

Joachim Kreibohm in conversation with Christian Helwing

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JK How did you arrive at what you're doing today? Is there a king's road in your development?

CH I don't think there's a king's road. At the moment, I'm not inventing either autonomous sculptures or sculptural postulates, but working concretely site-specific. I discover my sculptural language in my examination of the respective location. In the exhibition at the Kunstverein Ruhr I'm concerned with discovering the plastic potential of the architecture, dissecting the existing architecture, and investigating its possible sculptural formulations.

JK Important references in your development are artist personalities such as Gordon Matta-Clark, and artistic currents such as Minimalism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus. What fascinates you, for example, about the Bauhaus? Is it its aesthetics or the interdisciplinary approach in its teachings?

CH I was initially fascinated by formal things, postulates and statements. At the moment I'm discovering relevant references to Bauhaus in my work that I'd like to transport into our day and age. The Bauhaus was not only aesthetics, but a visionary form of design as well that couldn't be reduced to a sculptural postulate. Because I also locate my works in what we call reality, I inevitably make very different references to Bauhaus and to De Stijl than only formal ones.

JK You're active at the interface between architecture and sculpture. Your works are neither the one nor the other. This ambivalence leads to a central question: When does aesthetic intervention become architecture, and when does architectural intervention become aesthetics? Why this theme?

CH As strange as it may sound, I'm not particularly interested in architecture right now. Neither would I like to extend art by the concept of architecture. Rather, I'm attempting to work out a kind of sculptural potential in both disciplines. A potential that conceptually does not occur as sculpture or as architecture. I'm interested in working with body-related and confrontational situations that can't be subsumed under the one or the other heading.

JK Your works reflect architecture without dissolving into functional architecture. They suggest a usability or usefulness without dispensing with sculptural qualities. Do you move thematically between these two poles?

CH Good architecture always has a functional context as well as a potential for being perceived aesthetically. The architecture that is relevant and interesting to me is more similar to art than the term architecture commonly allows. Functionality materializes in my works in that they are accessible. And so in a certain way they can be used, because the experience they convey is also a form of use. Architecture becomes strong by incorporating artistic aspects, and art becomes strong provided it is not self-referential but attempts to respond to forms of reality, and only in this respect does it have a kind of justification.

JK You work on site, in close correspondence with the existing premises. A strategy that was employed in the nineties in an inflationary way. A reference to space was often claimed, but rarely radically fulfilled. Can one give what has in the meantime a somewhat stale strategy a contemporary turn?

CH Certainly. But not by means of spectacular actions such as those Gordon Matta-Clark carried out in the 1960s by cutting through buildings and in connection his artistic actions with a provocative gesture. Today one falls back on strategies that intervene in existing spatial structures and architectural postulates in a more subtle way, because architecture and the overall urban environment have become extremely differentiated. The supposed reference to space from the 1990s is not a consistent one, as what was done was only a kind of extension of the boundaries for art. In contrast, in my works I dock to architecture to such an large extent that they practically merge into it. Because they can no longer be clearly recognized as a plastic, artistic reference to space, I find a contemporary answer and distance myself from a mere extension of boundaries.

JK Gordon Matta-Clark's interventions are always a radical critique of architecture as a discipline that claims to be pure and dismisses its dependence on economic conditions. Matta-Clark's commitment was even foreign to the model makers of the 1990s, such as Ludger Gerdes, Harald Klingelhöller, Reinhard Mucha, and Thomas Schütte. While they also understood sculpture as a conceptual model, they did not indulge in an impetus of the criticism and transformation of social structures. Your generation is accused of not having visions or utopias whatsoever and of celebrating a cool pragmatism. Any objections?

CH The spatial postulates I've developed in no way move on a pure model level, but they're concrete situations that can be experienced spatially and are connected to real architecture. While my postulates don't manifest utopias, they do attempt to link up to forms of a comprehensive world outlook and change.

JK Utopias are often ideal designs of future societies and have inspired entire generations. Utopias rarely live up to their promises and have disappointed entire generations. Have the utopias, dreams, and visions of the avant-garde movements failed?

CH The utopias of modernity have for the most part failed. But not due to their aesthetic policies. Rather, society didn't understand that utopias are more than the formal implementation of ideas. The contents associated with utopias were taken out of their actual contexts and profaned. If you take a look at Minimal Art, which should be seen in the tradition of Bauhaus, Constructivism, and De Stijl, today you can see that all department store decorations avail themselves of basic Minimalist principles and that while the purely formal aspects of the avant-garde visions have arrived in the middle of society, the ideas behind them have not.

JK The work *Rehfeld* in Felix Rehfeld's apartment and the exhibition at the Kunstverein Bremerhaven in particular come to mind. In *Rehfeld*, the different functions of the location were intertwined. In Bremerhaven, it wasn't the separate spaces that comprised the starting point for your sculptural interventions, but the building in its entirety. In what way did these works influence your further development?

CH For me, *Rehfeld* is the most exciting work. Because of the display-window situation, it is unavoidably forced to assert itself in the urban environment. The question was also raised of what one can expect from someone accidentally walking by the display window. How is what I stage there perceived? The work in Essen likewise clearly has to assert itself in an urban environment.

JK And the exhibition in Bremerhaven?

