

Interview

Beate Engl/Markus Heinzlmann

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MH_ Whoever has the opportunity to experience one of your works in person will be shaken up, massaged or spun around in circles on a kind of carousel until one feels dizzy. For your graduate exhibition, for example, you installed a vibrating table on which visitors could stand in order to view a Mike Rose painting part of the Lenbachhaus' collection.¹ What do you imagine the ideal recipient of your works to be like?

BE_ I do actually think more about the physical status of the viewers. After all, they never enter a museum with an impartial or neutral attitude. Perhaps they had just been shopping in a busy pedestrian precinct, pushed themselves into an overcrowded underground train or just finished a hectic day at work. Suddenly they find themselves in a place of staged tranquility and transcendence. I then often feel like I am in the „Rotor“, a carousel that is turning so fast that the floor can escape from under the feet and one simply becomes stuck to the wall. This must also be how visitors to a museum feel — as if they are in a rotating standstill. A more static attitude than the contemplative immersion in a work of art does not exist. Even though one is standing in a space and should enter into a dialogue with the works.

For me as an observer, the physical act of the classical perception of an artwork is somehow completely absurd. One steps up to see the details or the title on the label. One steps back to absorb the work.

One continues to walk from painting to painting in small arcs — like the wiggly line of a meander. The repertory of movement is extremely limited. The height of the space seldomly plays a role — who jumps up and down in a museum after all? One communicates with other visitors only if the view of the works is being obstructed or one has whispered conversations on what one has just seen. The unwritten code of conduct is more strict than in church.

I wanted to do something to oppose this order. A physical experience — sometimes intense, sometime subtle — can lead to a completely new perception within a familiar situation. The ideal recipient is integrated as a whole person into the artwork. Thereby I do not wish to frighten people nor do I want to, according to Burke's theory on the sublime², make people shudder. At most I assist the emotions a little in that I mechanically produce the excitement of viewing art through a vibrating pedestal. Never before was I able to perceive a painting in such a state of physical rapture.

MH_ Your most recent work **I'm as mad as hell**³ realises the concept of a rotating standstill in a different way. The user stands on a fruit crate under a paddlewheel, which has the following sentence from the film „Network“ written on one of its cross-beams: „I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore“. In the film the main character, a news reader, speaks this line just after hearing about his dismissal and he then publicly announces

¹ **Bildbetrachtung** [contemplation of a painting], 2001, see p. 17

² Edmund Burke: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 1757

³ **I'm as mad as hell**, 2006, see p. 48

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his suicide giving off rants of hatred against everything and everybody. In its references to the Soviets' platforms for speeches, does your work call upon the recipients to start a revolution or does it celebrate the ‚Stammtisch‘ [regulars' table]?

BE_ Revolutions don't have it easy today, since they presuppose a form of solidarity that turns into a mass movement. If at all, I only experience something like a revolutionary uprising in the pub nowadays. This usually takes place after a couple of glasses as a kind of explosive gesture of indignation that disappears as quickly as the alcohol dissolves.

For me it is the medium that the ‚revolutionary‘ in the film chooses that is most relevant for this work: television. Beale, the news reader, challenges the people in front of their screens to give up their passive spectator roles, to go to the window and to air their unhappiness by shouting: „I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!“. Thereby a collective process is evoked between separate individuals, who are only connected through the programme they are watching at the same time, yet without knowing about each other. By shouting together the individualised mass is suddenly aware of its togetherness, however, without it having a political impact. The sentence becomes an empty cliché for a permanently repeated helplessness. At the same

time private and public space is wonderfully interspersed, stimulated through media manipulation.

This is also how this sentence rotates in my work on a permanent loop that, depending on the intensity of the sun, sometimes faster, sometimes slower or standing still. A provisional elevation, as speakers like to use in order to stand out above the crowds and to be heard (beer crates, fruit boxes, chairs etc.), is turned into a cast monument. Even though one can use it as a speaker's pedestal, it manifests first and foremost the absence of the speaker. One might even say that it questions free speech in and of itself. What remains is propaganda as we encounter it each and every day in the mass media. And because of all of this propaganda one feels almost dizzy when watching. **Mad as hell** moves within the quotidian madness, between resignation and ‚let me entertain you‘, in a mixture of guillotine and Oktoberfest.

MH_ This neutrality surprises me a little. I know you as a politically engaged person. But also the the Rosa Luxemburg work⁴ on closer observation – or rather: closer listening – reveals itself as a critique of the art world and not as an engagement with Luxemburg's ideas. Is public space even still a place where political concerns, when formulated through art, can be heard?

