

## Joachim Kreibohm On Christian Helwing`s work

Text published in the catalogue *Christian Helwing / 4 M*, Kunstverein Bremerhaven 2007

### Reminiscences

Artists constantly attempt to transgress the boundaries between the various types of media and to dissolve existing ones. The boundaries between architecture and sculpture have also become fluid. This in no way implies a crossover, a light-footed leap from one genre to another that ultimately deprives the work and the concept of viability and substance.<sup>1</sup>

Lifting the boundaries between the genres is not a privilege of Modernism. The visionary architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799) broke with Baroque traditions, propagated a kind of monumental classicism, and developed a distinct abstract style. In his designs, Boullée dispensed with superfluous ornamentation and augmented simple forms such as spheres and columns by taking them to monumental heights. Many of his ideas, however, were never realized; their dimensions were for the most part immeasurable. His structures are regarded as the dawn of the connection between architecture and sculpture. Boullée originally wanted to become a painter and demonstratively preluded his architectural life's work with the leitmotif "And I, too, am a painter."<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Merz later paraphrased Boullée, saying of himself that "And I, too, am an architect."<sup>3</sup> This credo can also be ascribed to Christian Helwing.

The essential difference between architectural and sculptural forms concerns function versus purity. What connects them, however, is their three-dimensionality. Architecture always has a context, to which it responds. Sculpture and paintings produce a context within which they can situate themselves. On the one hand, architecture serves a specific purpose, designates a specific use. On the other hand, architects attempt to avoid designing purely functional structures. Provided an architect's dreams and fantasies take shape, they time and again come back down to earth. A painter, however, can do anything within the limitations posed by the two-dimensionality of a picture; he can extend these two dimensions by adding a third. He can, as did Albrecht Altdorfer in his painting *Susanna at Her Bath*, place story upon story up to lofty heights. He can, as did Antonio Canaletto, shift the basilica built by the famous architect Palladio in Vicenza to the Canal Grande in Venice. And as Hubert Robert did with the Grande Galerie in the Louvre, he can in the same way anticipate the future in a painting and let what exists go to rack and ruin.

Modernism also examines architecture in a pictorial and sculptural way. The temperamental architectural paintings by Oskar Kokoschka testify to his consistently personal comment on real architecture. El Lissitzky's painting combines weightless, transparent spaces with ostensibly almost illusionistic architectural fragments. In the 1920s, Kasimir Malevich created cubic objects

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<sup>1</sup> These reciprocal connections between architecture and sculpture have been the subject of a series of exhibitions. In some of the exhibitions, sculptures and architectural models were compared and emphasis placed on the interrelations between the genres (ArchiSkulptur, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2005; Kunst & Architektur 1900–2000, Genoa, 2005; ArchiSkulptur Museum Wolfsburg, 2006). In contrast, the exhibition at the Kunstverein Hannover focused on the relationship between architecture, sculpture, and the model in contemporary art production (Archisculptures, Kunstverein Hannover, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Boullée began his work *Architecture: Essai sur l'art*, published in 1793, with the statement "Ed io anche son pittore" (And I, too, am a painter). Ed. Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, Paris, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> The Hamburg Kunsthalle and the Deichtorhallen collaborated in 1992 to put on an exhibition of works by Gerhard Merz. The title of the exhibition, "Archipittura," was at the same time its leitmotif. Merz laid out, among others, two spaces in the Deichtorhallen. One of the spaces was designated "Ed io anche son pittore," and the other one "Ed io anche son architetto."

he called “Architectona” and which corresponded with the stylistic elements of Mies van der Rohe. Contemporary architecture is evolving in such a sculptural way that the boundaries between the genres are becoming more and more permeable. The structures designed by Frank O. Gehry, for example, display a strong affinity to sculpture, whereas works by Per Kirkeby make reference to architecture. The digital, bimorphic projects by blob architects such as Greg Lynn cause contemporary architecture to appear to be sculptured buildings.<sup>4</sup>

Gordon Matta-Clark’s works in particular were pathbreaking for a new understanding of architecture in the 1960s and 1970s. The American artist became renowned for his rigorous actions, during which he perforated, broke open or dismembered entire buildings. In 1974 he bisected an empty suburban home in New Jersey (*Splitting*), and in 1975 he executed funnel-shaped incisions on two residential homes marked for demolition (*Conical intersect*). His incisions and breaches open up architectural structures, dissolve rigid boundaries between inside and outside—both those that are real and those in our minds. These interventions are invariably a radical criticism of architecture as a discipline that likes to think it is pure and ignores its dependence on economic structures. They are based on the concept of opening hermetic architecture in favor of communicative processes that aspire to change real structures.

