

Totally

Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bettina Pousttchi and Markus Miessen in conversation

in: Bettina Pousttchi – Echo Berlin
208 pages, english / german
Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König Köln, 2010

Hans Ulrich Obrist: My first question for Bettina is: When did it all begin? What was your epiphany, that is, when did you first realize you were an artist?

Bettina Pousttchi: For me it was more of a process. As an artist, I find it difficult to look back and say that *this* or *that* particular event was the determining factor. What about you, Hans Ulrich? Was there a single moment when you just knew?

HUO: I was born for the first time in May 1968 at a hospital in Zurich. I was born for the second time in May 1985 at age seventeen, in the studio of Peter Fischli and David Weiss. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to be a curator.

BP: I started taking photographs at thirteen, when my mother gave me my first camera, a Kodak Retinette. At that time I also began to make my own prints in my school's darkroom. I only encountered contemporary art a few years later, in the second half of the 1980s, in Paris.

HUO: But when exactly did your work as an artist begin? After one's student work, there usually comes a moment when one's actual work begins. At some future point, when you compile your catalogue raisonné, what will be the first work mentioned?

BP: For many years, I studied all kinds of things in many different places. When I try to think back to the first work I ever wanted to make public, it was quite late. I'd say it was in 1997, when I was twenty-six.

HUO: If I remember correctly, you came in contact early on with Rosemarie Trockel. How did that experience influence you?

BP: I met Rosemarie Trockel in 1997 when I became her student in Düsseldorf ...

HUO: So it all started in 1997. That was the magic year!

BP: As a professor, Rosemarie was important to me for many reasons. Her teaching didn't so much take the form of classroom

instruction; it was more a matter of one-on-one conversations. Conversation was key.

HUO: So conversation as the medium, so to speak.

BP: Not a medium, but rather ...

HUO: ... a trigger?

BP: Yes, exactly.

HUO: Rosemarie Trockel is always in dialogue with the new, up and coming generation and with the preceding ones as well. She once told me I should interview people who had reached the age of one hundred – who had been witnesses to the century – and that was the catalyst for me: conducting interviews with very old men and women, which ultimately turned into an entire series. She exerted a crucial influence on all of us. So it would be interesting to hear more about what was or is important to you about your contact and especially your conversations with Rosemarie Trockel.

BP: The conversations took place either at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf or in Cologne, where I lived at the time, like Rosemarie. We often met either in her studio (usually in the kitchen) or in mine, to which not many people had access at the time. Yes, she was a huge inspiration for all of us. She always encouraged me to go beyond my boundaries, to experiment with other media and other disciplines. It's because of her that I started making videos.

HUO: Would it be possible to dig deeper here? So she initiated the videos ... and what else? Did the conversations ever include Rosemarie Trockel's other students, one of whom, for example, was Thea Djordjadze? Were there conversations with them?

BP: Rosemarie, Thea, and I did a collaboration for the Venice Biennale in 2003, a photography and video installation for the exhibition *Absolut Generations*, and a work for the *Utopia Station Poster Project*.

Markus Miessen: I wonder if you could say a little bit more about the conversations in the kitchen. There's this fabulous collection of conversations all of which Hans Ulrich has in his archives: the *Monica Pidgeon Kitchen Lectures*. Could we talk about whether and how the kitchen as a location influences the kinds of conversations that take place there, for example, compared to conversations in a studio or a museum?

BP: In this case, the kitchen was more or less part of the studio itself, so there wasn't really a distinction ...

MM: Aha. Informal conversations usually take place outside the studio, precisely in environments like the kitchen.

BP: I often think about conversations in the studio, because for a long time I disliked this strange convention of the "studio visit." It took me some time to realize that for me, the most interesting thing about studio visits is that they can become the impetus for good conversation. Since then, I've become somewhat more open to the idea, and I've been thinking about making a book called *Conversations in the Studio*, since after all what is a studio these days? On one hand, it's a physical space where you spend time and where various things get made, but at the same time it's also a mental space that you work in, and in this sense the title *Conversations in the Studio* could be understood very broadly.

HUO: Another important aspect of Rosemarie Trockel's work, but one that's less widely known, is the fact that she's done all of these incredible experiments with artist's books. I'm thinking not just of her innumerable artist's books, her catalogs, but also about how she's illustrated literature or how literature has illustrated her work. She also has a lot of maquettes of artist's books that haven't been realized, which are wonderful. This Skype dialogue that we're having today will also be published in a book, and I know that for you, Bettina, books play a very important role as well. Could we talk a little bit about books – your own books, artist's books, catalogs, and also perhaps the book in which this conversation is going to appear? That way perhaps there can be a kind of meta-level, where the reader reads about the book they have in their hands. Or as Lawrence Weiner says, "books furnish a room."

BP: I have a very intense relationship with books. Part of the reason may be that I grew up in Mainz, the city where the printing press was invented and hence the mechanical production of books, at least in terms of a Western historiography. This bookmaking tradition is something that is cultivated very consciously there. There's a fantastic book museum; I've been there more times than I can count. It presents a very vivid picture of the whole history of the book, from its earliest beginnings as manuscripts on handmade paper to artist's books from different historical periods all the way to books as industrial products. This early influence has stayed with me

over the years. Books play a very important role in my artistic practice today.

HUO: Can you tell us something about the book in which the conversation we're having right now will be published?

BP: The occasion for the book is *Echo*, my photo installation on the facade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin. I didn't want to produce a typical exhibition catalog, but rather an artist's book. I was interested in the idea of making a kind of flipbook that would seem to present a tracking shot that circled the building. A book where text becomes image, image becomes architecture, and architecture in turn becomes text. A kind of interdependent transdisciplinary loop or interdisciplinary flipbook.

