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Autor: Krebs, Edith / Ursprung, Philip

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KUNST AM BAU AS A PLAYING FIELD FOR DEMOCRATIC PROCEEDINGS

An interview with Philip Ursprung

Edith Krebs

TRANSLATION: *Margie Mounier*, 65

In various essays and speeches, you have spoken out strongly on behalf of Kunst am Bau. Why? Among specialists in the field, but also among artists, talk of Kunst am Bau always elicits a great deal of scepticism.

To begin with, Kunst am Bau is one of the realms that have substantial funds at their disposal for the fine arts. Artists are provided with opportunities to realize the sort of large-scale projects that would hardly see the light of day under other circumstances, since construction budgets are far larger than usual art budgets. Secondly, through Kunst am Bau, artists get to present their work to a far wider public than at shows in galleries and museums. Thirdly, Kunst am Bau represents a highly experimental situation that invites deliberations on art and the function of art that are totally innovative. In unprecedented fashion, not only must the specific venue for an intervention be taken into consideration, but also the goals, duration and, last but not least, the legibility of a project.

So you refute the argument that Kunst am Bau renders art functionalist?

On the contrary. Kunst am Bau is an age-old institutional opportunity that I feel is worth defending. How can a democratic nation represent itself? How can a school, a court house or a scientific institution be artistically represented? Now as ever, these are controversial questions. We should not forget that, in former times, it was the churches and nobility who commissioned Kunst-am-Bau projects. During the Baroque era, princes or bishops alone could define a project program. Only with the emergence of the democratic society did this realm open up, continuing to this day to provide occasion for transactions and discussions. Kunst am Bau is a sort of playing ground for democratic proceedings – one it matters to keep open.

Would you really say the game rules are democratic?

Let's watch our step here. I guess we would have to speak of half-democratic process, such as is generally the case in a democratic state where many transactions and decision-making processes are determined by the committees, the delegated entities, under whose responsibility they fall. Seen in this light, in my opinion the art market is not democratic, because it still retains many relics of the feudal and aristocratic societies of yore.

You have been a member of the Swiss Commission for Art since 1997 and, as such, you are also in charge of the federal Kunst-am-Bau program. What has been your experience in the matter?

Kunst-am-Bau projects are generally decided by an invitational competition process: Certain artists are invited to submit works for a particular construction project. So it is no pseudo-democracy open to all – which would in fact fly in the face of the real world of architecture and art. Rather, it is a process governed by specialists who choose between various suggestions. The process calls on a number of parties – the developers, users and art experts – to participate.

Thus it takes place in various stages, which inevitably means making compromises. As a result, it is generally the least disturbing projects that are selected. Other projects are often more interesting from an artistic point of view than those that attract the users or architects. The difficult, but also challenging, aspect of all this is to blueprint a program that gives the artists all the specifications they need, yet leaves them with enough leeway to come up with exciting suggestions. Another difficulty arises in convincing the users to choose suggestions that are not designed from the start to be subordinated to to the architecture. Often it is the architects who feel constricted by the art.

Does it ever happen that architects skip the competition process altogether and suggest artists they themselves want to promote?
In my experience it only happened once, for the Oerlikon school building. The architect, Peter Märktli, bypassed the competition process: He gave the contract directly to Hans Josephsohn, and went on to choose already existing sculptures. In this case, the artist involved was someone very close to Märktli, someone for whom Märktli had built a museum and whose sculptures he had previously integrated into several private constructions. Although the Kunst-am-Bau selection process had already been set in motion and the jury chosen, a direct contract was established. The result may not look all that bad – indeed, from an aesthetic and formal standpoint, it is even quite convincing. Still and all, this example did bother me, because as far as the Kunst-am-Bau question is concerned, merely setting up existing sculptures in front of a building is to throw a great opportunity out the window. It avoids all confrontation, exchange, or innovative experimentation.
Of course, there are many architects who like to work with certain artists. Herzog & de Meuron, for instance, with Rémy Zaugg, Adrian Schiess and Thomas Ruff; or Gigon Guyer with Adrian Schiess. However, in these cases it has been a matter of joint projects announced as such from the start and, as far as I know, they did not come into being as a result of competitions. Many times when the architect him- or herself decides on an artist, a certain degree of subordination exists: for example, the artist is put in charge of the color or light design of the architecture. But to my mind, „color/light design" could conceivably be considered uninteresting. The interaction between art and architecture this suggests is totally restricted to formal elements. In any case, the art serves to underscore decisions made by the architects.

But that is just the sort of Kunst am Bau that is specially popular. This raises the question whether art is not reduced to mere decoration in this way.
I'm no fan of this sort of collaboration. To give you an example, the University of Zurich's pink auditorium – renovated by Gigon/Guyer, and for which Adrian Schiess did the color design – seems less than successful to me. And in most of the other cases, too, the results are hardly conclusive. It is almost as if the artist were nominated to be some kind of an expert in coloring and expected to furnish a little surplus value. The problem is that this conception of the matter has become a model for others.