## Model Builders

In the 1980s, the discussion on the subject of architecture brought about a further dimension. The model becomes worthy of discourse. The so-called model builders—such as Ludger Gerdes, Harald Klingenhöller, Wolfgang Luy, Reinhard Mucha or Thomas Schütte—gave careful thought to model-like but unconstructable structures without placing themselves in the tradition of visionary architecture, without assuming the role of a radical critique of architecture. Their works range somewhere between sculpture and architecture; they are a kind of representative of postmodern thought and take on the purpose of pictorial metaphors.

Sculptural concepts are also being increasingly explored in the medium of photography as well. Oliver Boberg, Thomas Demand, and Lois Renner walk the line between photography and sculpture. They do not place reality directly into the image, rather they create flawless and perfect models of the objects they subsequently take photos of. It is not until one casts a second or third glance at the image that one recognizes its origin. Oliver Boberg takes his motifs from the everyday world and prefers “non-places” in urban environments. His works convey an atmosphere of their own; they appear to be real and at the same time far removed from our mundane existence. Thomas Demand also constructs models, preferring locations that are in some way related to media. These might be the workplaces of famous people, television studios, or architecture firms. One of his primary questions is how an image works that purports to depict reality. His works principally revolve around epistemological topics and examine different levels of reality. For years now, Lois Renner has been availing himself of a model of his studio, within the context of which he takes photographs of constantly new studio situations that have a classic effect. The boundaries between model and surroundings are hardly discernible. Renner thematizes the studio as a source and focal point of artistic activity. The classic theme of the artist in his own studio therefore takes a surprising contemporary turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Blob architecture refers to structures and designs that exhibit fluid, often rounded and bimorphic forms. It did not become conceivable until the advent of modern software for architects. Greg Lynn, born in 1964, is one of those architects to generate a new type of architecture with the aid of the computer. Fundamental to his concept is the integration of temporality and motion into the architectural form-finding process.

Characteristic of all of Gordon Matta-Clark's stances on the Düsseldorf model builders—all the way to those among the photographers—is his rejection of an exclusively self-referential artistic orientation and his attempt to resecure art to socially relevant questions and issues. These positions distinguish themselves in their answers to the following questions: What is art's task? Does it have to develop visions and utopias? Should it change and shape society? Is it art's responsibility to point out the deplorable state of society's affairs? Gordon Matta-Clark adopts a clear stance: art has to intervene, it has to subject the excesses of modern architecture to criticism, and it has to expose the liaison between architecture and economic interests.

The commitment of a man such as Matta-Clark was foreign to the model builders of the 1980s. They also regarded sculpture as a conceptual model, without indulging in the impulse to criticize or change social structures. They were skeptical about a noble claim by art to be able to change society—for the model builders, art no longer has the omnipotence to effect such change. A younger generation of artists, such as Manfred Pernice, moves at a meta level and dispenses with directly borrowing from architectural forms. The works by this generation are often models of themselves and move along the interfaces between architecture, sculpture, and the model.

### **Architectural Integration and Sculptural Autonomy**

And Christian Helwing? How can his work be positioned? What are his strategies? What are his central questions? His works oscillate between art and architecture, they are neither one nor the other. They move along the interface between these areas and sound out the boundaries. The ambivalence inherent in his works marks the central questions: When does architectural intervention become art, and when does aesthetic intervention become architecture? In this context, Helwing speaks of sculptural fixtures. Fixtures that both seek architectural integration and at the same time insist on sculptural autonomy. The structural alterations he carries out are in no way produced from the perspective of an architect, rather they are statements made by an artist with respect to architecturally defined exhibition spaces. Ambivalence and paradoxes essentially constitute the grammar of his work.

