

MOVING IN CIRCLES

Dominique Laleg on Adriana Lara at Kunsthalle Basel

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Translated from the German by Elisabeth Lauffer

At the center of Adriana Lara's exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, housed in the museum's spacious *Oberlichtsaal*, is the multi-piece installation, "Symbolic Surface of Revolution" (2012). It consists of 68 identically formatted, white primed canvases, whose overall connection is created by the flat representation of a continuous line of black dominoes that stretches across the individual pictures. On the first wall, the serial visual elements, each of which originated with the imprint of a domino, are depicted as having toppled; it's not until the second wall, that they are lined up vertically. The uniform row then continues across the canvases on the two remaining walls, with a brief change of direction here and there, before ultimately reaching the entrance to the room.

Multiple, layered references and levels of significance begin to emerge in the experience of this cool, reduced setting. Formally speaking, the canvases—some of which hang alone and at a distance, while others cluster—are characterized by a certain ambivalence, caught between their thematic lateral togetherness and the objectified separation of the abstract-minimalist picture/group of pictures. As such, the pictures' readability is split: although each is a component of a commanding room installation, the pictures' formalism and flatness also call to mind the conventions of modern abstract painting. Furthermore, the subject is lined up and rendered to scale, a verisimilitude that hints at its serial production. Finally, the impossible changes in direction undermine the suggestion of a side view of the dominoes, which further obscures the mode of representation. A multifaceted ambiguity that moves between abstraction, indexicality, and representation therefore applies to the thematic reference from the start.

A complex web of references, which emerges from both subject and title and impacts the work's readability, further complicates the prenominate formal qualities. The work alludes to the notion of the domino effect, for instance, with the Arab Spring serving as a contemporary counterpart to the Cold War-era fear of the spread of communism. These political connotations are echoed in the title, "Symbolic Surface of Revolution," which shows the "symbolic" link between political events and the idea of falling dominoes; it also draws attention to the visual and decidedly two-dimensional depiction of this symbol. A further reference embedded in the title clarifies Lara's interest in the genesis and visibility of such surfaces: in mathematics, a "surface of revolution" is a surface generated within the graph of a function that can be rotated around the vertical axis of its coordinate system. This rotation creates the visible surface of a three-dimensional body, and characteristics of the original graph appear on this surface—transformed, yet readable. In Lara's representation, the surface of the geometric-sculptural volume meets with the aforementioned political phenomena,

resulting in an encounter that invites curiosity about the relationship between visible façade and underlying characteristics. The element of surface genesis is not the only connection between the work and this mathematical motif; the rotation in Euclidean space mirrors viewers' revolving movement within the exhibition space. Considering these aspects, the abrupt changes in the height and direction of the line of dominoes—and with them, the change in the mode of representation—could be understood as a sort of surface transformation occurring in tandem with the parallel between graphic rotation and human movement through the installation.

By this point, it has already become clear that the installation's visual austerity is contrasted with an escalating and occasionally forced production of references. The connections used to invoke these references—and subsequently link them to the artwork and to each other—are a little overly engineered and simplistic. What primarily prevents the work from sinking into overdetermination is the productive relationship created between the formal, thematic, and symbolic ambiguities; this relationship prompts a multifaceted as well as reflexive process of perception. The motif does not serve solely as a cipher for historical, political, and theoretical references; rather, it places them in a strained association with the actualized perception. This aspect may best be experienced by walking through the installation, because as the row of dominoes proceeds along the four walls—and, seemingly, between the canvases—it becomes strangely independent, extending its direct influence beyond the frame and onto the viewers in the exhibition hall. The artist anticipated their physical movements during production, as she herself moved along the canvases, stamping the surface with one domino after the other. The very fact that the narrative of (impending) collapse and a certain associated temporality—the determined direction of which is aligned with the intended and generally accepted flow of people through the space—are inherent to the domino motif, allows the experience of the work to become an active process that is at once visual, cognitive, and physical.

In this way, and despite the transparent link between formal, thematic, and symbolic levels, the artist is able to make thematic statements using certain conventions of representation, presentation, and perception—especially when the actual consummation of perception becomes an integral part of this connection. It remains unclear if this highly constructed piece is pursuing a special interest, beyond serving the truisms of critical reflexivity in art. Despite thematic and formal references to the central installation, the three further works in adjacent rooms—which include a large format, painted canvas, as well as an upright cylinder-shaped object—allow for but vague and speculative possibilities for interpretation. One searches then in vain for an objective that might have been drawn to a conclusion by the admittedly skillfully created, yet unfortunately somewhat empty process of perception in “Symbolic Surface of Revolution.” Ultimately, the viewers' movement around the exhibition hall corresponds almost

graphically to the idea of the search for meaning in this exhibit: we move in circles.