

From:

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## **READING NEWSPAPERS**

### **A conversation between Albrecht Schäfer and Stefanie Kreuzer, February 2010**

*Your exhibition at Museum Morsbroich is part of a loose series that began in 2007 for which we have invited artists to respond, in a few works, directly to the space, which is anything but a white cube. How in general do you approach a particular space, and especially the Baroque castle in Leverkusen?*

Apart from Morsbroich's Baroque aesthetic, I was first particularly struck by the large number of rooms. Counting the entrance hall and corridors, there are over twenty separate rooms. There are also almost no extensive areas of wall space because this is constantly interrupted by the windows and doors with their grey frames. So apart from the large number of rooms, there's also this division into many smaller areas. It was probably when I was thinking about the particular character of the building that I had the idea for *Ein Tag / One Day*. I wanted to encapsulate the whole museum, the numerous spatial elements and the contrast between the Baroque architecture and Oswald Mathias Ungers's rationalist stairwell in a clear gesture that would run through the whole museum. Apart from that, I wanted my various works to be integrated into a coherent thematic and formal concept. The line with the images is conceived as an independent work while simultaneously forming a kind of coordinate system that influences the hanging and installation of the other works in the exhibition. This work also relates to another aspect of the building. The long sequences of rooms encourage the visitor to go from one to the next; there are long flights of up to seven rooms that almost seem to draw the visitor in. It therefore seemed appropriate to make a work that could only be "read" while walking alongside it.

The starting point for a site-specific work is always different and always a combination of things that interest me generally and the particular conditions of the space. One example of this is a colour proposal I developed with Susanne von Kornatzki in the summer of 2009 for a group of East German apartment blocks. When we first visited the site, we were struck by the way the balcony niches had been painted in individual colours by the residents. Until recently, this could be seen all over East Germany, and for fifteen years I had been photographing this without knowing what to do with it. It was probably the result of the way flats were rented out in the German Democratic Republic, where the tenants renovated their apartments when they moved in – as opposed to when they moved out, which is what happened in the West – and because these individual improvements were tolerated by the state which, in any case, didn't make much of an effort to maintain the buildings. We liked the way the residents had used colour to appropriate the architecture, so our idea was to incorporate this activity into our concept and develop a colour palette from which each tenant could choose a colour for their balcony. Our proposal for the rest of

the building was very neutral. After a few initial difficulties, our concept was eventually realised and didn't cost more than the originally planned standard job – which was one of the guidelines we had to follow. Another part of our proposal was the idea that, in the future, the tenants could continue to change the colour of their balconies – even outside our colour palette – and so the total range of colours would keep getting richer. This means that later changes are not seen as a disruption, but are welcome. The work combines a site-specific social practice with our conceptual and aesthetic ideas.

*I would like to come back to the installation Ein Tag / One Day, which gives the exhibition its title. Can you describe the project in more detail – also in relation to the thematic and conceptual implications?*

The installation *Ein Tag / One Day* consists of a single copy of a daily newspaper, *Die Welt*, which is cut up line by line and image by image, and pasted in a line on the wall like a clear architectural section running through the whole museum. The images are incorporated into the line of text in the relevant position. While the lower edge of the line varies according to the size of the text or images, the upper edge remains flush. But on the whole, there's only a thin line of text that, even when you are only a few metres back from the wall, resembles an abstract pencil line. When you get closer, the words and content become visible, and you are suddenly confronted with the day's events. On moving away from the wall, the content disappears again behind the form. In principle, the newspaper remains totally readable, but the compact layout becomes a spatial form that looks very abstract.

In a newspaper layout, a lot of information is contained in a small space. In *Ein Tag / One Day*, the opposite is the case. By removing the breaks, the shifts between columns and pages, the newspaper is stretched to its maximum length, like unravelling a pullover to the last stitch. The text is the textile that's unravelled to become a thread again. However, I wasn't sure whether the thread, the line, would be long enough for the museum. After a rough estimate, it soon became clear that, despite the size of the museum, the line would be much longer. A copy of *Die Welt* produces a line around two kilometres long, while the two floors of the museum have around 700 metres of wall space. In the end, I decided that the line should simply break off in the last room, just as a newspaper article is generally forced into the parameters of the page. The architecture becomes a kind of print space for the text and images.

The particular date of the newspaper isn't important. It's a day like any other.

*The installation Ein Tag / One Day is a good example of how many of your works interact with the space or, more generally, with the architectural situation. This play with shifting signifiers that, up close, become concrete information – a readable text – and, from a distance, are a horizontal line, also constitutes a general reflection on “reading”, on the understanding of visual signs. To what extent is that a reference for other works in the exhibition? And what role is played by the materials you use, which are often taken from*

*everyday life and therefore initially seem quite familiar to the viewer?*

The materials are very important. My ideas are often developed directly from working with materials or as a result of their particular associative properties. Sometimes I notice something in a familiar object that I haven't seen before – I “read” it differently, and this can lead to an idea for a work. This was the case with my newspaper works for example. One could say that my works – and this isn't only true of my newspapers works – come quite close to the literal sense of “reading newspapers”. Parallel to a simple reading of the newspaper's content, I read the newspaper itself, as medium or material. And I read it in the original sense of the word as gathering or selecting.<sup>1</sup> So I don't read in the sense of a semantic deciphering of signs, but in the sense of selecting certain properties or levels that I want to make visible as, for example, in the *Newspaintings* where I turn each page of a newspaper into a colour paste that is then applied to a series of canvases of the same size as the newspaper page. So instead of the usual information, the result is the average colour value of each newspaper page, changing from page to page. In the case of the *Frottages*, in which I transfer a newspaper page onto drawing paper with a series of circular rubbing movements, I also play with different levels of readability. In some of the *Frottages*, it's possible to make out a specific content, a photo for example; in some, it's only clear that they are based on a newspaper page, while relatively broad rubbing movements leave only a nebulous colour composition.