How do things stand with respect to the so-to-speak „stars" of the architectural profession? It hardly seems conceivable that a Peter Zumthor would accept Kunst am Bau in his buildings. Or what about Jean Nouvel's Culture and Congress Center in Lucerne, for instance?
Actually, I know nothing about how things stand for the CCC. I would be very surprised, however, if Jean Nouvel – or for that matter Peter Zumthor – would admit any Kunst am Bau. Undoubtedly, both are convinced that their buildings are art in themselves. This holds true for Mario Botta as well. As far as I know, the latter only tolerates Kunst am Bau when he himself chooses it. This is so even when federal projects are concerned, where the game rules in fact call for different proceedings. But there is no federal legislation for Kunst am Bau, which is ruled more by customary law in the matter. And much depends on the persuasiveness of the individual protagonists. I have often seen architects get quite touchy when their buildings are tackled. Frequently, architects are wary of artists, fearing that the later will distort their original idea. To my mind, this is a mistaken opinion, because I doubt that art could really affect a building's architecture. In extreme cases, like Zumthor's buildings, which work like sculptures, I would tend

rather to refrain from any Kunst am Bau. Then again, to date Zumthor has unfortunately never been commissioned for a federal project.

In the meantime, consensus has been reached about how much better it is if artists are included in the planning phase as early as possible. Does that really make sense?
Personally, I think it's better for them to be included once the shell of a building is up, so they can see how and to what they must react. Actually, it only makes sense to include the artists from the start when a so-called „congenial" project is in the making. That is, when the artist already has a role to play at the planning stage, such as for urban planning projects. However, most Kunst-am-Bau projects are undertakings on a smaller scale, like schoolhouses or administrative buildings. In such cases, I feel there is no need for architecture and art to do the planning jointly from scratch. To my mind, it's also more interesting for artists when they can react to something existing, because only then can they take off on a tangent and set up a contrast to the building. The projects that appeal to me the most are those that actually have absolutely nothing to do with architecture. Instead, they enable art and architecture to collide. I believe in the division of labor.

What do you think of artists who specialize in Kunst am Bau and are totally absent from the art market – from museums, galleries and exhibitions in general?
The price paid by such artists is a certain isolation. Keeping up with the art scene means obeying certain rules. Those who focus on the Kunst-am-Bau scene to the exclusion of all else generally lose their credit elsewhere.

In your text „Das Medium ist nicht die Botschaft" (The Medium is Not the Message), you plead the cause of a Kunst am Bau that seeks to come to functional and historical terms with architecture.
On the one hand, there are some architects who deliberately play dumb and resist any form of Kunst am Bau. On the other hand, there are also many artists who act dumb when confronted with a Kunst-am-Bau challenge. They simply go on doing their art, maybe on a slightly larger scale. They are totally insensitive to how the venue functions. Time and again, I've noticed from the competitions how few art projects give any thought to, for instance, the history of a venue. In this, some of the artists are way behind the architects, who generally tend to closely study the venue under construction in its topological, functional and historical aspects. Artists often neglect these questions, as if grappling with architecture over them were something of a dead angle in artistic production.

There are few Kunst-am-Bau realizations in Switzerland that could be termed social interventions and that, for instance, set up situations involving communication. Is that due to the competition process, or are theire really so few artists around offering such concepts?
To my knowledge, „service-art" is actually very poorly represented in Switzerland. In any case, it is far less prominent than in Germany and, above all, Austria. And the competition rules, at least at the federal level, are politically oriented to exclude all but Swiss artists. We have tried over and over again to get the federal government to change this, but evidently it is not legally possible.

The one-percent regulation has been legally adopted in only a few communes and cantons. What do you think of posting that money, which after all is governed by the building authorities, to a different category so that it could be spent on, for example, art in public spaces, like they did in Hamburg?
The Hamburg model is a good example, but, unless I'm mistaken, in the meantime it has come to an end. The results of such projects are usually very positive qualitatively speaking, beause they are the work of skilled specialists. This makes me wonder if they are not too attached to the art world. Usually, they involve imitations of models developed at some exhibition. For example, there was the sculpture exhibition in Münster, and suddenly they sprouted up all over the city. The good thing about such experiments is that they get the discussion on art in public space going in the first place. Personally, I remain steadfastly attached to the traditional model of Kunst am Bau. I also am of the opinion that we can go on calling it „Kunst am Bau" (art on construction) and not

switch over to „Kunst und Bau" (art and construction) as they have in the city of Zurich. I always think of Kunst am Bau as a fungus-like growth: Somehow, I simply prefer this tangled, gnarly, muddled and self-contradictory process, even if the results are sometimes disastrous. Such small and even large fiascoes are the source of much creative energy, experimentation and understanding, all of which – once the cultural debate is over – is to the benefit of both art and architecture.