Do his works make sole reference to contour, shape, and volume, or do they open themselves up to other areas of social reality? The visions and utopias of previous avant-garde movements are not pursued; one cannot attribute a content-laden charge of that kind to his work. In their form and presence, his works are related to Minimal Art, and yet Christian Helwing is able to impressively detach himself from it. They reflect architecture as a setting for human life, and they strive to be more than just existent. By assigning the sculptural fixtures a function, the natural point of reference of which is the people walking through an exhibition, Helwing departs from the classic definition of Minimalism and liberates himself from the Minimalist dogma of art for the sake of art. A long way from Minimalist pronouncements, a long way from the Düsseldorf model builders, who unlike Helwing almost exclusively staged their sculptures as models. A long way, too, from the model builders among the photographers, such as Thomas Demand, whose epistemological questions have only marginal character for Helwing.

Helwing's works create volume in space and define themselves by the presence of their materials. They do not emerge as a closed and self-contained thing that circles around the viewer in order to participate in his or her aura. Rather, his sculptural fixtures are able to produce distinct and succinct spatial situations; they occupy, organize, and structure the space, channeling the viewer's movement capabilities.

Christian Helwing works in situ, i.e., on site in close correspondence with the existing dimensions and proportions. Yet the spaces his works make reference to are not only considered with respect to their specific architectural features. Besides the structural circumstances, he is always interested in a structure's social, representative, or historic function. For example the work *4 Meter 60 nach Hause gehen* (2007), his contribution to the exhibition in the Städtische Galerie in Bremen of works by recipients of a grant-in-aid. In its various functions, the real space becomes the subject of the work: exhibition space and transit space. Helwing disguises his sculptures as architecture by feigning a certain usefulness. The wall segments that have been joined together are reminiscent of minimalist Bauhaus architecture; the lighting and the textured plaster spark off associations with hallways from the 1950s. Above and beyond this, the work lays claim to its own sculptural reality. The hallway built by Helwing was meant to serve as an entryway into the exhibition space, to channel going in and going out. However, this walk-through hallway did not dissolve into functional architecture because the space also serves a purpose without this fixture.

Or *Wohnung Felix Rehfeld* (2006). The various functions of a spatial situation are thematicized in this case as well. The venue as living space, as an exhibition space, and its previous function as a butcher shop. The sculptural fixtures the artist has executed act as partitions or wall elements. References to architecture therefore exist without establishing functionality in the literal sense. The intervention in the former cold storage room is particularly convincing. The ceiling was done in the same green as the invitation to the exhibition; and the hooks on the slide rails, from which pork halves once hung, have been derusted and polished to a bright shine.

In general, an architect's floor plans serve as a guide for the exhibiting artist: Where are open spaces? Where can pictures be hung or sculptures placed? What influence do the lighting conditions have? Christian Helwing also attunes himself to the floor plan; however, he sends his thoughts out into the opposite direction. The title of his first institutional solo exhibition arranged by the Kunsthalle Bremerhaven was "Kunsthalle." The hall of art is occupied by itself. The large exhibition hall, the graphic gallery, the box office, the gallery, the paths, and the foyer become the subject of his interventions.

In Bremerhaven, the functionally distinct spaces of the Kunsthalle as a whole are the theme of Helwing's exhibition. Spaces with different functions, spaces of varying sizes and heights, spaces with different floors and ceilings. His sculptures have been placed in the rooms in such a way as to disclose the functional and social relationships of a special place: the Kunsthalle Bremerhaven. He developed a general concept for the existing spaces that is directed at the space occupying the space itself, occupying itself with elements that in progressive abstraction were borrowed from the spaces themselves.

Stacked in the large exhibition hall there are four bodies sheathed in black film that in their height, width, and length make reference to the gallery steps: *blind volume*. On the one hand, the bodies possess volume and take up space. On the other hand, their surfaces seem to resist this spatial expansion. The film focuses the viewer's gaze, mirrors it without reproducing it. The bodies hide their innermost, only to reveal it elsewhere. Depending on where the viewer is standing, volumes and proportion seem to change. The length of all four bodies corresponds with the length of an imaginary tunnel that traverses the exhibition hall from the box office to the rear wall. The individual parts of this tunnel are in turn components of the broader conceptual design.

