. Nor can we describe Germann’s method as an intertextual procedure that serves to bring out what is already present in and between the texts. In a study entitled “Crossmapping,” the literary and cultural scholar Elisabeth Bronfen has proposed that term to describe a method that seeks to reveal “similar concerns” in texts “in different media” by comparing them “along the axis of a shared visual language”—a method, that is to say, that builds on Aby Warburg’s iconographic theory of the pathos formula.<sup>3</sup> Bronfen applies this method, for instance, to relate Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1890) to Francesca Woodmann’s photographic works from the 1970s and the Hollywood movie *The Others* (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar, combining their visual formulae and figures of thought in a “fertile” conjunction. This approach, whose initial inspiration lies in the experience of comparative and associative seeing, is dedicated to “unfolding a space of thinking that places aesthetic visual formulae alongside figures of theoretical thought in order to register the cultural aftereffects of forms of internal affect as well as the correspondence between the various formalizations these intensities have undergone” in order to “arrive at a comparative perspective on how cultural intensity has flared up at different times in history as well as in different media.”<sup>4</sup>

As beholders, we might perhaps similarly approach Germann’s art—which aspires to “cognitive gains”—by reading his cycles as artistic forms of such “crossmapping”: a method that connects themes and motifs, bringing out parallels and tracing hitherto invisible lines, where factual and fictional elements interweave to create a new whole.