

Bettina Pousttchi

INTERVIEW WITH JED MORSE

For the past 15 years, Bettina Pousttchi has created artworks in a variety of media including photography, video, and sculpture. These works often examine the constructed nature and tenuousness of memory. Two recent projects, *Echo* (2009-10) at the Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin and *Framework* (2011) at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, presented photography at the scale of architecture, lending it a sense of monumentality and presence normally associated with large-scale sculpture. This summer, Nasher Sculpture Center Chief Curator Jed Morse visited Pousttchi in her Berlin studio.

Jed Morse: *I imagine you don't produce a lot of your sculpture here in the studio, because its size seems fairly limiting.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: The preparatory work is done here, but for the big metal sculptures, I need special machinery. The sculptures are done in a workshop at the far east end of Berlin. It wasn't easy to convince someone to let me use their plate roller in a way it wasn't intended to be used. But I found this workshop, and the old couple who own it don't mind the crazy girl who bends crowd barriers. It's a very old machine and it's very slow. Every bend is done separately. When the elements are done, I arrange them on site, and a welder fixes the points exactly where I tell him. I want them to be invisible. He sets the points either where the upper parts touch, or sometimes where the feet touch.

What's important is that they stand on their own. Gravity has done its job and I respect that. It stands alone and it's just welded to fix it in place.

Jed Morse: *So, what did you have to say to convince them to work with you?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: It was a long time ago - five years. They were happy for the work and I think they were also curious. In the beginning their attitude was rather critical, but later they started laughing.

Jed Morse: *When they finally saw a sculpture come together, did they think differently about it?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yeah. It's a big workshop, where the couple with the plate roller has a corner, and the welders have another corner. They are not much interested in art, but they still get something out of it, when they see the sculptures finished. Which I think is great.

Jed Morse: *Recently you've made these double monuments to two figures central to art history: Tatlin and Flavin. Do those two figures hold special significance?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: They both are figures that have been important to me for various reasons. Vladimir Tatlin was someone who worked at the intersection of sculpture and architecture, and who developed utopian architecture. He contributed to a different society. This tower [Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*], being so many things at the same time - a building, a sculpture, a clock - has always fascinated me. The *Double Monuments* developed from thinking about the idea of knowledge, or art, and how the knowledge about art has survived over time. It survives in books, libraries, and museums, but also in artworks by other people - in homages. So, I got interested in the idea of homages and I was thinking about which ones I know and like. I am very fond of American Minimal art, and Dan Flavin's monuments to Tatlin have always fascinated me.





Bettina Pousttchi,
*Double Monuments for
Flavin and Tatlin*, 2010.
Powder coated crowd
barriers and neon.
Installation view,
Kunsthalle Basel, 2011
© Bettina Pousttchi.
Photo: Serge Hasenböhler



Jed Morse: *There is also something very special about Tatlin's monument because it does not exist. It only exists in the kind of collective imagination...*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, it was never realized. Nevertheless, it has influenced generations of artists and architects.

Jed Morse: *One of the things that's surprising in that series is how different each work is. If you don't see them from a number of different angles, you don't realize how quickly they change.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: They are all very different. I start with a certain idea, but the final form gets decided on site. There are many conscious decisions, but intuition and chance also play their part. No element is like the other and no sculpture is like the other. Everything is done in my presence. I couldn't just make a drawing and send it to the workshop.

Jed Morse: *Your practice incorporates work in other media: video, photography, and also architecture, as in the project that you did for the Temporäre Kunsthalle [Temporary Art Gallery] in Berlin. Are you attempting different things when you're working with really substantial materials like bollards and crowd control barriers, as opposed to when you're working with photography or video?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: The fascinating thing about sculpture is the physicality of it. After many years of sitting behind screens, working virtually, and running around with cameras, there is something about the directness and physicality of sculpture, which is just fantastic. That said, *Echo* and the other façade projects bring together many things I am interested in. They were a way of making photography more physical and bringing it closer to sculpture and architecture. In those works, photography gains a material presence which it didn't have before. Today especially, photography can be very immaterial. Sometimes it only exists as a file on the Internet. There is an ongoing discussion about the end of photography, the end of the photographic print. In my opinion, we are not witnessing the end of photography, but rather the beginning of a new chapter. I think plenty of wonderful things can happen through digitization, it just depends on what you do with it. Today, there are many more possibilities than there were before to materialize a digital file and to bring photography back to its physical presence. With *Echo*, I've decided to put it on paper—poster paper—which was a huge risk, because it was exhibited outside for six months here in Berlin, during the fall and winter. We knew it would rain and snow, and we had no experience with how the paper posters set on the plywood of the building would react. But they survived!

