

No Cut!—The Chain as a Command  
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A chain, as both the practical, everyday, object world and symbolic discourses are aware, has inter/linked parts. Each individual element contributes to the connectedness and cohesion of the whole. A chain always consists of many parts and yet is also a single entity. After all, it is the repetition of individual components—in a flexible relationship in and with one another—which creates a functional structure. This gives the chain a particular discursive relevance and sculptural/visual significance. Chains are a form of sequence of essentially identical parts, but are not based on a modular construction or three-dimensional template that can be interrupted or discontinued at any point. Rather, their interconnectedness can only be broken in a single, violent cut. In a chain, spaces and edges come together in such a way that the value and function of one—the empty space—is inseparable from the value and function of the other: the materiality of the ring. In abstract terms, a reciprocal relationship of this kind displaces classic polarities and hierarchies. It is not an *either-or* relationship, but rather an *and-also* relationship that can be illustrated, materially and sculpturally or diagrammatically, in this way. Nonetheless, this formal description is inadequate. In a metastable environment, the surrounding context is critical: In the 19th century, applying this logic to electricity enabled an effective industrial technology for power transmission to be developed. Well-known applications include transport, engines, delivery, and so on. This contrasts with the older idea of an elegant, often materially and ideationally valuable piece of jewelry.

Applying the same principle, chains of hotels, supermarkets and firms can be understood as forming economic complexes. In this context, a chain represents the powerful, unified appearance of a company's multi-site presence. In the following discussion, we will seek to understand chains in essentially institutional terms, a closed circuit of function and object. In the context of state institutions, people are locked up at the behest of an authority whose position is, figuratively speaking, guaranteed by the symbolic chain of office. In this way, we can identify a straightforward linkage between the functions of virtual power and real subjugation. *The chain is a command*, an order, an instruction which, in conjunction with its plastic form, guarantees the particular efficacy of the control. To this day, putting a delinquent into chains is an inhumane form of punishment. In the US state of Arizona, for example, inmates must wear the striped convict's suit – banned on humanitarian grounds in 1904—and, chained together into groups (“chain gangs”), coordinate themselves to undertake hard labor: psychosocial terror and exploitation of workers rolled into one.

Casting our attention further back into history, to the end of the 18th century, we move our focus away from practices in jails and towards the treatment of the mentally-ill. History tells us that French doctor Philippe Pinel “freed” madmen “from their chains”—a progressive change to models of internment for society's outcasts—but he replaced the chains with other treatments.

Where, previously, acts of madness were prevented by holding the insane in jail-like captivity, the use of, for example, unexpected spurts of ice-cold water was now intended to surprise and shock them into an awareness of their delusions and behavior—or simply to break down their resistance, forcing them to submit to the rules of the institution. Still, the goal was to draw a distinction between criminals and the mentally ill, substituting criminalizing measures for ones with the potential to heal.

Around 1800, therefore, a revolution occurred and the previously tight knot of crime, illness, power and institutions was unraveled. Normalities were differentiated by the separation of their locations: of jail and hospital, of moral

improvement, discipline and psychophysical care. These historic paradigm shifts can be symbolized in the role of chains, however melodramatic the imagery may be: Whereas before, the use of chains rendered various deviations from societally-agreed norms indistinguishable from one another, they were, from this point on, dealt with separately. However, although individualization is seen as an aspect of societal progress, these systematic changes primarily mean subjectification: that is, subjugation through the division of the collective process and the increasing isolation of individuals, be they ill or criminal. Interestingly, both groups converge again in the activity of forced labor, undertaken as a tool of punishment or rehabilitation. 200 years ago, the mentally-ill were marginalized by those primary frameworks of exclusion—the family and the world of work—which “are based on the rules of economic production and the rules of societal reproduction” (Michael Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 1978), and a sub-system of employment was established for them. Even then, resocialization and recovery were not seen as humane ends in themselves, but as preconditions for people’s effective rehabilitation as workers.

It is no coincidence that incarceration—epitomized in the collective consciousness by the image of colonial-era slaves—stands in direct contrast to the functions of the human chain as a political plea for peace or justice, or as an expression of mourning. The most important aspect in this case is the linking of hands as a social structure which is affectively, rather than analytically, organized. But why this brief cultural history of the chain? Jennifer Bennett has repeatedly included a crude, metallic chain as a prominent component in her works. The chain looks like a found object or a piece of scrap. Sometimes it hangs out of, and down from, an object in a distinctive way. At other times it lies, guided by its own weight and flexibility, its suppleness, draped over multiple elements including upright sheets of metal. Loosely, almost casually, the chain secures the various elements to the wall and, in doing so, playfully turns them into captives of the space: inmates of the institution. While the use of the chains arises, at least in aesthetic terms, from the respective sculptural context, the chain itself symbolizes a framework—and frameworks imply a mutual reliance between disparate elements. Through its weight, the chain produces order; It establishes a temporary coherence. A chain has a structure and, through it, structure *is produced*. A chain has two orientations: an inner connection or infrastructure through whose flexible solidity an external attachment (to), or an external joining, can be created. Here, the argument I elucidated above (largely from the perspective of the model) once again becomes apparent—this time in sculptural terms.