The central element in the graphic gallery is a partition that has been covered with textured plaster, which in abstract form constitutes the paths between the spaces. In addition, an ordinary façade light fixture has been attached to the inner wall of the gallery at the same height as the head of a sculpture by Stephan Balkenhol on the outer wall. Miniature tables and chairs—part of

the Kunsthalle's furnishings—complete the ensemble. The graphic gallery with its carpeted floor is transformed into a homelike atmosphere. Even the title of the work—*Gemeindezentrum West*—provides sufficient material for associations.

Another work—*Blender*—opens the foyer in two directions: its own longitudinal axis and the passage past the box office into the large exhibition hall. Besides its architectural features, further of the box office's functions and the passage are thematicized: passageway and barrier for visitors, place of communication and information exchange, workplace and surveillance room. There is something threatening about the sculpture covered in silver film—it seems to obstruct the visitor's movement and unsettle him or her.

## Small Sculptures

Besides the architectural fixtures there is a group of small sculptures. Christian Helwing works with preexisting forms. Styrofoam packaging for radios, computers, coffee machines, and the like is his source material. Packaging that resembles miniature structures. Helwing does not invent his forms, he finds them. He does not use the found forms as ready-mades, he alters them: he dissects them, breaks them into fragments, adds to them, applies plaster to them. In this way, a constant process develops between finding form and inventing form. The small sculptures have a characteristic pictorial as well as sculptural formulation; they provide the viewer with a form of imaginary accessibility, imitate heaviness and yet are light as a feather, and they permit memories of real architecture to rise up—but only memories. These sculptures in no way constitute the preliminary stage of a sculptural or architectural execution. They are neither a model of nor a model for anything, and they seem to appreciate this intermediate state and to skillfully suspend it. In his sculptural works, Helwing does not fall back on architectural embellishments in order to process them on a modified scale into sculptures diminished in form. This aspect points toward an essential distinction between his works and those by Hubert Kiecol.

## Surfaces

Christian Helwing uses materials from the local home improvement store. Materials that are easily available: roof battens, film, and preferably Styrofoam, a certain cosmopolitan material because it is used everywhere. Styrofoam is used as packing material and in this function refers to the wealth of our society, which appears as a monstrous accumulation of goods. Styrofoam is regarded as an inferior material; however, if it is employed to insulate floors or façades, it serves a superior purpose. The ambivalence of the material also influences how it is used. On the one hand, precise plastering increases the value of the material. On the other hand, paint is applied to it so that the material tends to break up. Contrariness nevertheless proves to be a decisive working principle.

Helwing's works not only thematicize space and volume, but also materiality and surface without taking trouble over the classic reference framework of appearance and reality. Neither does the surface become independent nor develop into an autonomous system. Here, surface is always a projection surface for ideas, thoughts, and fantasies. It seems as if the materiality of the surfaces of his works reflect the surfaces of real structures. He imitates technical processes; the surfaces appear to have been handled like the heat-insulated façades of buildings or prefabricated elements, plastered with the same tools one uses to plaster an expansive wall. Thus Helwing's working process is much the same as what would be necessary to build a house, except that it is on a smaller scale. This scale, which occurs in everyday life, carries the recipient's imagination.

Here, building elements that are many times larger outdoors have been made many times smaller in order to serve as sculptures. The textured plaster that has been applied may have the same graining as that on real buildings, but the proportions have been broken. There are two ways to classify the surfaces of his works: on the one hand, they are surfaces in a specific materiality, color balance, and structure. On the other hand, the surface is a link to the real world both visually as well as conceptually.

## **Consolidation**

Christian Helwing's works prove that he has mastered the balancing act between art and architecture and that he succeeds in pleaching the different functions of different locations. He is neither a dreamer of illustrious perfection nor an ideologist of absolute autonomy. Excessiveness, pathos, and beauty are not insignia of his work. His art operates between model and reality, functionality and purposelessness, image and reality, between inside and outside. Helwing's works reflect reality without dissolving into functional architecture; they are sculptural constructions beyond distinctly functional references. Constructions that are aimed at the imagination of space and motion. These works are abstract enough to rule out being mere representations of real architecture, and they are concrete enough to allow the development of association areas. They cannot be easily extended into reality, nor do they deny reality in a self-referential sense. Rather, Helwing's works are both architecture and sculpture. Aesthetic, architectural, and social functions come together to consolidate in his work. Thus a completely new language emerges whose frame of reference is located somewhere between art and architecture.