Jed Morse: *I didn't realize that the Temporäre Kunsthalle was made out of plywood. And so you were essentially adhering the photographs to the exterior plywood, like a construction zone that has plywood around it with pasted posters and advertisements.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, it was exactly like that. The Temporäre Kunsthalle stood for a period of two years on one of the most central locations in Berlin, the Schlossplatz, next to the Cathedral and Museum Island. Exhibitions took place during this period within the building as well as on its outside skin, which was made out of plywood.

Jed Morse: *And it has a very physical, tactile quality to it.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Paper posters on plywood have a very special materiality. I like the tactility of paper. I like posters and how the weather shows over time on that material. It leaves traces—scratches, crinkles, and imperfect angles.

Jed Morse: *970 posters made up the image. How large was the surface?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: The total surface of all four sides of the building was 1,700 square meters, which is about

18,000 square feet. Each print was 64 x 280 cm (25 1/4 x 110 1/4 in). It was a challenge to mount the wet paper at a height of 11 meters (36 feet) with all the wind on that open field of Schlossplatz.

Jed Morse: *The image wrapped around the entire building?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, the posters covered all four elevations of the building. It was really a sculpture - you could move around it and see it from multiple angles. It was difficult to get all the posters level and the angles right, as the architecture was not perfectly accurate.

Jed Morse: *Because the exterior is made of plywood ...*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, and it was made for temporary use. It was not planned and executed in the same way as a permanent structure.

Jed Morse: *That was a fantastic project and I understand that you've done something similar at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: I have. *Framework* is a photo installation that was recently commissioned by the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt for its façade. *Framework* didn't cover the entire building, but did cover the rotunda entrance and large parts of the eastern façade of the building. As with my other work, this installation was a reaction to the architecture and to the urban and historical context of the institution. In a nearby neighborhood, for example, a modern town hall had been demolished in order to reconstruct Medieval style houses - half-timber houses—using modern means. For *Framework*, I have taken some of these timber framework elements out of their original context and combined them into a new ornament applied to the postmodern building of the Schirn Kunsthalle.

Jed Morse: *So the construction was a consciously historicizing project?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes. Frankfurt was bombed very hard during the war. It became a wound in the heart of the city. After the war, there were few attempts to reconstruct what there had been before, and instead contemporary architecture was built, which was often Brutalist, concrete architecture. Not everybody liked that. Today, there is an attempt to bring back the pre-war city center, with many half-timber houses. Contemporary construction techniques and materials have been used to make the city center look like it was centuries old.

Jed Morse: *So it's like a "half-timber Disneyland."*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Exactly. There's a trend in Germany at the moment to reconstruct historical buildings. It's parallel to what will happen on Schlossplatz in Berlin with the new-old Schloss (castle). There, the Palast der Republik was demolished in order to reconstruct the historical pre-war architecture of the Schloss.

Jed Morse: *The Palast der Republik was a bizarre building conceptually because it housed the East German parliament, and also discotheques, bowling alleys, it was an entertainment center as well ...*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: It offered some of the best entertainment in the country.

Jed Morse: *It's like something that Rem Koolhaas would have come up with: deconstruct the city and how it's used, then put it all back together in one building. Had it fallen into such disrepair that it had to be torn down, because I am sure that there were people who wanted to save it?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, there was a huge movement in the city and across the country and beyond to save the building from demolition. Rem Koolhaas was in fact involved with it. The Palace was a trace of an era that was suddenly gone, but it was used in so many ways after



the fall of the Wall - for exhibitions, performances - that it became a very important site in the new Berlin. I think its significance had changed over the years. First it was a symbol of the GDR and a divided Germany, but after those 17 years during which it was used in many ways after the fall of the Wall, it also became in some ways a symbol of the unified Germany and Europe in my opinion. Many people were sad when it was gone.

Jed Morse: *So both of these projects [Echo at Temporäre Kunsthalle and Framework at Schirn Kunsthalle] end up being a little bit about history, memory, and the role of architecture. Do you like those kinds of ephemeral projects that have a sort of certain life span?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Their temporality is an interesting aspect of the intervention, but I also wouldn't mind if they stayed around longer.

Jed Morse: *Was it hard to see Echo come down?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: To a certain extent it was a relief, as we weren't sure whether the paper posters would really make it through the winter. Six months was a long period, especially in Berlin, where the urban context changes so rapidly. The environment of the installation constantly changed and that was amazing to observe. I took many photographs of the work's urban setting during that time and that became a photo series in its own right (Echo Berlin). Now all kinds of photographs of *Echo* live on in the archives. Today when you Google "Palast der Republik" you get pictures of the historical building, its demolition - but also of *Echo*.

Jed Morse: *Many of the photographs are black and white and appear striated, like it's a still from a grainy video, as if from a security camera. And a lot of your work incorporates other elements of public control: the bollards, the crowd control barriers. Is that kind of graininess intentional to give it a sense of surveillance - as if it were being seen through a low-resolution security camera?*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Some of my photo series look like that, but not all of them. It's something that is introduced in the postproduction process. There are many

associations that come with it. It adds a layer between the image and the spectator. It interrupts the illusionism of the photographic image.

