

Peter Herbstreuth / Staging public space Performative spaces by Stella Geppert

In: Stella Geppert // ach so // Objekte / Installationen / Interventionen, Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, 2006

These days the concepts intended to help organize and discursively control reflections about public space are coming off the printing presses so rapidly that their staccato increasingly illuminates the concepts themselves rather than artistic practice. Public art is no longer public art, but is instead art in the public interest, a service, resistance, counter-public, district work, interaction, city marketing, festivalisation, entertainment or just downright universalizing. Art of the public. Yet beyond all the terminological fireworks, the stars sparkle. Still to illuminate are the constellations in which Stella Geppert's ephemeral undertakings become visible.

She has taken on the drastic changes in perceptions that occurred since the 1990s regarding art in public and utilitarian areas, and she often works "below art's perceptual threshold"¹ on routes of inner-city movement. Depending on the task and on her interpretive freedom, she also takes theoretical reflections into account that have been discussed in the German-speaking art world since that time. Although the analyses and propositions of Guy Debord², Henri Lefèbvre³ and Frederic Jameson⁴ were sufficiently well known – even if from secondary sources – it was not until the 1990s that they became increasingly relevant to curators, jurors, artists and art critics for evaluating public art proposals and projects, and for making decisions about their implementation.

This theoretical aspect should be considered as a climate of discussion of the past few years, but not overstressed. Ultimately, artists rarely follow theoretical guidelines, but orient themselves instead on the results of socially relevant analyses, especially if these are urban analyses dealing with artistic interests, and also reflecting the criteria and preferences of curators and jurors for temporary outdoor projects.

Lefèbvre's theory of "differential urban space", which he developed in 1970 as a complex framework of isotopias, heterotopias and utopias to contrast with the homogenous space of rural and industrial locations, is relevant to Geppert's approach. Lefèbvre states that the differences which come to light and establish themselves in space do not originate from the space as such, but rather from that which settles in it, collects, and is confronted there with the urban reality – and that opposites, contrasts, superimpositions and parallel existences take the place of distances.⁵ Continuing these thoughts in later essays, he observes that urban spaces should also become manifest through artistic interventions, should offer playful possibilities for the individual adoption of public interests and concerns, and generally should enhance the sense of possibility and create "structures of enchantment". This is why, as he concluded his pamphlet with prophetic flair, the future of art is not artistic, but urban.⁶ In this way he points to art as a form of action. However, his considerations, like those of Debord, Jameson and many of their interpreters, are based on the retrogressive paradigm of estrangement – a diffuse variable, the zero value of which cannot be calculated and the various degrees of which cannot be assessed.

In the foreground of Stella Geppert's work stands the individual interaction with objects. The objects, however, are simply media. They are introduced in order to do something with them, are material that is freely available to play with, and confront passers-by with the unfamiliar and with something that is functionally undefined. Therefore the question arises of how to represent the interventions, and of how they are combined with photographic investigation. What status do the photographs acquire, and how does documentation turn into a work?

Documentation of the everyday

The artist generally adds a short commentary to the photo series, disclosing the intervention's experimental design and defining its points of departure in order to illustrate the structure of the reality she has documented. As soberly as for an accounting statement she outlines her course of action and underlying intentions. This produces the context in which she wants the series to be seen. The photos are documents of her undertakings in outdoor and indoor urban spaces. No picture stands on its own or proposes itself as an absolute representation of the whole, for the idea of the whole is extrinsic to

a process that always works in stages, extracts, additions and series. Every picture therefore shows a further point of view and exploits the idea of a past event's constellation with a variety of unresolved aspects and blind spots.

The artist notes what she did over a limited time span – always in the present tense. "I follow the movement of a corner shelf turning in upon itself," as one of the inscriptions begins (*Parasitäres Verhältnis — Parasitic relationship*, 2001). Another continues, "Over a period of two weeks I observe people and their behaviour on the platform of the U2 subway at Alexanderplatz" (*Parasitäre Verhältnisse und Dialoge — Parasitic Relations and Dialogues*, 2002). Yet another begins, "This work develops during several walks through this relatively small city" (*Standpunkte unterschiedlicher Sichtweisen — Standpoints: Different views*, 2002–2007). Every prelude for a scenario immediately makes clear her interest in a framed-in, parenthetical and easily comprehensible reality, and with consistent logic refers to a serial photographic documentation. After all, these are field studies of an experimental nature. Their progress is still open, as is their outcome. Yet nothing can go wrong in such experimental set-ups. Within the set parameters every result is a finding.

