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# Dialogue

*Translated into English by Laura Schleussner*

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Sabeth Buchmann: It would be relevant to discuss your work in relation to so-called social minimalism. This term refers to standardized forms of work with an industrial aesthetic that is based on historical minimalism and that-as in so-called institutional critique and the so-called context art of the eighties and nineties-is loaded with socio-cultural significance. Examples include the works of Janine Antoni, Angela Bulloch, Tom Burr, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Henrik Olesen, Christian Philipp-Müller, Heimo Zobernig, etc. In my opinion, one certainly can make these associations, alone due to the apparently alinear structuring of the concepts of your work-which are rooted in the work world and everyday life-according to typologies that are more or less randomly compiled according to letters of the alphabet.

Mario Asef: From the very start the interventions were conceived as a kind of journal, in which chronology played a deciding role. In retrospect, I discovered that the series contained very specific themes, in which the intervention assumed a specific position and which, to a certain extent, demonstrated a continuity within the timeframe of a year or longer.

Naturally these themes do not need to be organized in a linear manner. There is no reason why one theme should come before or after another. The format of the book as a medium does favor a linear reading of the works. For this reason I resorted to a random classification of these themes, in order to refer to and create awareness for the non-linear coexistence of the different thematic areas.

On the one hand, this highlights the fact that a certain kind of knowledge that one acquires through experience (Empirien) is not stored chronologically in the memory. It is abstracted in a way that space and time exist independently of one another. On the other hand, herein lies a negation of conventional historiography, which always runs counter to psycho-physical element of memory in order to represent a constructed, linear subjectivity towards events-which ultimately only serves a political aim.

S B: The kind of terminology you bring into play-Empirie and the notion of experience-seems to formulate an opposing stance to the minimalist tradition related to conceptualism, in which the artwork is based on ideas or theoretical propositions. At the same time, one is not given the impression that you are interested in the aesthetic or phenomenological experience in your work but in experience as a form of information about the specific context in which the works are placed. My question is whether you are concerned here with opposing moments in the perception of the subjects and situations you construct?

M A: Yes, I do try to clearly separate different stages of perceiving the work. I think there are different levels of experience. This term is normally reduced to a sensual level, in which an immediate effect is ostensibly generated through confrontations with the material world, without an impact on other mental levels. However, there is also a level of "mental experience," in which material is charged with certain signifiers that strongly influence experience and that can generate different kinds of perception, depending on the possibility of interpretation in socio-cultural contexts. [All such knowledge can be confirmed as true or false, so that one single experience can be associated with multiple, and perhaps even contradictory, meanings.]

My working process consists of setting up a hypothesis in mental space and then looking for an experience in actual space that can confirm this hypothesis. In other words, this reverses the empirical process through which knowledge is gained, and thereby the function of a "contemplative action" is artificially generated and pursued ad absurdum. Thus, an idea is not created from experience but implanted within experience as an abstract thought. Idea and experience thus become a systematic construction of a thought experiment that aims to produce an unpredictable effect.

S B: To what extent would you say your approach is related to project formats that circulate under the term artistic research? This includes an almost scientific investigation of locations, contexts and discourses. I am asking this, because, on the one hand, you often work with text and commentary; on the other, you seem to place value on the

literary and poetic quality of your objects and projects—a quality that analytical research projects sometimes lack. So here are two questions in one.

M A: These works are not based on any kind of research project. This analysis normally develops as a kind of assimilation process. We know that the analysis cannot continue to exist independent of an object of investigation. This means that the analysis exists as a whole and can therefore very quickly lose its relationship to empirical reality and remain unaffected by it. In order to disempower the analysis, one can use analysis itself as a means of establishing a critique of the analysis. In this sense, humor plays an important role in my work.

The basic idea is to create a system within which one can move more or less freely. For this purpose I often fall back on pseudo-scientific methods, always in the hope of achieving a poetic sensibility that lies beyond this methodology. This might sound paradoxical. However it is true that science (particularly since the beginning of the 20th century) has strongly influenced the cultural imaginary of the Occident (here one could include Cubism or Futurism in conjunction with numerous science fiction visions, etc.). In other words, it is fertile ground for poetry. New scientific discoveries open up new perspectives on life and also new fantasies.

S B: Maybe we can use this point to delve more concretely into the sculptural aspect of your work. I have the impression that you—although your works could best be described with the term "situation" or "situative intervention"—still hold onto what one could call a classical approach to the object. For example, in the intervention Europe Towers, which you realized in a Bausch & Lomb warehouse, you bring together the aspect of a new order within European norms and a reference to modular typological forms of modern architecture, and at the same time you use cardboard boxes. The association with Warhol's serial objects and minimalism is obvious. Are you interested in pointing to the frame of reference in which you are operating, i.e. the institution of "art?" At the same time, your interventions are apparently always located outside of this frame of reference, in the factory, on the street and in contexts that impact "other" social levels and realities in order to engage there with genre-like conditions of artistic production.

