

Jule Reuter / Social spaces in the focus of sculptural field research / 2006

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An ongoing theme in Stella Geppert's sculptural work is the relationship of people to their spatial environment. This relationship is difficult to comprehend, being dynamic and changeable, and defined by various factors and processes, some of which are not visible. The artist attempts to approach this complexity by raising questions that constantly recur and enlarge upon themselves. The question of corporeality, says Geppert, is the foundation and stimulation for all formal development in her work. Like a field researcher she investigates concrete starting situations – the sculptural results are products of the respective site-specific analysis. In this she adheres to the concept-art-based practice of working "in situ", which declares the context to be part of the work.

The spaces that Stella Geppert investigates are the spaces of urban life. In 1998 her initial preoccupation was with the empty building and the superimposition of architectural form and social application. Upon this basis she questioned the qualities and composition of domestic interiors in spaces maintaining a tense balance between industrial design and private use. Her next step led her to publicly used interiors, which through special powers of definition can influence people's perceptions and behaviour. A pars pro toto metaphor for this is the gallery space, in which artistic composition attempts to decipher the spatial context. While she initially concentrated on interiors, this was followed by a preoccupation with exterior space since 2001. She selects urban spaces distinguished by the superimposition of various, often heterogeneous functions, definitions and uses. She particularly studies people's concrete behaviours and actions, and the types of social interaction between occupant and space.

Preceding every sculptural composition is a phase of meticulous observation and material collection. Primarily using a camera, she first records places and processes that accentuate moments of the provisional, the in-between and the temporary as the prime triggers of spatial changes. Her artistic work moves between these two poles – emphasising site-specificity, or process orientation. In sculptural terms the question is: how can a three-dimensional static form react to permanent movement and change?

Accordingly, the artistic process is defined by at least two different impulses. On the one hand Stella Geppert works with analogy. Through external, functional or structural correspondence the work apparently adapts itself to the space, sometimes so far as to almost negate its character as art. On the other hand, her process is subversive in the sense that it simultaneously and intentionally disturbs or infiltrates the apparently smooth alliance of art and life. This disturbance is created by changing parameters, which vary according to the respective location and the artist's intentions. With this hacker-like strategy she manages to reveal weaknesses in civilization's present condition, and to expand our experience of social space by demonstrating possible intellectual and physical courses of action.

Global player

With the work "Trafocontainer / Transformer container" (2000) Stella Geppert examines the relationship between function, aesthetics and economics in functional architecture and utilitarian fixtures in public space.

Transformer housings are inconspicuous grey boxes around the city. They escape the notice of passers-by because they are neither subject to public use, nor do they assert a presence with their outer appearance. The boxes, which conceal switchboards for the electrical supply of buildings, are storage spaces by nature and immobile. The distribution of the "grey boxes" throughout the urban environment seems random, following no discernable logic. Portable structures, however, settle in construction sites

or other places where living is temporarily organized. It is a transient existence and the structures' design is reduced to the most necessary, and therefore the most utilitarian. Corrugated steel sheeting forms the outer shell, and if required there are different types with windows and doors. They are transportable, stackable, and worldwide they follow the principle of the "mobile task force".

The "Transformer container" – the artistic answer to this – is a hermaphrodite by nature. The artist has reduced the container to the size of a transformer box. Set up in public space, this artistic object suggests domesticity without consummating it. It becomes a little fictitious residence. The spatial unit's ambisexuality produces a twofold intellectual conclusion: the anonymity of technical infrastructure is revealed and the principle of containerisation simultaneously thwarted. This does not only provoke the question of where the boundaries lie to the profit-maximizing logic that leads to housing people in ever smaller accommodations, but also that of the consequences for people's lives of containerisation as a cultural technology.

Parasitical relationships

Stella Geppert takes the idea of hermaphroditic nature further in the work "Parasitäres Verhältnis / Parasitic relationship" (2001). Here she investigates the relationship of the parts to each other more intensely. Out of a decorative corner shelf standing on three lathe-turned legs, a kidney-like, white form covered with wood-chip wallpaper grows in such a way as to threaten the shelf's equilibrium. The artist must intervene – by weighing the shelf down with everyday items – to create a temporary, precarious balance.

