

“In my view, conversations have architectural forms.”

Interview with Stella Geppert by Norbert Bayer (Berlin, August 2015)

Translated from the German by Kathleen Heil

The artist Stella Geppert develops spatial and performative concepts and installations in her work. With Norbert Bayer she discusses her latest works, democratic actions, and her dreams.

As the interview begins, Stella Geppert puts on her hooded sweatshirt. While putting it on, the sunglasses that were sitting on her head slide down to her nose.

Stella Geppert: *(laughs)* As you can see, by pulling down my hoodie I'm able to put my sunglasses on at the same time.

Norbert Bayer: Great! Could this be one of your performances?

For me, it's primarily an inspiration from which an intervention could emerge.

And what does an intervention mean to you? How does it differ from a performance or happenings?

Well, with happenings—I am indeed happy—but with happenings I'm not so guarded. A site-specific work requires a long preliminary research phase. In contrast to good interventions, which in my case are the result of situations created by chance. My objects have always evolved from situations and actions, because for me there is no creative process which could be separated from everyday actions.

Norbert Bayer: Could you give me an example?

For example, the dismantling of the letter trays in the work "When Destruction Becomes New Form." The different types of destruction, both with and without tools, led to the creation of a new and different structure built on these different forms of destruction. These different gestures of rage arose from resistance to a system. I chose letter trays because I had dealt with letters and with A4 sheets in particular, and a flyer triggers actions and behaviors that are distinct from what a notice or a form would lead to. The communication triggered by administrative processes—which invite or exclude people to take part in a society—was the starting point for "When Destruction Becomes New Form." So, in short: an asylum application is denied, or the fact that there are people who need specific IDs and certificates in order to live in

any given country. This powerlessness in the face a highly administrative system—this systemically induced sense of powerlessness—has been a very important part of this work.

As I was working on it, on the radio I heard an excerpt from the novel *Die Orangen des Präsidenten* [The president's oranges] by Abbas Khider. The excerpt described a torture situation in which the protagonist, because of the vehemence with which he is being tortured, starts laughing in pain. He laughs and laughs and laughs. The torturers are very irritated by this, but he will not stop laughing. This was a key experience for me, the reason for which I made the work "When Destruction Becomes New Form" at all. Just as in a moment when a sequence of suffering takes on a form that no longer can be described—in this case, laughing at a highly painful situation, which allows the protagonist to begin to break free from the situation. This both touched me deeply and enraged me. "When Destruction Becomes New Form" is on the one hand, melancholic, and on the other, destructive, but through this melancholy a moment of liberation also unfurls.

Are you often full of rage?

Not really, but I would say that my work is based on notions of loyalty, democratic action, and a sense of equality among human beings. I am always interested in ways of belonging in groups, and group formations that are structurally equal and balanced. The genesis of my work is born out of the lack of understanding of imbalances and inequality. And of course that contains emotional components as well, which are worked through conceptually.

So do you see your work in a political context?

The basic motivation for making art is a political context, yes. I would not call it in and of itself political, but in any case it comes from an understanding of society and ideas of society.

...one which is different from present-day society?

It works according to the social principle of equality, according to the principle of understanding, with the aim of overcoming inequality or achieving a structure in which dialogues where each person has equal footing become possible. My newest work, "Hieroglyphendecke," is after this in a certain way as well, by trying to decode forms we are caught up in that might also be able to evoke other images. And when we are able to make ourselves understood by other images, we also become capable of communicating with each other differently.

Could you elaborate on this?

So, when we're all wearing plungers on our heads [*laughs*]*—*that is, drawing-headsets, as in the work "Hieroglyphendecke"*—*and all of our head movements as we talk are being recorded, regardless of status, the role we dress for or think we have to fulfill, then our understanding would be different, as in my work "Hieroglyphendecke." My interest lies in disrupting established role-specific behaviors. The "Hieroglyphendecke" is an installation of very delicate, filigree square steel tubes.

The structure is built to form a variable, height-adjustable interior, in which a roll of paper can be pulled out to form the ceiling of the room. The people with whom I immerse myself in this installation all wear headsets, which are outfitted with tubes in which a piece of charcoal is inserted at the end. Depending on the person's height, the tubes of course are also different lengths. The idea is that while conversing, one draws at the same time by means of the unconscious movements of the head beneath the paper roll. The different actions and situations, such as reading a book, chatting, holding a meeting, lectures, consultations, or expressions of love are recorded. I would like to continue to develop this, also with the goal of working even more in the mode of recording movements of the body.