Her curiosity about reality precludes a naive belief in the representation of the real. In Geppert's time- and research-based undertakings she is not concerned with *the* reality with its political, economic or cultural dimensions, but with observing a careful presentation of everyday life in public, staged using apparently useful things. Yet little occurs during her observations. Public space in her pictures does not appear as a space for social interaction. No dramas are kindled here, and climaxes correspondingly fail to appear. People come and go, sit down and wait, stand at a traffic light or pass each other on the street. They look at the ground, into the distance and into nothingness. Everyone is silent. Nobody speaks. A car goes around a curve. No danger. A peaceful city.

Performative spaces

Since interventions in public space are based on a dialogue structure, and the objects employed enter into a relationship with their surroundings by accentuating a connection, commenting upon a relationship or condition, emphasizing something neglected or offering something – and then disappear again after a predetermined period of time – neither the artist's idea nor her undertaking are revealed when the objects are viewed in isolation. This becomes clearer if one construes public space as performative space. The special nature of the artist – that in a more or less well-defined segment of public space she arranges the relationships and organizes the behaviour of things, passers-by, movement and perception – allows comparison with a staged presentation. After all, individual interpretation (by the actors) is also possible in the performance practice of staged presentations. "The performative space," according to the definition of the theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, "opens up possibilities without stipulating the manner of their use and execution. Furthermore it also allows itself to be used in a way that was neither planned nor foreseen."⁷ There is – to put it briefly – a script; that is the artist's concept. There is also the performance, which is transitory; this is the intervention into urban space with its special atmospheres, unpredictable factors and weak or strong performers. These are observed by the artist.

This style of observation distinguishes Geppert from many other artists who work in urban settings. She places as much emphasis on it as on the staging, but in her still young oeuvre she does this without exhausting or strictly limiting all the performative possibilities. Yet all staged presentations refer to the book – not to film, for in retrospect the successions of uncontrollable movements find completion in a series of selected images.

The role of photography

The ephemeral survives in photography. During the staged presentation the artist observes the reactions of passers-by who either noticed her undertaking or did not notice it them, and she documents the positions that passers-by adopt. Nobody poses. These are casual moments in public places – moments that also would have taken place if Geppert had not been present with a camera to view the immediate impact of her object ensembles. Here it is of further importance that her discreet form of observation with an unseen camera gives the photo documentation a completely unspectacular

and largely accidental air. Yet these are in fact composed photographs.

Passers-by constantly move around the installed objects during the day, since Geppert selects well-frequented locations of everyday life for her undertakings. Viewers passing them generally linger only briefly if at all, and are elsewhere with their thoughts – at their next appointment, in a daydream or talking on a mobile telephone. These are locations of inner-city passage where people accumulate without congregating. They lean against the cushions provided in the subway station (*Parasitäre Verhältnisse und Dialoge — Parasitic Relations and Dialogues*, 2002), stand on the coloured circles on a public square (*Standpunkte unterschiedlicher Sichtweisen — Standpoints: Different views*, 2002–2007) or heedlessly pass these things by. Under the photographer's gaze, both the unpredictability and the completely informal aspects of the spectacle of the streets come to the fore (contingency), while this spectacle simultaneously acquires a framework that organizes the situation into an image with a balanced internal structure (staged pictorial composition). The freedom of the passers-by towards the objects on location finds its counterpart in the constraints imposed by the two-dimensional excerpt. Her decision to select *particular* photos for the publication may suspend this contingency, but it does so without being able to fully abolish the semblance of a contingency. One second later or on the following day she could have found a similar situation and photographed it. She is clearly not aiming for highlights and crucial moments, but is seeking consistency and the endless repetition of the everyday. She even seeks this when she counteracts vanishing-point perspective in some pictures, placing pillars prominently in the picture, blocking the view, dividing the picture, or even combining various pictures into a collage that one does not immediately recognize as such (*Solothurn picture postcard*, 2002). Her shots capture moments in such a way as to play down their staged character and emphasize their documentary status: *this* is how it was for a long while; *this* is how it happened. The photographs even maintain this appearance when they reveal themselves, as a collage, to be the opposite: namely something artificial, composed and cut to fit. Thus one is dealing with the logical impossibility of a long-running, staged chance occurrence, and does not immediately see what it is about.