The purposeless, aseptic-looking form undermines the piece of furniture's function and aesthetics. Only a stabilization of the shelf's load-bearing function can compensate for the imbalance, but the shelf loses its flexibility thereby. The work functions as a parable about the weakness of a status quo produced from a combination of extrinsic parts.

In the spatial intervention "Parasitäre Verhältnisse und Dialoge / Parasitic relations and dialogues" (2002), created on the subway platform of the U2 line at Berlin-Alexanderplatz, Stella Geppert relates the idea of the parasitical to the possibility of alternative uses for existing structures in public space. Subway platforms are a transitional space of the 20th century. Typologically they resemble all the interfaces associated with modern transportation such as airports, train stations or road intersections. Here she took people's daily movement habits and movement sequences in primarily functional spaces as her artistic starting point. The artist added unique shapes to existing spatial structures there in the form of cushions – in places where people often lean while waiting for the next train. The artistic intervention had two aims: it extended the subway platform's functional spectrum on the basis of its users' real behaviour, and redefined the space through active participation.

The artist operated on behalf of the people moving through the space. She created little landing areas in such a way as to invite people to linger temporarily – but to also facilitate contemplation of the heavily frequented space. Camouflaged in the red and orange patterned material used by Berlin's transit authority (BVG), the cushions became potential oases of time, for when people stand dreaming on the platform without travelling on, they become parasites in the system. From the point of view of operators of functional public spaces, anyone using the space other than for its intended purpose – such as to get warm, to beg, or for unlicensed vending – is a disturbance. The topic is more difficult from the passengers' point of view; most of them would like to leave the place as quickly as possible. The artistic intervention, ostensibly serving the system, thematically dealt with the presence within systems of people whom the systems increasingly try to eliminate as disturbances. On the other hand, it also functioned as an indicator of systematic shortage of time as an increasing alienation from space.

Changelings

In "Home I" and "Home II" (1999) Stella Geppert dealt with the function, design and atmosphere of interiors with respect to residential rooms. Her manner of analysing space here is genuinely

sculptural. Central to her interest, besides the materials' surface composition, are the ways and means of physically dealing with items of furniture. The artistic mien already refers structurally to the later parasite-related work.

The artist combined ready-mades – a sofa in the case of "Home II" – with hypertrophic, synthetically composed forms, resulting in seemingly surreal new creations. Into the tipped-open sofa she wedged disproportionately large doorknobs, which shoot up like mushrooms. Their enlarged scale makes them ambiguous, while the Gulliver effect simultaneously loads the form with metaphorical qualities.

In "Home I" the complexity of the tangle of domestic relationships condenses into an object. By changing its scale, a table becomes architecture. Six stools hang on the underside of the tabletop, appearing to be drawn upwards as if gravity had been abolished. Their seat cushions point downwards, however, their undersides disappearing in the flower-patterned, indented upholstery covering the table's underside, which suggests the surface of a bed.

Stella Geppert amalgamates table, bed and seating, the basic furnishings of living, into a seemingly absurd aggregation that negates the functions of the individual parts. Moreover, the sizable supporting structure made of raw chipboard is papered with wood-grain wallpaper. Alien dimensions and implanted surrogates lead to a shift from the usual perspectives. Top and bottom, interior and exterior, surface and material, construction and form: all can be experienced here as varying parameters that refer to the illusoriness of three-dimensionality.

De-stabilizations

In the works "Entfestigung / Defortification" (1998) and "Studie zum Raumverhalten / Study of spatial behaviour" (2000) and in "Portrait of the room, Galerie Pankow" (2000) Stella Geppert researched the social dimension of architectural spaces with regard to the parameters lending them stability and authority.

"Entfestigung" was her first larger public work, and in it she formulated the question of the redefinition of disused space. An amorphous red mass pushed out of all twenty-seven large windows and ten smaller dormer windows of an abandoned building on Wittenberg's market square. This soft, billowing form destabilized the building's solid shape. The impulse of movement created by this outwards-pressing mass made the building appear as an architectural shell that had lost its most important function: the protective separation of inside and outside.

