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BEAT ZODERER ON RECYCLING ART AND A SUCCESSFUL KUNST-UND- BAU COMMISSION

Roberta Weiss-Mariani

In autumn 2003, the fifty-year-old Kunsthau Aarau once again basked in the limelight, this time enhanced and enlivened by a spacious extension designed by the world-famous architects Herzog & de Meuron. The firm's winning project – submitted to the invitational competition held seven years ago – disregarded the stipulated spatial framework: Instead of an underground solution with but a small section of the above-ground entrance area harboring the annex, they designed a plan taking up the entire area between the museum entrance and the classical government building.

This same space had already inspired design projects in the past, including the 1994 contribution by the Aargau artist Beat Zoderer, winner of the Manor Art Award for the artistic enhancement of the museum square. Still today, many people remember the impact of the luminous color strips he strung unevenly across granite flagstones paving the space between the government buildings and the museum. Of course, once construction work on the new entrance hall got underway, the square had to be vacated. Visitors reacted with enthusiasm upon the re-opening of the Kunsthau with its new extension, although the occasional expression of regret for the former, playfully interlaced color strips could nevertheless be heard.

What happened to your piece for the Kunsthau Aarau?

When I set it up for my show upon the occasion of the Manor Art Award, we both – the museum direc-

tor, Beat Wismer, and myself – knew that the square might well be „sacrificed“ to make way for the museum's expansion. Indeed, it was only in full awareness of this fact that I could take up the square with my Floor Drawing No. 1/96. At the time, I suggested to the authorities that the work, comprising 1x1 square slabs, be sold, with the proceeds posted to the museum's acquisition fund. What I didn't want, was for the money to go towards an expensive „Brünneli“ [mocking term for a lavatory sink] for the museum restroom. When the square was broken up, the various parts of the piece were sold to different institutions and private persons¹.

How do you like the new solution that Herzog & de Meuron came up with?

The architects have provided galleries for the art and a pathway leading to the works on display in them. Light is beautifully channeled into the exhibitions.

What feeling do you get when you look out on the old city from atop the roof of the extension?

Well, that personally I would rather be standing down on the square than over it.

On various occasions you have been invited to provide suggestions for different Kunst-und-Bau competitions. What do you consider matters most in that kind of project?

Every commission project has to fulfill various functions, as determined mutually by the contractor and executor. In the process, the user is often sidelined.

In my own projects, I always try to include the users, for it is they who stand at the start of the pathway leading to the finished contribution. This also explains why my works for public venues are so varied; they have little to do with my work for galleries or museums.

Which of your Kunst-und-Bau projects would you rate as most successful with respect to the collaborative effort of all concerned and the result achieved?

My piece „Räumliches Aquarell No 1/00" (Spatial Watercolor No 1/100) in Basel's Merian Haus—for which I was commissioned directly by the architect, Hans Zwimpfer – brought me the greatest satisfaction². Direct contracts were awarded for all six of the huge courtyards. The first model I put on display won me the support of the architect, who then accompanied me through the detailed blueprinting until the realization of the project, and who ensured me a fixed fee. There was no question of a democratic majority decision, nor were the future tenants asked their opinion beforehand. All the works in the patios became permanent component parts of the building, of the architecture. The building designer's opinion was decisive as to who was to do the work and how the art was to be integrated. After all, at the time, Palladio, too, knew exactly who would be decorating his roof merlons.

In your opinion then, do direct commissions for Kunst-und-Bau contributions lead to better solutions?

It is my feeling that such commission works are better tailored to the artist and thus provide more integrated results. And this is true especially because dialogue with the architect is required, which brings a whole new process into the picture. Architects can thus draw the artists into the project earlier on. I feel that public art-and-architecture competitions should require that the art concept be submitted at the same time as the building plans, and that the jury should evaluate the architecture and art jointly.

Outside projects require other materials, a different approach, than works meant to go on display in an exhibition. Do you ever concern yourself with the life span of an outside project?

The ways and means by which such projects are to be carried out represent a criterion that is vital to contractors. Maintenance costs and cleaning usually head their checklist and, unfortunately, often determine who receives the commission. Undeniably, it is the owners who have to care for the sculptures or objects – an incumbent task nonetheless all too often neglected. From a historic point of view, public-space works are not only of artistic relevance, but, in the long-term, they can also be seen as signs of the time during which they were created.

¹ Parts of the museum square became the property of, among others, the Altersheim (senior residence) Kehl in Baden and the writer Klaus Merz. An airplane view shows the various parts scattered across the Central Swiss Plateau.

² Designed by the architect Hans Zwimpfer (2000), Merian Haus is an office block comprising six building complexes, built as part of a development for the former Bahnhof-Ost (east railway station) area of Basel. The architect's underlying design concept for his complex development project targeted artwork born of dialogue with the building. Accepted by the building authorities in 1993, the project ended up involving 15 renowned artists of different nationalities in the office block's interior and outside design.

Kunst und Bau Projekt Merian Haus, Basel,
Architekt: Hans Zwimpfer, Kunstprojekt: Beat Zoderer