And what ignites your inspiration, exactly?

Mainly the impulse to give shape to things such as conversations that don't have a fixed form, as well as the impulse to investigate the underlying motivations for actions. That is the idea behind "Archäologie der Kommunikation," which I'm interested in as an archeologist of communication [*laughs*]. I experience the moment of encounter or agreement in communicative contexts as an architectural form, and that fills me with creative energy and focus. And I ask myself: How I can develop a sculptural form for this encounter, which in turn will spark a different kind of relationship with the other and thus a different means of communicating? I make this work out of the desire for interpersonal, fixed ways of acting to be shaken loose and broken open. That art changes something is obvious, but that's something art can only do with the interaction of multiple forces and not the artwork on its own. Otherwise I would create work in institutional contexts, which in turn would hinder my thoughtful joy and artistic practice immensely.

'Thoughtful joy' is a beautiful term—what thinkers have inspired you?

At the moment I could not give you a specific answer. I'm sympathetic to thinkers who have developed derivations from the world that are their own independent constructions, rather than referring to the work of others. There are philosophers who have inspired me greatly because they have made visible for me structures of thought that open up a connection between the life of the mind and an approach to the world. And when thinking springs forth authentically and constructions of thought become visible, I am then also mentally involved. So I would say that Deleuze and Guattari were at the foreground of my thinking with the mirror works and that thinkers such as François Jullien have had a big influence as well.

You mentioned site-specific work. What sites or places are particularly charged for you?

In my view, nearly all kinds of places can be inspiring. It has to do with one's willingness to truly situate oneself in a place. And that renders each place interesting in certain ways and also worthwhile as a site for creating a work. First and foremost I am fundamentally interested in the appropriation of multi-faceted formations that can arise from places which people move through, avoid, and/or in which they carry out certain practices. When I consider concepts for spaces, I am on-site and moving through the space to find out what different uses and modalities still exist in that space, even though they are no longer legible architecturally. Many of my installations work with the coding and revealing of being, as in "Unabhängig von der Lage." In the Kunstverein Cuxhaven this involved recommissioning the ceiling tiles and an elevator shaft in the former lemonade factory, which had been forgotten but nevertheless was still present in the basic outlay of the space.

Which works would you consider your strongest? Those with which you would say, I have accomplished something, and that have also been crucial in leading to further work?

I have had several key works which have furthered my artistic practice. "Entfestigung" is one in which I stuffed with padding an empty building, which was cubic in its layout, so that the padding swelled from the windows. It is through the work that I have determined for myself that I may call myself an artist, independent of official diplomas or university accreditations. Another work was "Parasitäre Verhältnisse und Dialoge" from 2002, in which I took the leaning behaviors of people waiting in the Alexanderplatz subway station as an opportunity to activate an existing situation, so that people would come into contact with each other. It is also, for me, one of the first artistic works to express a political gesture of resistance to the depersonalization and economization of public space.

And 2007 – 2009 was a very important time for me in terms of work, in which I created three mirror installations that broke open the architectural parameters of a white cube. As such, these three works in their own way call into question for me to strong effect the architectural space and the thinking about the space, as well as the question of how we locate ourselves in actual space and also in our imagination. Another important year for me was 2013, working in performance and film at the research center in Venice and beginning to study the culture of walking in general and more specifically in Venice. And always there are very, very small works which have been created in my studio that are very, very important to me.

In broad terms, how has your work changed over time?

The basic need to make art has to do with giving and impulses of doing. Another motivation is the need to be intensely present in the world. That's why my artistic work is always about location and always about the question: "Where am I?" and "Why am I doing something?" My artistic practice revolves around the individual responsibility to actually and intensively experience life, and in this to examine the possibility of coexisting with others.

What are your upcoming artistic projects?

I would like to develop the movement structures of the installation "Hieroglyphendecke" even further, which means further work with different persons beneath the construction, recording their head movements during conversations and then considering the form in which I can categorize these drawings, because multiple drawings of different kinds of actions will arise. And also with the aim of working even more in the mode of drawings that record movement itself.

What do you dream of?

I dream of collectives, I dream of spaces in which the greatest possible freedom of action and thinking exists, and I dream...I dream quite often of conversations that have architectural forms. In my view, conversations have architectural forms. Following our conversation, tonight I will definitely also dream of the architectural form that our conversation has.

Stella Geppert, thank you for speaking with me.