Staging chance occurrences

The inability to immediately recognize precisely what they are about, however, is one of the characteristic features of Geppert's undertakings. What she adds to the houses, streets, squares and gardens cannot immediately be ascribed a sense, meaning or function, and defers identification. She sometimes sets up her interventions so minimally that they could even be overseen (*Trafocontainer — Transformer Container*, 2000). Sometimes she gives a large form a new suit of clothes, draping the high windows of a shabby four-storey house on Lutherstadt Wittenberg's central market square with puffed-out Bordeaux-red material, for example, converting it into a mysterious monument with baroque chic (*Entfestigung — Defortification*, 1998). In both cases she used purely visual means to hint at functions and suggest a use. As a passer-by one gets the impression that the attributes have a use (as a container, a road sign, a curtain or a garbage bag). Yet the semblance of usability and functionality does not become reality. The function remains uncertain. Nevertheless a substantial part of the effect comes precisely from this semblance. It begins the perceptual process and turns out to be an imaginary excess in the undertakings in that it activates the sense of possibility and loads the attributes with a nameless 'something more' that cannot be rationalized, realizing itself like poetry as a concept. This imaginative moment that – when it succeeds – vibrates as pure *dynamis*, ignites the works as little ecstasies in the give and take between definition and the undefined. These small ecstasies arise – paradoxically enough – from vacillation. The passer-by falls out of linear time for a brief and spellbound moment, and pauses. The habitual aspect of the walk, the predictability of the path, the flow of one's own thoughts, are halted – as if a small accident had happened, the outcome of which is not yet clear.

One can ascertain the means of arranging these interruptions of the usual. Geppert develops them from the visual context and brings them into line with their surroundings, to which she adds them: the principle of similarity. An element never appears by itself. These are always several objects with symbolic character: the principle of addition. These two leitmotifs also run through the pictures she took of everyday life in Japan. There, on a rainy day and from an elevated standpoint, she

photographed a city square filled with a sea of umbrellas: all the same, but none identical. Similarly she photographed a park where equipment was protected by blue tarpaulins, and in a game reserve she photographed a forest clearing with a grouping of pine trees and deer (Ansiedlungen – Settlements, 2003). These are always conglomerations of similar items, groupings and variants of the uniform. The same is true for photographic series of London streets, the asphalt of which had been painted with a baffling wealth of symbols and patterns (London Pflaster – London pavement, 2004). Yet she does not analyse these arrangements or investigate their origin or meaning, but simply organizes their visual appearances into groups.

What one rarely finds in her photographs, however, are symbols, such as advertisements, shop signs, display windows, billboards or logos from the world of commodities. While she primarily photographs developed areas, inner cities, streets and routes all occupied with traces and indications of civilized activity, the commodity-oriented world remains rudimentary and almost completely hidden. The commodities – fashion, cars and real estate – do not appear as offers for sale, but rather as things already acquired, and thus as things of individual use. Similarly, the surroundings she consistently scrutinizes in the photographs consist of the familiar, to which she adds slight contrasts through the use of temporary discrepancies. Yet with the patience of a snake charmer she establishes in all of her photographs the precarious uneventfulness of places frequented daily: the normal life that every daily paper contradicts; no sudden changes, but consistency; no speed, only the calm river of time passing. This clarifies the curious fact that she takes similar pictures on a journey to London as she does on a journey to Japan, or during observations in Solothurn. She pays attention to the variability of sameness, of common ground and of that which connects, and not to the differences, to that which separates or to otherness. This is precisely what leads to the half-ironic, half-curious correlation that when one looks at the photographs one cannot be sure whether she has found and photographed a situation that has not been altered, or whether she has staged this situation with objects employed temporarily in order to observe them by photographing them. Elements from Japan reappear in exhibition rooms – particularly the blue: the blue of the garbage bags is the blue of the markings is the blue of the umbrellas is the blue of the tarpaulins is the blue of roofs at the foot of a mountain range. One could therefore conclude conversely that Geppert considers her own productions to be a part of everyday life everywhere. Yet this would be a punch-line with limited scope. Geppert arranges connecting elements through her choice of photographs, incidentally universalizing the blue, and outside of all didactic intentions she directs the viewer's gaze to details so that one wonders: what might the artist have added? What is there – on this square, this street, this train station – that is at all useful, purposeful or beautiful? The difference between ingredient and discovery becomes uncertain, and this illustrated book, this catalogue and this work arise from these uncertainties.

¹ Jean-Christophe Ammann: A Plea for New Art in Public Spaces. In: Parkett. No. 2, 1984

² Guy Debord: Die Gesellschaft des Spektakels. Tiamat, Berlin, 1996 (Original edition: La Société de Spectacle. Paris, 1967)

³ Henri Lefèbvre: Die Revolution der Städte. List Verlag, Munich, 1972 (Original edition: La Révolution urbaine. Gallimard Paris, 1970)

⁴ Frederic Jameson: Postmoderne – Zur Logik der Kultur im Spätkapitalismus. In: A. Huyssen / K. R. Scherpe (Ed.): Postmoderne. Zeichen eines kulturellen Wandels. Rowohlt, Reinbeck, 1986

⁵ Lefèbvre: *ibid.* p. 135

⁶ Henri Lefèbvre: Writings on Cities. Blackwell Publ. Cambridge/MA, 1996, p. 173

⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte: Ästhetik des Performativen. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 189