

Münster '97 Sculpture Projects

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Carolee Thea Interviews Curator Kasper König

Kasper König is the curator of Sculpture Projects Münster '97, along with Klaus Bussmann. The team also directed Sculpture Projects Münster in 1987. König attended the Courtauld Institute of London University for Art History from 1963 to 1964 and the New School for Social Research for anthropology in 1965. Presently he is the director and professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany, where he is also the director and founder of the exhibition space, Portikus. This interview took place June 24, 1997, in Frankfurt, Germany, at the Städelschule.

Carolee Thea: Do you think that the purpose of art in public places has changed over time?

Kasper König: Yes, it has changed, but it is quite contextual. Münster is a specific situation. Here art is part of the environment, the public sees art without going to a museum or gallery, it is part of their daily life, at least during the exhibition.

Thea: What is the purpose of public sculpture?

König: The purpose is the purpose of art. It is to question the autonomy and the function of art. There are also the dialectics between the museum and the outdoors. This time in Münster we will go so far as declaring the museum as public space. The big difference is that in the museum you expect art and in the outdoors, you don't. So there has to be a plausibility within the works presented in the urban environment.

Thea: Yes, but a dialogue like this began in the late '60s with pioneers like Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dennis Oppenheim, and others who were liberating artwork from the museum as a democratizing or political act. The original purpose seems to have gotten lost. Not to offend you, but I feel that much of the work presently in Münster elaborates on existing history rather than challenging these and other past models.

König: I disagree: I like the new models. For instance, Douglas Gordon's piece, "Between Darkness and Light (after William Blake)", cannot be put into the category that you are citing. He deals with existing cultural entities like Hollywood films. He uses an underpass which is really run down and turns it into a public movie theater. His piece also deals with Modernism in a very straightforward way, having a box and a slab in the center. His point of departure was Joseph Beuys's piece in Münster in 1977 [installed in the same underpass], but he made himself very independent of that model. The video installation of Diana Thater, Broken Circle, is another example. She deals with a building from the 12th century for which there was no access for 60 years. So now it is of great interest to the public to be able to enter this tower. She could easily have fallen prey to the atmosphere of the building, as such. However, through her work, she established her own structure, and the two merge.

Thea: Beuys said, "Sculpture must always absolutely question the basic premises of the prevailing culture. This is a function of art which the society is always trying to suppress. Art alone makes life possible. Without art, man is inconceivable." Can you comment?

König: It's true, what he said, for music and poetry or any creative articulation. If art didn't exist, it would be difficult to think of the future. One could recall so many different kinds of things from Beuys. It's interesting to talk about what he did in Münster, actually. For "Unschlitt/Tallow" (1977), first he said, "to do something outdoors would be an aesthetic waste." Then he managed a dialectic trick of finding a spot which was kind of a social alibi, and transported it into the museum.

Thea: When Beuys talks about "conflict potential," how does that fit with your thinking about public art? Do you feel conflict potential is important in order to engage the viewer in an articulation of their thoughts and feelings?

König: Sure, conflict potential is important. However, provocation is not the prime intent. It is more important to do something that is also meaningful in terms of art. So you have to insist on art in order to change or expand our idea of what art can be today.

Thea: Tell me about Münster.

König: Münster is a old town with a great Catholic tradition. Here there is no fear of images, no fear of art. This year artist Nam June Paik targeted the relationship of the Baroque and the contemporary in the context of Münster. His enormous work looks almost small. Each of the cars in his piece has its own cultural design entity: the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, and even the Mozart Requiem on top of it all. Suddenly you realize how fragmented and how non-holistic monumental art is today, or can be, in relation to the Baroque. Still, he tackled a monumental, almost populist, project. We are careful not to make a sculpture park and to put too much art in the city, but to respect the normal routine and the anonymity of the city and not to infringe on the privacy of the people working and living here.

Thea: Are you subtly integrating works of art into the city?

König: Integration is a term I would disagree with. I think that art is a sort of antipode to culture. Integration can be a method, but generally the introduction of a work is a strange, unfamiliar moment. Art serves as an initiation for opening a door, yet it remains very much on the outside.

Thea: But art can be evocative and poetic, when it works. I found the Hans Haacke, Nam June Paik, and Ilya Kabakov pieces overwhelmingly introspective, complimented by Mark Dion, Andrea Zittel, Atelier Joep van Lieshout, and Marjetica Potrc, who created works that were containers for solitary journeys. Perhaps isolation is a theme for the fin de siècle, though I have heard you say that you don't want to impose "themes" on the exhibition.

König: First of all, we do not suppress anything. I think that if a curator has a theme, then quite often he or she manipulates, controls, and tries to influence the artist to succumb to an overall idea. The work of the curator is successful when it shows what the artist is thinking, when the curator disappears behind what is being presented. Otherwise, the curator quite often compromises the process. So you have to share a risk. It is more interesting, really, to take the idea of "theme" out of the process so that the artists themselves quite often are surprised by what they eventually do. I also don't agree with categories necessarily. If somebody is using concrete or is using film, video, or chewing gum, I don't give a damn as long as the work has an intelligent haptic point-this then is its anchor.