But that in itself is sad, that there is so little public receptivity and debate over Kunst am Bau. What do you think is the reason for this?
The artist group Relax, which has realized a good number of what I consider very pointed Kunst-am-Bau projects, has this to say on the question: Kunst am Bau does not interest anyone, and that is the starting point for us. I too believe that, in the public eye, Kunst am Bau rates very low. Debate only gets going if, for instance, a budget becomes overdrawn. But that is not always the case. For example, in Berlin there has been heated debate over the Holocaust Memorial for three years now. Another example is Richard Serra's „Tilted Arc" – a monumental sculpture that was erected at New York City's Federal Plaza, and ended up being torn down by the client several years later. Public controversy crops up mostly at touchy points involving public interests, when it becomes a question of who decides where something is to be placed. And for a controversy even to take place, there has to be continuity in the proceedings and traditions; otherwise, it's only a matter of isolated cases.

Besides public commissions, big business firms – especially banks and insurance companies – are an important source of orders for Kunst-am Bau contributions. For these clients, the way they are represented, their corporate identity, plays a greater role than for public institutions. Is that reflected in a certain conventionalism marking Kunst-am-Bau works?
On the contrary. Often the contracts assigned in the private sector are bolder and more satisfactory than those for public venues. In the first place, direct con-

Ein Blatt im Wind, Pippilotti Rist, Installation, Unikat, 2002, Foto: Linus Lintner

Ein Blatt im Wind, Pippilotti Rist, Installation, Unikat, 2002, Foto: Linus Lintner

tracts generally replace any competitions. This means that the different participants need not pursue anything for the purposes of complying with the competition rules. Nor is the process restricted to Swiss artists. You could draw a parallel between private commissions of today and projects commissioned by the Baroque-era princes, who held responsibility for the entire art „package": The entire political issue disappears, and the matter is reduced to the internal labor market.
Until now, I have only collaborated on one such private project, together with Jacqueline Burckhardt, for the expansion of the Winterthur insurance company's headquarters in Winterthur. We drew up a program for a series of interventions, yet nonetheless proceeded with the invitational competition process. In other words, we partially transferred the public model to the private sphere. Things worked out well, even if in the final run we were unable to realize all the more audacious suggestions. Predict ably, Vito Acconci's idea of flooding the building's tower never gained acceptance. Often private Kunst-am-Bau projects are of greater interest artistically speaking, since internationally acclaimed artists can participate in them.

In connection with such major private commissions, could we speak of a trend towards re-feudalization? The fact is that almost all the old country estates are now in the hands of big business firms.
Globalization requires international concerns to address the question of their corporate identity. In some cases, a „feudal" image of the company is highly desirable, especially when it is a matter of conveying the company's „ancestry" and local „anchorage." Swiss Re's country seat in Rüschlikon was clearly implanted with an eye to representational ends: The architectural language, together with the building's design and art, form a single unit, resulting in a marvelously harmonious whole. Thus represented, it shows off which forms were integrated at the time for representational purposes. Obviously, a company has much to gain by using architecture and art to create an attractive image of itself.

Could you give us any examples of successful Kunst am Bau that went through the regular channels?
Of the projects in which I myself participated, I can think of for instance Pipilotti Rist's „Blatt im Wind" (Leaf in the Wind). As part of the expansion of the Swiss embassy in Berlin, a building by the architectural firm Diener + Diener, it involved a slit in the concrete roof over the entrance, from which a message was released every hour. The concrete relief piece that Helmut Federle had created on the building, and that already existed, had not gone through any Kunst-am-Bau channels. At first, no further Kunst am Bau was foreseen, but we were lucky with the client – the federal building authorities of the day – who showed interest in an autonomous project. On the one hand, Pipilotti Rist's intervention respected the sculpturesque building's exclusiveness, while, on the other, it managed to infiltrate it by refusing to yield its own autonomy.
Another project that comes to mind is the artist group Relax's intervention for the St. Luziensteig barracks. Relax put up a message against the dining room skylight: Large letters spelled out „Eat in peace" in the four national languages. The military vehemently objected to the project, and left no stone unturned to keep it from being executed. Finally, the federal government had to step in; they ended up convincing the upper echelons that it would be politically detrimental to censor the word „peace" in a Swiss barracks. Even the architects were against the project. But we were really lucky with the federal building authorities, and the project did get realized. In my opinion, it is an outstandingly successful intervention.

Philip Ursprung holds a chair in history of contemporary art at the Institute for Architectural History and Theory of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and has been a member of the Swiss Art Commission since 1997.

Trans. note: Literally „art on the building," Kunst am Bau has become the consecrated term referring to state policy for the promotion of public art, i.e. a percentage of the total construction cost is devoted to an art project destined for that construction.