What is interesting about Jennifer Bennett’s material/form combinations is the fragile balance between large, heavy, solid arrangements and “flowing” or tipping moments. The arrangements can be located in the artistic tradition of the 1980s, which caused a semantic-figurative shift in postminimalism through its everyday use of familiar objects and patterns of use. While the postminimalism of the 1970s and early 1980s focused primarily on the body—frequently on its abject physicality—Jennifer Bennett’s sculptures shift this corporeal perspective onto objects which are not entirely non-objective, nor primarily representational. In no way do they abandon this perspective—see the “deck chair” (*Die Lehne* [“The Backrest”], 2011–12); Nonetheless, they transfer it onto a space as something that shapes and disciplines: socially, politically and technologically. At this point, our discussion might seem to have lost sight of (the function of ) the chain; However, the chains of the past—a restraint which permitted at least a limited radius of action, including affective engagement—have, today, largely been replaced by the practice of sedation. And sedation—that is, medicinal immobilization or, in the everyday context, consumerist pacification—shares a root with *sedes*: Latin, meaning “seat”. The physical balance in Jennifer Bennett’s works, does not, in aesthetic terms, result in the conclusive establishment of a stable state. The term “establishment”

combines cultural and social connotations. Firstly, it is a synonym for *installation*—technical, bureaucratic, aesthetic—and, secondly, it stands for institution: the historical asylum, the social welfare office, the museum, the family (and it is in this last institution that Michel Foucault locates the majority of social norms which are, ultimately, enforced with power and some degree of violence). In this way, Jennifer Bennett suggests a transfer of sculptural and visual data onto society: something which is organized, preserved and transformed through symbolic arrangements as well as manifest-mechanistic and institutional terms. By linking aesthetic/sculptural, discursive and participatory practices with the communal realm, Jennifer Bennett aims to make change conceivable and, in doing so, to hold a mirror up not only to art, with its fractured, formal rigidity, but also, implicitly, to the socio-political domain with its insistence on capitalist economies and nuclear families.

In her 2011 diploma thesis, Bennett updated Schiller's concept of aesthetics. His 1795 treatise *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* ("On the Aesthetic Education of Man") primarily discusses freedom and necessity, but also imagination and cognitive faculty. Chains can be drawn into this picture as objects which act as physical manifestations of ideas and thus reflect societal practices. Over 200 years ago—around the time Pinel was freeing madmen from their chains—Schiller wrote that beauty would replace the representative and politically contrived, "establishing" new respect for the humanum, and that it would do so, first and foremost, against the ruthless protection of the vested rights of the wealthy and the particular crudeness of those who, at the time, were referred to bluntly as "the uneducated". Without a doubt, such simplistic distinctions must now be revised, but their societal relevance is far from obsolete. In the elegance of her sculptures, the attention she pays to their surfaces and her commitment to participatory design, Jennifer Bennett engages with the idea of an education based on aesthetic interactions. My sketch of historical developments in institutions such as jails and psychiatry, using the example of the function of the chain, is intended to support these sculptural and visual dialogues.

Let us finally consider chains from another angle, approaching them as topological entities (we will, of course, be dealing with the layman's understanding of what is a highly specialist mathematical field). In doing so, we can see that Jennifer Bennett's collection of cartographies—drawings and aquarelles—also fits into the intellectual and conceptual context I have described above. Mathematically, a dimension is defined primarily as a concept that lists the number of degrees of freedom of movement in a particular space. The (length of a) chain becomes relevant in this context if the diagrammatic and metaphoric idea of a linear sequence of chain links—which, when spread out, reach a particular length—is transferred onto intertwined multiplicities. Thus conceived, every link of a chain is the edge of a part of the preceding length, which is bigger, more extensive, and also has additional characteristics. In other words, a length of chain can be understood as a number of sub-spaces of a particular space. In the same way, the surface of the Earth represents the edge of the globe and, within it, state borders represent the edges of countries, and so on. Linear elements mix with those which are, like shells, at once planar and spatial. Of course, in the zoom lens of the "viewing machine" *Google Earth*—the tool of research for the cartographic drawings—the multiplicities become dedifferentiated. The digital lens focuses indiscriminately and amorally. The political and societal implications of borders—or, more generally, of edges—are rendered irrelevant by the ability to zoom in on, and visually capture, Earth's most obscure corners. While this may be true with regard to optical technology, however, the political and economic picture is different. The amount of image data available depends on the potential it offers for economic and neocolonial exploitation. In Jennifer Bennett's black-and-white alterations and (dis)colorations of city and country maps, detailed diagrams of such divisions are created.

They have as little to do with overviews and neutral orientations as they do with a naïve idealization of nature. Instead, Jennifer Bennett creates a critical topography, literally coloring wilderness and agricultural areas with environmental pollution, the waste which inevitably results from any radically industrial exploitation of raw materials. In their graphic clarity, these drawings relate a keen awareness of destructive intertwinement along with a thoroughly moral and ethical assessment.

Jennifer Bennett's interaction with physical chains in the context of her sculptural compositions takes place on a different plane to that of her engagement with Earth's dimensions (in which the chain functions in a topographic sense); When viewed side-by-side, however, it is clear that both deliver critical impulses that encourage the recipient to take a stance independent of exploitative acquisition. This utopian vision is primarily characterized by communicative togetherness or interconnectedness. The starting point is to perceive artist and recipient not as categorically separate but, instead, to locate both on a shared continuum of responsibility. Both can see themselves as producers without in any way diminishing the aesthetic expertise of the artist. On the contrary: It is the artist who, in the first place, uses her aesthetic tools to create a space in which ideas can be (de)constructed.

*Translation by Matthew Way*