Thea: How do you select the artists for this exhibition?

König: Select is not a nice word. I think a better word is invite. Yes, inviting the artists and being happy if they accept that invitation and take it seriously. When they come, spend some time, and ask questions, quite often it is a "fishing expedition." We measure whatever they are proposing against the best of what they have done. Some of them are young or haven't done much because nobody has asked them so far. There were quite a number of artists invited because they participated in '77 and '87, like Carl Andre and Michael Asher. Also, because there are many works that remain permanently in Münster, such as pieces by Siah Armajani, Ian Hamilton-Finlay, and others, there was no urgency to reinvoke these artists. Instead, we invited artists who are much older and those who are much younger. So you see, we have expanded it to three generations. We also put a lot of research into seeing what's going on in central and eastern Europe, even if we only invited a few from that area. Certain individuals were actually professional artists doing monuments in the public context, quite often compromising themselves to the system. Then there was another tradition which was unofficial and alternative. If you read the text of Marjetica Potrc, it offers a more telling parallel than my saying it. The Sculpture Projects catalogue is invaluable because it contains these statements by artists. The whole process is also being followed on the Internet in an even more detailed way.

Thea: What themes are coming out of central Europe?

König: There are certain prevalent issues coming from central Europe and some of the artists deal with them in a subtle way. For instance, there has been a discussion going on for a long time in Berlin about the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. The way it is being handled is ridiculous. Hans Haacke's work, Standort Merry-go round, deals with the desire, on the one hand, for monuments, and with the question, "Is it still possible to make monuments today?"

Thea: A few of the pieces become part of the physical life of the people in Münster, like Claes Oldenburg's "Pool Balls" (1977). What about the Peter Fischli and David Weiss garden?

König: The Fischli and Weiss piece, "Garten", is temporary. It has been sited in a private space owned by a lady who was very skeptical about it. It is magical and does not insist on being unique. Other artists have realized this same idea but with different meanings—there is, of course, Alan Sonfist's work at LaGuardia and Houston Streets in New York. This Fischli and Weiss garden is very important. It's not about insisting on doing something that has never existed before; it has a different, wider context. The artists that have been here before are not expected to be locked into a style, or to reproduce themselves or anyone else (contextually speaking). In '87, Fischli and Weiss created a kind of pragmatic, investors' model of a stupid building right next to the train station. The house was also very much a criticism of what the other artists did in a subtle creative way. They made a clear point vis-à-vis Scott Burton's and Siah Armajani's theories about public art.

Thea: Your interest in an artist seems to be a long-term commitment.

König: Yes. Also, the exhibition in Münster is decentralized and meandering, which is important because as you walk or bike from one place to another, what you see in the meantime might ultimately be your experience and perhaps be more interesting than what you actually confront. In your memory and when you think about it, perceptions change. Ulrich Rückreim stated that, in regard to the work he did in '77, "two thirds of the work is the 'siting' and the other third is the work itself. It's how you go from one place to another." He picked up on a memory of what Münster was at one point, specifically, a big wall and a grand design for the university, and without being sentimental, he showed its alienation, as a quality. There's an interesting statement by a German artist who once said, "Modern art is very easy to understand, modern life is complicated." I think that sometimes artists focus on the artistic thinking and practice and come up with models that do not have this application to life or to politics but are an entity in themselves.

Thea: In that they refer back to themselves?

König: Yes, but they are more than self-referential, they do something that hasn't existed prior, and that is a question of hope. It is a constructive, and an incredible, offering.

Thea: Are you saying that the artist imparts a new way of thinking to the observer?

König: Yes, but the artist is also an observer of himself or herself. You can't clearly participate or anticipate between reception and production. The criteria for understanding are quite often being offered along with the work. It's a very dialectical relationship between the maker, the viewer, the museum, or the places where you expect art. There really is no such thing as a public artist. Either there is a good artist or one who is not serious or risk-taking. And, the institutionalization of public art is something I am very skeptical about. Art becomes a kind of social engineering. It's the same thing as architecture. You can't limit an architect to being a specialist in building churches or synagogues or hospitals or schools. An architect should tackle any architectural challenge.

Thea: Do you often work with teams of artists or curators?

König: I'm continuously doing small-scale exhibitions at Portikus here in Frankfurt along with the Städelschule where I've been involved in different roles, as editor, teacher, or whatever. I like to work in a team because it's a complex interrelationship, as, for example, in Münster: Klaus Bussmann is the director of the Landesmuseum and Florian Matzner is the exhibition coordinator. The other people involved grew into this organically, and took on responsibility. It's a collective effort—collective in terms of supporting particular possibilities and then really taking the risk and sticking to it, and not compromising. So you have to make a lot of changes, but it's interesting. When certain things are not possible, you have to read that positively. You deal with the limitations and you focus. Some artists took great interest in knowing what other

artists did, and others had no interest in that at all. Not that they were indifferent to what their colleagues would do, but that was not their method. Which artist ended up in what space-it was a very organic process. There was no hassle. It's amazing how many of the artists, especially the younger ones, were there 10 years ago, one or two because they were assisting other artists or they visited on their own, or came as students, or whatever. This is where professional records come in. I'm also moved when I visit studios and find the catalogues from Westkunst or Münster in their libraries. We are trying to put together a catalogue which we feel is useful; it has sources, it gives a lot of information, it's usable as a book for people who are interested in particular positions of artists in a different context.