The building had been empty for years – a result of the serious social and societal changes after German reunification in 1989. The failure to find new residents for the apartment building raised questions, in the artist's view, about the inherent qualities it possessed beyond its speculative and market value. The artistic form's red colour loads the question further. It stands equally – with art-historical connotations – for new beginnings and for decline.

The work "Studie zum Raumverhalten" was created as an artistic response to an invitation from the Akademie der Künste, one of Berlin's established art institutions. The artist had to deal with a room as a structure of social relationships, and which tolerated no doubt about its purpose. The building on Hanseatenweg, an example of Western post-war modernism, is classified as a historical monument. The assigned location was the so-called Lichtauge [Ger. lit. 'eye of light'] in the building's 'club room'. No holes could be drilled, nor could the architecture be damaged in any other way. The artist discovered a three-legged stool discarded in the building's repository, and used an extended telescopic rod to suspend it high above the viewer's heads, vertical to the wall. She additionally papered one of the supporting concrete columns with wood-grain wallpaper. Here displacement and decontextualisation became catalysts of the imagination. Falling back on the material concepts of the 1960s, she construed the interpretive predominance of art not as a question of the "right" aesthetic, but as a potentially permanent and observant perception.

In "Raumportrait / Portrait of the Room, Galerie Pankow" an oversized upholstered ring encompasses a

section of wall that connects two of the gallery spaces and the corridor. The unique hypertrophic form made of brown vinyl optically hinders access to the exhibition rooms, and simultaneously enters into a relationship with space that is normally left empty. The ring purports to have a function, like a support or cushion, which seems absurd in this location and position. The title of the work provides some clues – the sculptural intervention sees itself as defining the gallery spaces more precisely, such as defining the gallery as an art room.

The gallery is located in a former upper-class apartment with parquet flooring and stucco ceiling mouldings. The originally luxurious atmosphere was overlaid by other types of interior arrangements: sober office ambiance mixed with the insignia of the White Cube, the pure art room. On the structural level it also proved at that time to be a conglomeration made up of divided responsibilities for freelance curatorial and administrative-representational tasks. These different interests, competencies and capabilities of the people managing the art room had to be constantly mediated.

The cushion ring, over-inflated and weak in terms of structural function, can be read as a symbol for the latent inefficiency of such relationships and conditions. As a sculptural object it conveys an atmosphere that provokes questions about the art room's purpose.

Temporary settlements

During her stay in Tokyo in 2001 Stella Geppert deepened her preoccupation with temporary and mobile architectures. For this she took homeless people's dwellings in the Japanese metropolis as her starting point. She studied the settlements of surrogate habitations in relation to city space, and to each other. Her manner of observation resembles that of a sociologist examining the forms of social self-organization as a relationship between self-assertion and exclusion.

In the subsequent analysis she determined that camping sites and snack-bar huts also obey the principle of temporarily organising public space, simultaneously using it parasitically. After lengthy use in one location, forms originally conceived as mobile mutate into overflowing, static structures. House trailers are given front gardens, and snack-bar huts extended with various add-ons.

"Modell für Raumerweiterung / Model for spatial expansion" (2001) transfers her observations of expanding structures, which include the organization and occupation of space as intrinsic principles, onto her own work. The seemingly mobile core of the work – a cart-like construction – was overwhelmed by the spatial structure it transports. The individual room segments open on all sides to the surrounding space. Referring to different contexts, the surfaces act as an interface between domestically and industrially used materials. These serve no recognizable function, but unify into conglomerations that are aesthetically enhanced through the use of imitations. The patchwork-like pieces oscillate between provisional arrangement and permanent condition.

Networked structures

In "Gruppengefüge / Group structure" (2003) the open structure of temporary settlements is tested under real conditions. The traversable spatial arrangement shown at the gallery Kunstbank united elements of stage decoration and kiosk architecture. Markings on the ground provided possible coordinates for movement. Here sculpture is developed further into a space-encroaching system, which seems arbitrarily expandable or reducible. Stella Geppert invokes a basic vocabulary of various uses of space permitting maximum utilization – there is an in-front and a behind, vaguely an inside and an outside, but actually the in-between dominates. To the extent that room boundaries become fleeting, the framework of action appears arbitrary and diffuse. The artistic reference to current kiosk culture, with sales counters, shelves and little cupboards and pedestals, can also be understood as a currently experienced loss of the power to define spaces.