CH I worked with floor plans for the first time in Bremerhaven, something essentially new for me. Here, I didn't develop three-dimensionality out of a sculptural understanding of materiality or forms, but I fell back on architectural floor plans. I took the architect's plan, thought beyond it, and turned it around. I took my work on site very seriously.

JK Let's turn to the work *EAT*. in Essen. The exhibition space is divided by means of two black, diagonal walls in such a way that three separate triangular spaces are produced. One space can be entered from Kopstadtplatz. The rear, larger area can only be accessed if you go out again and use the entrance from the foyer of the Forum Kunst & Architektur. The third space is inaccessible. What are the basic parameters of your intervention?

CH For one thing, the work in Essen involved the intense study of the space's floor plan. For another, I consciously examined the works that were realized there by artists in the past. I attempted to position myself in this canon in this way. In the course of my examination it became clear to me that most of the artists perceived the exhibition space as a box that, although it communicates itself outwards by means of a display window, continues to be the self-contained exhibition space of the Kunstverein Ruhr. I wanted to break through this perspective.

JK A kind of attitude of denial?

CH I think so. I didn't cancel out the hierarchy between the exhibition space and the existing architecture. The Kunstverein's display window acts like an outward signal into urban space, whereas I applied the lettering *EAT*. to the entrance door. Once a passer-by or potential visitor to the exhibition acts on this attention-getter—be it as a question, invitation, or promise—and enters the exhibition space through this door, he or she is immediately excluded again, because with a room depth of a maximum of three meters, the diagonal partitioning allows only little space to move. As a viewer, on the other hand, I am thrown back on myself. At this point I already negate the notion of a self-contained exhibition space that I enter with certain expectations. If you still want to get to the bottom of the situation, it is possible via a detour to reach a second one, the rear exhibition space. There you're confronted with the same situation—the space opens to one side, but at the same time closes again.

JK Does the overall project embrace this ambivalence?

CH This ambivalence continues on to the rear wall of the exhibition space by means of a door that suggests one can walk through it—you see that it's open a crack, but it doesn't lead anywhere. I integrated a dissecting spatial cut into the exhibition architecture that avails itself of very minimalist means, derived from the floor plan. You could also view the walls I placed in the space like a wedge that has been driven into it from the side and allows or prohibits certain movements within the space. Thus, my intervention is based on a confrontational spatial concept that does not define the space at Kopstadtplatz in terms of an autonomous work of art, but by means of cuts into the existing spatial conditions.

JK Can your interventions be interpreted as an attempt to dock onto reality and peel off self-referentiality?

CH The way I perceived the Kunstverein Ruhr, apart from the large display window, it very closely approaches being the ideal exhibition space. The floor is painted gray, the walls are white; the pillars in the space might be distracting, but then it is an art space that has to be seen in isolation. However, I didn't thematize the space with regard to the idea of the white cube;

rather, overall I see it as part of a certain form of postwar architecture that quite explicitly gives distinction to the cityscape in the Kopstadtplatz district. Thus, I deliberately react to this urban environment and disengage myself from self-referential strategies.

JK The work demonstrates an understanding of sculpture that includes the viewer in its entirety. You've succeeded in creating an emotionally charged atmosphere by means of a reduced language of form and color. Why did you choose to combine gray, black, and white?

CH I encountered this combination of colors in the De Stijl architects, who developed a clear color policy. Very specific attributions were used for the *Rietveld Schröder House* in Utrecht. All of the walls were designed in either gray, black, or white, and all of the linear constructivist elements in red, yellow, and blue. Coloration that doesn't thematize itself in its own chromacity, but is an ideal combination for producing reactions in the potential viewer. Coloration that expands the spaces and at the same time constricts them. This is why I used this chromacity reduced to black, white, and gray.

JK Do geometric forms serve as a manifesto for you?

CH I don't write manifestos, because what interests me about geometries is their "abuse" in an attempt to explain a world order. What I do is more an attempt to polemically culminate the right angle, or in this case the acute angle, whereby I use principles similar to those in modernity in order to counteract them in equal measure. For example, I've inscribed the expressionistically tapering corners of the *Chile House* in Hamburg into my space in Essen, but not in the form of architecture that defines itself outwards by way of the façade's rhetoric, but which ends in the viewer's confrontation with the interior space of the architecture. My diagonal cuts in the space, for instance, cut through the two steps in the exhibition space in such a way that as a functional element they are apparently reduced to absurdity.

JK How does *EAT.* distinguish itself from earlier spatial postulates?

CH *EAT.* is substantially more focused than previous works, because, on the one hand, it radically thematizes the spatial situation, and, on the other hand, it carries strong, reflective elements within itself in that it scrutinizes a variety of modernity's architectural concepts.

JK Does your art supply added aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual value?

CH These terms can't be separated from each other. My works possess a potential that transports the viewer beyond intuitive perception to a reflective level as well. The various forms of insight are not arranged in a hierarchy, but are interwoven. With its holistic approaches and utopias, modernity has to a large extent apprehended human existence without playing out emotions against intellect. My works are concerned with continuing this line of thought. However, I would like to transport it into the present time, revive and perpetuate it. I think that this is a contemporary concern. Modernity did not fail because its overall claim was wrong. But the architecture that arose out of it can't meet this claim because it was degraded into objects and turned itself against its original claim.