Thea: As the director and founder of Portikus, can you describe a little bit about what that space is about?

König: It's really a very simple space. It's attached to a classicist ruin of the city and university library here in Frankfurt. It was destroyed at the end of the war. That gives rise to a wonderful irony, because in Classicism the ruin is an idea of a stepping stone, and then through the trauma of history it inadvertently became a ruin again. It was standing around for a long time and no one knew what to do with it. This was pointed out to me by some artists when I was offered the chance to come to Frankfurt to teach here at the school, and I said, "Yeah, I'd like to do that." I'm not an artist, but I'm living or working in the context of artists and I need some kind of a vehicle of my own to mount ongoing exhibitions or events. Then, a film was being made there with stark lights on the facade of the remaining portico. It was a Postmodernist experience, like that described in the Robert Venturi/Denise Scott Brown book, "Learning from Las Vegas". That was it for me! With the design help of two young architects, we just attached a big exhibition box behind it which is no bigger than the walkway and put containers on either side. It inadvertently offers a criticism of all the new museums and other celebrated architectural commissions. They are architectural alibis for cultural gems and I'm really skeptical of that. Most of the new museums have been really pretty bad, vain, self-serving architectural pipe dreams.

Thea: Do you think that these museums are hostile to art?

König: Indifferent to art-quite often not even hostile. If it would be hostile, then there would be an intention.

Thea: What is the nature of the exhibitions that you choose to show in Portikus?

König: There's a relationship to the Städelschule-in order to make it interesting for artist-guest lecturers to have something beyond working in the school with students, to have an exhibition of their own and a catalogue. So it's in between a museum and a private gallery. It's not the bread and butter issue, and it's not like "representation." It's a challenge, this white cube (Portikus). From the outside, it has a great sense of irony because it's a solitary building with a grand facade, yet with a pragmatic shabby look on the outside. It is very clear and readable indoors. The space is a given, it is very neutral, and within its limitations it is incredibly usable. For instance, Ellsworth Kelly did a piece which he had in the back of his mind for a long time. It was neither a sculpture nor a painting, and since it's a room all by itself with no frills, not one room next to another room, it was an ideal situation for him to do that work.

Thea: Who is showing there now?

König: Matthew Barney. He transformed it into a showing room for his new work, Cremaster 5.

Thea: Barney won the Hugo Boss prize last year.

König: Yes, he's considered the darling of the art world, and that is an image which can easily turn against the artist too. I find this star system really distasteful. Quite often the substantial contribution these artists make can be separated from the secondary aspect around them.

Thea: Not to confuse the art with the art-maker.

König: Not to confuse the art and its quality-what is there-with the context in which it is being presented. Not to be vain or glib, if I were asked what was the most exciting exhibition I've seen in years, I'd say it was the Sigmar Polke exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Bonn.

Thea: The star status is fleeting. It is about the long term again; is that why you bring up Polke now?

König: Yes, continuity is very important, and discontinuity as well, not getting stuck, like the producer of brand names. It's very perverse. I have a great respect for Bruce Nauman, who had a proposal for '77 and for '87, which could not be realized. We've been in touch with him and hope he is going to do a work, but it might take a year or two until he really has the idea of what he wants to do. This is very good-we are not in a rush, we don't want to prove anything.

Thea: Will he realize this work as part of the 1997 group?

König: If he comes up with an idea which he considers substantial and is something he hasn't done, we will do it, even when the current exhibition isn't here anymore. The continuity of the exhibitions Klaus Bussmann has done at the museum is important. In the center court of the museum there has been a number of exhibitions by artists such as Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Thomas Schütte, Per Kirkeby, and so on, which have been on a large scale and devoted to the work of a single artist. That space cannot be separated from this exhibition. There is also an inner structure and legitimacy to the museum and its function in the community. We're not involved in some kind of traveling circus.

Thea: I am getting a sense that you are committed to taking risks and being able to change.

König: And not repeating mistakes!

Thea: That's a very hot topic in the present triumvirate of blockbuster exhibitions: Sculpture Projects Münster, Documenta X, and the Venice Biennale.

König: We can make new mistakes, but we don't repeat them.

Thea: Well, yes, yes, that is ideal. Documenta falls short here.

König: I guess because Documenta is too "overambitious." There is a method of protection, by not making the theme overly important and allowing a sense of proportion, allowing a sense of "give" and "take." Otherwise the exhibition becomes incredibly pretentious and condescending. Who is interested in curators looking at their own navel? I don't think the artists or the interested public want to know the opinion of the curator; they want to see what the artists are doing. Ultimately the work of curators is successful when they disappear behind what is being presented and still have an intellectual overview. Also, when they are able to let go, and to give.

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