

A different outlook on Kunst am Bau

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A DIFFERENT OUTLOOK ON KUNST AM BAU

Brita Polzer

From every point of view, the encounter between architecture and art is central to any discussion about Kunst am Bau. It is the building authorities of a commune or canton – officials related to the architectural profession – who organize the art project competitions,¹ and it is the architects themselves who by and large decide an art work's location and, frequently, its thematic content. Meanwhile, various publications have featured the pros and cons of including artists earlier or later in the planning stage, together with illustrations striving to document how harmoniously art and architecture complement each other, preferably undisturbed by any sign of actual use. For all concerned, architecture remains the basic point of reference, reflecting the fact that Kunst-am-Bau funding does indeed come from the respective building budget – generally one percent of the total cost of construction. Not that this automatically puts Kunst am Bau in bondage to the architecture: Basically, the artists are free to define their task as they want. One can only wonder, then, why so few of them make use of such freedom to develop their own scenarios. Generally, they tend instead to content themselves with accomplishing formal, aesthetically-intentioned interventions in or on the finished building. In an attempt to dismantle this fixation on architecture, I would like to introduce a shift of perspective, using two works by Hanswalter Graf to support my argument.

In a study of her city's booming culture scene, the London cultural critic Angela McRobbie determined that its artists are, to a great extent, cut off from the on-site events.² Although London belongs to the culturally saturated venues of the world, she notes that its local art scene is winding down – a fact she attributes in large part to the increasingly nomadic lifestyle of artists who think of London merely as a point

of transit. No longer a „life stage" to these artists, the city has turned into a „shadowy backdrop" to their careers. McRobbie goes on to question whether culture and creativity have the capacity to restore the community, in order to bring about long-term links to a locality and, thus, a sense of place. A study of Basel yielded similar insights. Based on opinions culled expressly for the journal „subtext," an editorial appeared explaining that the professionally handled presentation projects that are currently the trend in Basel are meant to impress the outside world. Basel's artists, the article continues, show more concern for outward appearances dictated by mainstream opinion than for the tangible socio-cultural needs of the city. There is a growing demand for new strategies addressing social issues of the sort.³ In short, by targeting the international scene and market, artists are hindering the development of local roots. This uprooting – in the sense of a lack of integration – also affects the insertion of Kunst am Bau: Artistic projects intended for hospitals, prisons, kindergartens and schools are designed far more with an eye to their reception by an art public. They cater to an established art world that, in fact, has little interest in the „applied arts." Kunst am Bau, however, is a realm of its own, with its own highly specific pretensions. Instead of imitating the rules and regulations of the market-oriented art business, it is now vital that the sorely neglected debate over Kunst am Bau be resumed and intensified, and that new possibilities be envisaged. Who knows, perhaps something new will come of the fusty and legally hidebound model, something inviting local participation and renewed awareness of the immediate surroundings ...

Because he is so openly committed to this sort of cause, Hanswalter Graf, who hails from Thun, tends to be considered as your „typical Kunst-am-Bau art-

ist."⁴ In recent years, he has come up with some highly cogent ideas: Instead of simply delivering finished works of art to his clients, he fulfills his commissions in collaboration with the latter. No doubt, the fact that Graf himself is a graduate of a teacher-training program contributes to his attitude. Upon submitting his entry to the Kunst-am-Bau project competition for the Dürrenast Primary School in Thun, he complained that grade school art history courses generally stop at Paul Klee, and that there is no exposure whatsoever to contemporary art. Given this state of affairs, the question arises as to how to initiate any sort of encounter at all between school children and art. In this case of his „Marker" project, Graf decided to share both the commission and the funds available to him. The project extended over six years, during which time he successively invited various artists to join the school's sixth-graders in developing it, and at the same time lead discussions on contemporary art.⁵ During each year's workshop, artists and pupils jointly created a sign, an eponymous „marker." The abstract signs thus produced came to succinctly embody each year [NB the German text reads „week-long," but from what I read of this project on the Internet, I understood it to be a year-long each time] – long, art-filled learning and living experience. The „markers" were affixed to various sites inside the premises and as an identification mark on an outside wall of the school. Here they serve as a sort of art logo, each standing for the respective year's graduating sixth-grade class. A class is a temporal community. Not only do Graf's „markers" bring this across, but they also made it clear at the time to the departing sixth-graders: This is the place where they spent such an important slice of their life. Each of the workshops was accompanied by a journal⁶ featuring texts on Graf's project and the participating artists. The school as a „local visiting card" also inspired articles, as did the topics of the architecture and surroundings of various school-houses, and even the question of education in general. It is hard to imagine a better way of networking and bringing to fruition the coupling of art and architecture. The project put every aspect of Kunst am Bau – be it aesthetic, intellectual or social – into practice in most exemplary fashion.

Graf experiments with new forms of teamwork, builds up networks, develops new working methods and finds new ways of displaying art to the public. In doing so, he produces works expressing and paying due homage to the collaborative development process. Participants in his projects learn that it can be fun to take closer notice of their immediate surroundings, with an eye to perhaps subtly changing them. Graf does not take the stance of an autonomous artist in his projects: He thinks of himself as a go-between. In his many roles as variously coordinator, curator, initiator, teacher and/or head office clerk, he links up with a changed artistic self-awareness that, since the nineties, has been developing under the heading of „New genre public art" or „Art in the public interest." In a remarkable essay on Site Specificity,⁷ Miwon Kwon – who teaches in California and is the co-publisher of the renowned art journal „Documents" – comments that contemporary forms of localization tend to grant less importance to aesthetic and art-historical concerns. Artists use the leeway afforded by art to present highly diversified concerns. No longer restricting themselves exclusively to producing aesthetic objects, they have come to prefer works affording spheres of action and experience.

Kunst am Bau needs to see itself in a new light. The relationship between art and architecture now plays second fiddle to the social contexts and specific living conditions of the users. Were these to be taken into consideration, then art and architecture together could produce feelings of belonging, commitment and responsibility.

¹ In the present essay, I shall deal exclusively with state-commissioned Kunst-am-Bau projects.

² Angela McRobbie's text can be consulted at www.ateliereuropa.com, within the framework of the Munich Kunstverein's "Atelier Europa" project, 2004.

³ „Subtext 3," editorial, Kunsthalle Basel 2004, www.subtext.ch

⁴ Such designations are at once scornful and envious. Although Kunst am Bau represents a basic source of income and activity for quite a few artists, it still is looked down upon as a secondary activity dependent on commissions.

⁵ Besides Hanswalter Graf himself, the other participating artists were Nika Spalinger, Markus Schwander, Dominique Lämmli, Heinrich Lüber as well as Sabina Lang and Daniel Baumann.

⁶ The six „markers" were published by Hanswalter Graf and editorially entrusted to the art historian Claire Schnyder. Contact address: Hanswalter Graf, tel. 033/222 36 12, hwgraf@datacomm.ch

⁷ Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," October '80, spring '97.