M A: Although a clear reference to the art context is implied in my interventions and precisely because the transformative significance of objects play an important role in my work—objects that are taken from everyday life into a gallery and museum and are then again returned to the street—I do not want to define the formal element of my work as sculpture but as structure in public space, as converted elements of this public realm that have taken on artistic reference through a "shift in order."

One should also consider the fact that precisely these references function contextually. That is to say that once the documentation has been put together, the works must be shown in an institutional space in order for them to evoke the artistic references that were a consideration in the working process but do not play a role in the initial confrontation with the intervention.

It is really important to me that all objects undergo an additional process of transformation. Only in this way do such interventions have meaning.

S B: A conspicuous element of all the concepts of your work is that they always contain a moment of retroactive impact that is mediated through the documentation: that means that different sites of intervention—such as in Brownie Ranch, Job Center, etc.—always function as a mediated site for the production of signs. However, this is exactly what seems to make it possible for you to integrate an act of chance in a specific way—an act that embodies the moment the work is perceived. In this context I am thinking of the work *Mudança*. This raises the question of whom you want to address in your work.

M A: In the first phase of the process the addressees are always passersby. Later the work shifts more in the direction of addressing the viewers and consumers of art. They all represent the corpus of the social, and in this way they all represent the intended audience. In other words, the interventions consist of reorganizing elements in social space. The passersby, users, clients or workers who happen to be at the places I have selected rearrange these elements or simply destroy them.

Initially this kind of participation is the catalyst for nonverbal communication outside cultural institutions, and it represents a kind of transgression of the artistic context. Later the works are documented, and this documentation is shown as art in an institutional context. As a result, the range of addressees becomes wider, and the relationship to the work is changed, because the reorganized elements have already vanished and they only remain as a kind of "staged memory" (documentation) in the gallery or museum.

S B: In conjunction with my previous questions I am interested to know whether you have certain specific artistic conventions in mind when you take photographs, or whether you tend more towards a journalistic style.

M A: All interventions were documented with an analogue pocket camera. Personally, I have no photographic ambitions. My position resembles that of tourists who are always outside of the contexts in which they find themselves and who try to make sense of the given situation from a distance. This distance resembles the rhetorical distance of a poet, the mathematical distance of a scientist, the structural distance of an observer. At the same time, I try to engage with the paradoxical realm of the photograph. As in *Dead Policeman and Hole*, in which the significant motif within the context remains positioned behind the camera. The location was namely a US military base, and, as is the case at such sites, one is not allowed to take photographs.

Or in *Fragile*, in which a comedian placed himself in front of the intervention after it had already been taken over by homeless people. The public photographed the show and also the appropriated intervention in the background, which remained "invisible" to people because they didn't know about it. This means that the motif of my intervention was reproduced dozens of times, but it remained invisible to people.

This phenomenon is repeated in the many interventions of Type L, in which people simply shoot photos in a museological context in order to look at them in peace and quiet at home. However, when they get home, they realize that these locations where they have been did not correspond to what was represented in the photographs. In other words, some elements take up previously unsuspected positions, although everything still looks completely ordinary.

S B: It is almost a banal cliché to say that the function of art consists of making something visible. As if the field of visibility were a privileged field of work. Your work seems to be concerned with opening up other possibilities of perception. We talked about this initially in reference to the notion of information, which targets cognitive or intellectual elements. Here, I primarily mean your work with literary texts, such as those of Borges, which deal with a transformation of language itself in a way that is more or less implied in all of your interventions.

That brings us to Marcel Duchamp, who comes to the fore in Type L, your act of donation: here information and language refer to the museum's classification of apparently non-aesthetically coded objects. One could also draw other parallels, for example to Beuys and Broodthaers, in the sense of a reflection on the meaning of exhibiting and the associated institutionalization process of modes of production and understanding. What would you like to add to this reflection?

M A: These kinds of references to Duchamp or Broodthaers are certainly an aspect of my intentions, although my interest is more concentrated on the aspect of the classification systems for objects in our environment. Thus, these interventions represent a parameter for the classification of private objects, which generate an absurd moment when combined with the predominant value parameters of our culture. That is the reason that we laugh when we think about choosing to make a differentiation, and it recalls Jorge Luis Borges story *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, in which he presents a list of the classifications of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia.

So my works speculate with the notion of creating a Museum of the Absurd, in which the exhibited items provoke new chains of reactions due to specific constellations, such as those of museological grammar.

Over the course of the history of art we have learned that every object is a carrier of meaning for cultural signifiers. Why not rethink the traditional encyclopedic structure of our museums and reconceive it as a porous organism in which public interaction is a source of a continual reconstruction of the institution?