The starting point for this series was the observation that, when I did a lot of work with newspapers, my fingertips became black. So the colour could be rubbed off, and I began to experiment with the simple transferral of a page's uppermost layer of pigment onto another paper. It's the impression of an impression or the copy of a copy. In the end, I'm less interested in different levels of readability than in a tentative, manual process in which I can keep surprising myself. Particularly because the result remains hidden during the rubbing process.

*The discovery of new thematic dimensions in the familiar and the commonplace and their “uncovering” in the works has a lot to do with processes of transformation, alteration, or metamorphosis and with surprise. To what extent is instability or precariousness a figure of thought for you which despite – or because of – this is echoed as (apparent) instability in your works?*

When I consider the kind of art I particularly respond to, it's often works that have something unstable about them or which are open to disruption and uncertainty. The fact that, from the beginning, I have always worked with fragile materials such as plaster and glass, and with partly unstable constructions, is perhaps a reflection of this interest. But I wouldn't say that I consciously try to produce something fragile. And it probably wouldn't work either – like trying to make poetic art. Actually, there's always instability in the work process, sometimes in the form of doubt, sometimes as playful energy. In the exhibition, there are

a few works in which physical instability plays a role. In *Swing*, a video projector, hung like a swing and caused to sway slightly from the movement of its fan and the circulating air in the room, corresponds to the projection of a circling buzzard. This results in a complex overlapping of different movements. Or the work *Objective*, in which the lens of a slide projector (without a slide) is removed, rotated, and placed on the original packaging a few centimetres in front of the projector. The original, clearly defined order of projector and lens is minimally altered, leading to a shift in the lens's focal length so that the projector casts an image of its own light source, the bulb filament, onto the wall. This is also the case in the installation *Ein Tag / One Day* in which the text is liberated from its fixed setting, is opened up, and finds a new stable ground on the museum wall. In addition, the work is only completed by the movement of the viewer. The roof-lath works, on the other hand, are unstable, partly because the material is bent to its limit, and partly because these works are not permanent as sculptures.

*The complex roof-lath works have been especially conceived for the exhibition spaces in the castle. In an exhibition at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, a work made up of the same material responded to the gallery's arched ceiling so that the bowed laths formed a wall that resembled a series of waves. How do the two roof-lath works operate here in the castle in relation to the specific space?*

*Tonne / Barrel* will be installed in the central exhibition space on the first floor. It's made up of an outer ring of around 150 laths bowed outwards and an inner ring of around 50 laths bowed inwards. As a whole, the form resembles a large bulging barrel wedged between the floor and the ceiling. The inner barrel is visible through the filigree slats. However, the roof laths are also slightly rotated (in different directions for the two barrels) which results in an optical movement despite the central symmetry. In addition, the barrel is seen against the light, creating a variety of light and shadow effects. I thought for a long time about whether I wanted to make a symmetrical work, which I generally try to avoid. However, symmetry plays an important role in the Baroque, and Schloss Morsbroich is entirely based on a symmetrical plan, though also interrupted. I think both elements are crucial in the Baroque: the symmetry that comes from the Renaissance and is also a reflection of absolutism; and the disruption of all order, the desire for formlessness, the alternation of concave and convex forms, the expression of force and movement as well as an inimitable feeling for the immaterial effects of light. *Spinne / Spider* in the large corner room on the ground floor is the counterpart to *Tonne / Barrel*. It's made up of sixteen laths (each over six metres long) which, grouped in twos, form lens-shaped pairs. The laths project from the eight corners of the room and meet in the middle where they reciprocally support each other. This makes the room inaccessible to the viewer. The room-filling and room-obstructing *Spinne / Spider* contrasts with the freestanding, closed volume of *Tonne / Barrel*, creating an asymmetrical structure within the overall concept of the exhibition. Together, they form a counterpoint to the work *Ein Tag / One Day* that runs evenly through all the rooms and relates to all the works in the exhibition without directly coming into contact with them.

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<sup>1</sup> [Here, Schäfer is referring to the etymology of the German verb "lesen", rather than the English "read". Trans.]

*Light plays an important role in many of your works. How does this relate to the architecture, especially the Baroque architecture of Morsbroich?*

The fact that light makes a space visible is so common that we hardly notice what a very mysterious and poetic process this is. Light makes a space bright, dim, or invisible. For children at night, when it gets dark, the walls disappear. The constant transition from a bright, clear visibility to invisibility still fascinates me, and this is one of the reasons why I have so many works dealing with daylight, artificial light, lamps, shadows, etc. There's a work that explicitly deals with this in the exhibition. The slide projection *Vier Augenblicke in Brancusis Atelier / Four Moments in Brancusi's Studio* is a sequence of four images in which Constantin Brancusi recorded a sculpture from the same angle in slightly different lights. Although we associate Brancusi with a search for timeless forms, he was well aware of how crucially important the effect of light falling on his sculptures was for the observer. This can be seen in these photographs in which the movement of dappled light over the sculptures is much richer in contrast than the sculptures themselves.

The exhibition spaces in the museum generally have a very bright and even artificial light, but this kind of lighting is only one possibility, as well as a relatively lifeless one. Schloss Morsbroich is already filled with a wonderful natural light that changes from room to room according to the time of day, the direction of the windows, or the view from the windows out over the park. Because the exhibition takes place in winter, I need additional artificial light, but I hope that I can be sufficiently sparing with this so that I don't lose what is special about the place. This is an aspect that – to come back to your question at the beginning – always plays an important role for me. I try to be aware of the qualities of a place, to project myself into the place to a certain extent, and to include these perspectives in the development of the exhibition.