BE_ Translating the Rosa Luxemburg speech „Die weltpolitische Lage“ [The

⁴ betaversion 1.0, Leipzig-Plagwitz, 2004, see p. 52 and 72

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State of World Politics]⁵ into the context of the global art scene is certainly to be understood politically. Just as **Mad as hell** is not a neutral gesture in public space. Rather, these works emerge through the context in which the pieces are placed. For **Mad as hell** it is the positioning in a politically and medially extremely loaded location: The Gotzinger Platz is situated between a catholic church and the building site for a new mosque. In the case of **be-taversion 1.0, Leipzig-Plagwitz** it is the roof of a former cotton mill (Baumwollspinnerei), an industrial hall that had initially been occupied and lived in by artists and which has now become the ‚hot spot‘ of the Leipzig School and its international galerists and collectors, who are flying in from all over the place. In this way one can absolutely comprehend these works as political commentaries that are closely linked to the places for which they were conceptualised.

This is also very important for my working method, since only through researching the social, political and naturally also formal conditions of a space, does an idea for a work emerge. „Public space is after all also a fiction...“⁶. It is a politically and commercially oriented system that one reaffirms only too easily, either by adding to it through capitalist decoration, or by formulating a provocative anti-thesis with the same gesture of power through an (artistic) occupation. As soon as one engages, as an artist, with this politically desired and often financially supported occupation, one immediately acts as the

extension of the prevailing stipulations. This does not mean, however, that one can only move outside of these systems with a clear conscience. The aim is to sidestep these processes of representation. The critical and ironic commentary appears to me to be an adequate form to escape this instrumentalisation. It remains close to the situation, close to the people, who actually use the space, without preaching to them, rebuffing them or calling for their participation.

MH_ For your project **Space is a place**⁷ you reclaimed the universe as a public space for art. Let us trouble Walter Grasskamp once more, who essentially defined public space as a place, which is characterised by its general accessibility and significant rate of usage. In contrast to this stands Malevitch's „Black Square“ with which he also refers to the universe: For him it is the endless expanse of space and also the universe's inaccessibility that form a kind of project space for an absolute utopia. How do you reconcile these contradictions in your work?

BE_ For me there are two sorts of universes, which I also describe in **Space is a place**. For one there is the universe in the head, the ideal, cosmic space, outer space, the endless expanse of space and thereby the utopic, visionary and also religious space. This is a place of imagination, which is strongly influenced by the occidental tradition; this is where God or a similarly all powerful species is, a struc-

⁵ Rosa Luxemburg: Die weltpolitische Lage, [The State of World Politics] 27th May 1913, Felsenkeller, Leipzig-Plagwitz

⁷ Beate Engl: Space is a place. Handbuch und Standort-recherche für eine kritische Kunstpraxis im öffentlichen Weltraum. [handbook and site research for critical art practice in public outer space] 2005

⁶ „...and especially for all those users, who can pass through the invisible barriers so unimpeded so as to not notice them particularly.“ – Walter Grasskamp: Kunst und Stadt [Art and the City]. In: Skulptur. Projekte in Münster [sculpture projects münster]. 1997

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ture that for the human intellect is hardly conceivable. A place where all kinds of possible desires and ideas can be projected and it is, therefore, also much better than it is here.

And then there is the real universe, which is scientifically researched, occupied through the military and marketed commercially. This expanded space catapults globalisation in concentric circles beyond the earth's sphere. „Capital is an organism that cannot sustain itself in any other way than to constantly look beyond its limits, to feed on its exterior environment. The exterior is essential.“⁸

From the global village to satellite TV, GPS, military surveillance, geological data, weather forecasts, natural disaster management etc. – our everyday life is governed by the orbit, at least that part of humankind that can afford it. Similarly, space travel is almost historical in its principal of exclusion. Who is allowed to partake and who is not, is still being controlled very tightly. The US government's current focus on the building of a station on the moon poses the question anew whether the moon is now „an American“⁹ or not. It may sound funny, but these are unresolved ownership issues at the highest level of contention. And there is nothing utopian about it – cosmic desires are being used as political propaganda or marketing strategies at most.

Again, I am interested in the translation of systems. My argument that the universe is a public space functioning according

to similar patterns, has, of course, one problem, namely the aspect of ‚accessibility‘. However, even on earth this is not always granted after all. Shopping malls, which today occupy our inner cities, only pretend to be public. The piazzas with their fountains and sculptures belong to companies and private persons. Therefore, when a public space on earth is not publicly accessible and just the myth of the public suffices, then one can transfer this principle to the universe. The actual frequency of use is still low, but the virtual one is all the higher; it is perhaps best compared to media spaces like the Internet.

Space agencies are presently discovering the potential of art projects as marketing tools. This creates a real basis for the production of art works and accessibility to space technology. However, this kind of opportunity frequently happens on a basis of instrumentalising art for PR campaigns. This is why **Space is a place** proposes a critical confrontation with this place and its conditions by connecting it to a complex analysis of public space. It is only too easy to give in to blind enthusiasm for the universe and to thereby forget that one is dealing with a highly contentious and occupied territory. My stance here is also absolutely ambivalent and almost moralistic.