Jed Morse: *It allows you to overlay a level of the poetic or imaginary for the viewer to think of it differently from an image of a thing.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Yes, exactly. The crowd barriers and bollards are objects from exterior space that come to the interior - which is the opposite direction of the photo sculptures, where something which is usually shown inside are on the outside skin of a building. The barriers and bollards are extant objects. They're not found objects; they're not *objets trouvés*. I don't walk through the streets and take them. They are fresh and new, but I like that they come with a memory. You have an immediate association with them and also a physical experience. The physicality of sculpture is enhanced when you know these objects prevent you from going somewhere; you have to walk around them. They also represent authority and the law. These materials are very complex, which is why I don't choose other materials so easily.

Jed Morse: *The bollard sculptures remind me of Barnett Newman's comment about sculpture being the thing you bump into when you are backing up to look at a painting ...*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: I love that! I think art should be in your way. It should enter everyday life.

Jed Morse: *Essentially, the bollard sculptures do what all sculpture does, even in their everyday lives out on the street. They're an insistent physical presence.*

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: I currently have them in the streets of Zurich in a project called Art and the City, which shows public sculpture all over the city of Zurich. I made an installation of a few bollard sculptures on Limmatstrasse, which is the central road in the new art district in Zurich West. So, they have gotten out in the street again.

Jed Morse: *In the sculptures where the bollards are bent and then composed, the bollards have this figurative or*



anthropomorphic quality... So, when you see a group of three that are kind of intertwined with each other you get the sense of these three figures leaning on each other, supporting each other in some way ... like they've been out at the bar too long and they're trying to get home ... waiting at the bus stop together. Is that something you see in them as well? This looks like a couple that is dancing, and one is dipping the other.

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: When I first started doing them, it wasn't my first intention. I was experimenting with form, the transformation of the material. I wanted to see different phases of the same object in one sculpture. Then it developed in that direction and I started giving them names, names like Luise or Moritz. These are not people's names, but street names in Berlin, like Moritzstrasse, Luisenstrasse.

Jed Morse: So, the bollard, particularly in this series of works, acts as a sort of module that you then can put together in a myriad of different ways to come up with new compositions, new relations among the objects. So, the *World Time Clock Series* - how many have you done and how many more are there to go?

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: For this work, I take photographs of public clocks in different time zones of the world, all at the very same time. At this point I have photographed clocks in 14 different time zones. The entire photo series will eventually consist of 24 photographs, and I plan to finish it this year. It all started with a sculpture here in Berlin on Alexanderplatz, the *Urania Weltzeituhr* (*Urania World Time Clock*). It is a GDR sculpture that shows different time zones of the world, which is strange, as in the GDR people were not allowed to travel freely. There's something absurd about it: to show them the times of all these places they couldn't go.

Jed Morse: That's right. The world exists ...

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: ... but not for everybody. Time zones are fascinating. How they were introduced in the 19th century, how they developed since then. The time zone system is a way to organize the world, our planet, to organize space over time, or time over space. It's one

unified system that is quite static, but sometimes there are changes to it.

Jed Morse: So, have you identified specific clocks in the 24 time zones that you want to photograph? Or, are you still looking? Because some of these time zones can be very remote.

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: The project is still in progress. Before I travel to a place, I research public clocks on the Internet and I have an idea of which ones I want to photograph. Once I am at that place, the first challenge is to find them. And then to see whether they are still working, because if they have stopped at noon, I will never be able to photograph them at five minutes to two.

Jed Morse: That's the question I've been dying to ask: why five till two?

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: There is no one reason for it - the time is not symbolic. A few minutes before the full hour is a special moment. It's the moment before change happens.

Jed Morse: I'm so glad you said that. After seeing all these photographs of the clock at five till two, I kept thinking, "What happens at two?"

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: Exactly. That is the question.

Jed Morse: You've confirmed my anxiety about that!

BETTINA POUSTTCHI: The *World Time Clock* project involves extensive travelling to many places. I consider these trips like performative sculptures.

Previous Spread, top to bottom: Bettina Pousttchi, *Luise*, 2011. Powder coated street bollards, 22 x 28 ¾ x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist and Buchmann Galerie, Berlin. © Bettina Pousttchi. Photo: Roman März; Bettina Pousttchi, *Echo*, 2009–10. Photo installation, 36 x 66 x 187 ft. 970 paper posters on the façade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin. View of installation in progress. © Bettina Pousttchi. Photo: Bettina Pousttchi; Bettina Pousttchi, *Echo*, 2009–10. Photo installation, 36 x 66 x 187 ft. 970 paper posters on the façade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin © Bettina Pousttchi. Photo: Bettina Pousttchi; Above: Bettina Pousttchi, *Framework*, 2012. Photo installation Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt. © Bettina Pousttchi. Photo: Norbert Miguletz.