In "Modell für Raumbeziehungen / Model for spatial relationships" (2003) the idea of an open system theoretically leads to the principle of the megalopolis. The seemingly hermaphroditic entity created here, a cross between washbasins and stools, became rampantly self-propagating, by concretely

demonstrating growth as a self-generating principle. Can this perhaps be seen as a negative vision of structures developing a momentum of their own, which follow only the logic of inner growth, and which disregard the previous parameters of a housebroken modernism such as planning, need or elegant proportions?

Ambiguous markings

In "Standpunkte unterschiedlicher Sichtweisen / Standpoints: different views" (temporary work, 2002-2007) Stella Geppert developed a piece for a public space in Solothurn, a small town in Switzerland. She initially approached the town as a pedestrian and casual stroller. As she had done with the subway platform in Berlin, she examined people's everyday movements and, along so-called walking trails, discovered places where people often stopped for various reasons. She subsequently developed her own system of symbols intended to mark these subjectively discerned points. At twenty-eight selected intersections she painted blue dots, each with a diameter of fifty cm, on the ground. The sculptural form is reduced here to its value as symbol and colour.

Contemporary users of public space are accustomed to reacting to symbolic systems of all kinds. Particularly in traffic, movement sequences are structured by arrows, lines and dots. The dots placed by Stella Geppert have no such easily recognizable reference. On the contrary, among the citizens of Solothurn her punctuation marks provoked intense discussion about the meaning and value of the dots, and possible connections between them. This in turn evoked the artist's astonishment at all the active participation, and at the lively Swiss culture of debate. Their involvement went so far that the citizens themselves assigned interpretations to dots without obvious purposes.

The apparent capriciousness of their distribution drew attention to the role and semantics of individual codes that are at odds with collective conventions. To this extent, the equally minimalist and effective intervention allowed people to think about meanings and the setting of meanings. On a second level, the artist tested the perceptibility of a form that is reduced to the symbolic: for public symbolic systems are perceived selectively according to their user's interests. The points thus also focus our attention upon the brevity of urban perception.

Garbage, the city and fear

Her latest work "Belagerung / Siege" (2005) puts mobility as a dogma of modern society to the test. Here Stella Geppert placed objects reminiscent of short-term accommodations or things in transit into a temporary gallery and its adjacent municipal space. The individual works negate the habitus of the artistic form. The individual objects, packed in transparent or blue plastic sheeting, or wrapped up in rags and cloths, are stuck together or tied up. Externally observed, they are undefined things. Awkward and bulky, but nevertheless partly mobile being built on wheels, they are scattered around apparently at random.

Their purpose, which cannot be deduced either from their form or their contents, is also not revealed by their spatial context, and their interiors and exteriors appear interchangeable. The object dismissed from a context like this becomes an absurdity, becomes garbage, because it asserts itself neither through its function, nor through aesthetics, nor through a symbolic value.

Nonetheless, the packing brings with it associations of something being hidden or protected, and here and there the aura of abandonment and worthlessness is enlivened by clues that hint at an independent existence inside. Partial views into the interiors allow the outer form to be perceived as a cover providing 'nesting possibilities', as the artist calls them. Thus one object conceals the interior of a little cupboard, another rests on the wheeled foot of an office armchair. The objects' volumes and way they are put together are oriented to human dimensions. They were intentionally created with no special technical support, and only by utilizing found materials or materials already on hand.

The objects' deliberate artlessness and meaninglessness has a strange connection to the world of increasingly technical, networked systems. We are becoming more and more accustomed to having

data available at any time and anywhere, and we are developing the same expectations and making the same demands upon the material world. Container development has already produced self-steering, autonomous systems, which transport goods without any human assistance.

The artistic scenario "Belagerung" can be understood as a statement that the flip side of these developments are rapid processes of revaluation and devaluation, which cause continually more things as well as people to drop out of the systems. The artist doesn't shy away from making the fear of this indefinable, non-affiliated and ultimately threatening state of affairs into a public theme as a modern paranoia.