Besides the fascination for the utopian, what was the reason for your „Rückkehr ins All“ [return to space]¹⁰?

MH_ I was fascinated by the observation that the universe was only a huge

⁸ Michael Hardt./Antonio Negri: Empire. Die neue Weltordnung. 2002

⁹ „Der Mond ist jetzt ein Ami“ [the moon is now an american] – headline of the ‚Bild-Zeitung‘ 21st July 1969, the day after the first landing on the moon

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theme in art as long as that space was inaccessible to people. After the landing on the moon, art's interest in this utopian projection screen almost completely vanished. That a new generation of artists dared to address this topic was a real surprise to me. Today, with the help of parabolic flights or the launch of satellites, as, for example, Marko Peljhan is planning, for the first time there is the real and relatively cheap possibility to realise autonomous artistic projects in space. This has apparently fired up artists' fantasies that are much more pragmatic than the almighty fantasies of the past. I wanted to show this paradoxical connection of realism with classical utopian thinking in „Rückkehr ins All“. Where does this unusual alliance cause sparks in art and where in everyday reality?

In connection with this I am interested in your attitude regarding the display of your work. The installation of **Und die weiße Zelle schwebt weiter...** [and the white cube keeps on floating...] ¹¹ in Hamburg was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful works in the exhibition in its ironic paraphrasing of Ungers' architecture and the inclusion of technical elements such as the museum's air conditioning system. How important is the aesthetic appearance of your works to you?

BE_ The display is important in terms of the correlation between the chosen or existing place, the content to be mediated and the relationship to the viewer – they are all placements and decisions that

necessarily affect the whole. And thereby it is as much about the intellectual as about sensual perception. That is precisely what is fascinating, since through small interventions – as Robert Smithson describes it ¹² – a closet can be turned into a model universe. In Hamburg this was exemplary. I looked for a space, which escaped Ungers' architecture of the permanently repeated square. This continuous reproduction and reiteration of the classical white cube seemed somehow aggressively traditional to me in its systematic insistence and virtually pushed me to the edges of this system. The engineering room appeared like a Sputnik, predestined to take off into the orbital space of imagination. There I continued the formal principles of the existing white cube, but adapted it to the altered conditions of weightlessness. The optical dominance of the vertical and the right angle as a hierarchical structure of earthly museum architecture is reversed, the contemplative silence is replaced through machine noise and the white cell merges with the otherwise hidden technical instruments. Even a seemingly purely formal gesture like this one can disclose a completely new layer of meaning. The viewer again finds him- or herself in a vibrating, blindingly white space that is apparently taking off. This change of perception can cause anxiety, but also enjoyment.

MH_ Apropos enjoyment: The whole time I have been dying to ask a question. It is the one you asked visitors in the

¹⁰ „Rückkehr ins All“, [return to space] exhibition at Hamburger Kunsthalle in cooperation with the Siemens Arts Program, curated by Christoph Heinrich and Markus Heinzelmann. 2005

¹¹ **Und die weiße Zelle schwebt weiter...**, [and the white cube keeps on floating...] 2005, see p. 26

¹² „If this is outer space, any closet will do.“ – Mel Bochner/Robert Smithson: The Domain of the Great Bear. Art Voices, Herbst 1966. In: Jack Flam: Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings. 1996

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exhibition „Schatzhäuser Deutschlands“ [German Art Treasures]¹³ over and over again: What would you do if Rembrandt's painting „Diana Bathing with her Nymphs, with Stories of Acteon and Calisto“ belonged to you?

↳ **Markus Heinzelmann** is the director of Museum Schloss Morsbroich, Leverkusen. The interview was held in december 2006.

BE_ I used the legend of Diana, Acteon and Calisto as a metaphor in the hunt for the Rembrandt, or rather for its owner. The appropriation, which in the myth takes place through the gaze at the hidden firstly leads to catastrophe, to the transformation into a bear and is resolved in the end by turning the bear into the star constellation, making it visible to all in the sky every night. The painting has not yet fulfilled this metamorphosis. As a cultural artefact in private ownership it is still hidden within in the bearskin so to speak.

To imagine owning this Rembrandt is just as utopian for me as it is for the average museum visitor. The thought is connected to power, capital, wealth and the ideology of dominance. The possible answers show historical social hierarchies, class-conditioned ownership issues and an uncertain, yet still prevalent belief in authority. In contrast to this are the middle-class to precarious living conditions where such ownership is in the realm of the illusionary. One could perhaps answer with a Bavarian museum visitor's response and a twinkle in one's eye: „Hang 'em, you've got to hang 'em!“

¹³ **Große Bärenjagd**, [great bear hunting] 2005, see p. 18 and 67