MM: What kind of texts will be included in the book?

BP: In this book, I wanted to bring together texts that would shed light on the project from various different angles and various different fields. The installation touches on so many different areas, and not just because it took place in the public space. Thus, this publication includes a literary text, a philosophical text, two art-historical perspectives, an approach from architecture theory, and our dialogue as the last, final element.

MM: Could you say a bit about *Echo*, especially in connection with your interest in the Palast der Republik?

HUO: It's also a protest against forgetting. Were the two of you there when we had that brainstorming session about the Fun Palace at the Palast der Republik?

MM: Yes, the "Volkspalast." That was extremely important.

HUO: Exactly. The subject was Cedric Price's Fun Palace and whether it might not be possible to turn the Palast der Republik into a Fun Palace for the twenty-first century, perhaps as a "Volkspalast." Now the Palast der Republik is gone, but Bettina's posters are there. I wonder if you could say more about this idea of the Palast der Republik and the Fun Palace, and also on the subject of Verlust, loss, L-O-S-S?

MM: Extinction. Thomas Bernhard.

BP: In June 2009, when I was commissioned to do a project for

the facade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, the Palast had just been finally demolished, and the green lawn had just replaced the demolition site that had been there for so many years. At that particular moment, the sense of Verlust, loss, was extremely palpable. It was a strange moment, because the building was already gone but it was somehow still there – like an afterimage on the retina. I found this situation fascinating. I wanted to construct an afterimage – not an identical replica of the building but rather a visual echo. I was interested in the question of memory and how history and architecture get dealt with. How will the Palast be remembered, how has it entered the collective visual memory? What is the role of photography in this process?

MM: You also took your own video and photographs of the demolition of the Palast ...

BP: In the summer of 2006, when the demolition began, I wanted to make a film about it, and I spent hours at the Schlossplatz shooting video and taking photographs. As I did so, I noticed how traumatic a moment it was for many people. Every afternoon at the same time, the same people would come. Not just artists coming to take photographs but ordinary people who had worked at the Palast and couldn't believe what was happening to their building, which had been the embodiment of power and an omnipresent state apparatus but also an embodiment of glamor and entertainment.

MM: Did you use those images as part of the project?

BP: No. The images of the demolition are still lying unedited in my studio. For *Echo*, I worked with archival images, which I put together like a collage. For the most part, however, I had to compose entirely new files because of the large amount of data required.

MM: What exactly did you do?

BP: I had to adapt *Echo* to the spatial parameters and architecture of the Kunsthalle. So I reduced the Palast to its essential structural characteristics. As part of this, I did research in many different archives and looked at hundreds of photographs of the Palast, from construction to demolition. I wanted to understand what makes up the perception of this building and how it had entered the archive. After all, the current building, or rather my sculpture, looks very different from the original Palast. I was actually worried that people

wouldn't make the connection between my echo, which I'd put up there, and the Palast der Republik.

MM: The connection seems quite obvious to me, no? I find it's clearly recognizable.

BP: Everyone recognizes it now – it's amazing. I've even seen people walk past the clock, which was never there in the first place – it's a transformation of the national emblem of the GDR – and say, "Oh, how nice – look, the clock is back!" It's very interesting to see how memory functions. Even now, there are a lot of people who only have a vague idea of what the Palast actually looked like.

MM: I wonder if you could also say something about the blurriness of your photographs and the horizontal black-and-white lines?

BP: I am interested in photographs that reference media reality rather than factual reality. I added the black-and-white lines to the photographs in the editing process. I like the fact that this way they allude to their origin in the media. The blurriness opens up a space of possibility for the imaginary. For me, this visual uncertainty evokes the question of what reality is, whether and how it can be represented, and how we perceive it. Daniel Buren told me, referring to *Echo*: "C'est un souvenir en photo, qui n'est pas un photo-souvenir." That's a very apt description of the moment of memory and remembering. Isn't it interesting that the past is usually represented in black and white, while the future is depicted in color? Godard inverted this convention in one of his films, and this different approach to representing timelines is very strange and very confusing.

MM: What did the Palast mean to you personally?

BP: I knew it primarily from the period after the fall of the Wall, when its meaning for society was fundamentally changing. The empty building served as a venue for a wide variety of temporary uses, and that was also a very productive period for Berlin. Over the years, the Palast became for me a symbol of overcoming the division of Berlin and of Germany.

HUO: Let's come back to Cedric Price's unrealized major work from the years 1961 to 1974: the Fun Palace, an interdisciplinary multipurpose structure for theater and other cultural projects. Price proposed a building that was not intended to last forever but only for a limited time, and which would then disappear again. The idea came out of a dialogue between the

architect and Joan Littlewood and involves a combination of fixed and movable elements which can be added or removed as needed – hence addition and subtraction – even while the building is in use. According to Price, this would guarantee complete freedom in terms of how the structure is used – a building like this would do justice to the demands arising from the combination of different fields and practices. That brings us back to the notion of transdisciplinarity, which was already briefly touched on by Bettina. Your practice also positions itself between art and other disciplines.

BP: In the case of the photo installation *Echo*, we're dealing with a work that moves between art and architecture and, within art, between photography and sculpture. Cedric Price came to my mind at various different points through out the project. First of all, while thinking about what the Palast der Republik was. The concept of combining a parliament building with a leisure and entertainment center is quite fascinating and almost unthinkable today. The Palast contained everything, from bowling alleys and discos to restaurants, theaters, concert halls, and more. Thus, it offered a range of different leisure activities, and yet it hosted the party congresses of the SED. Price also came to mind in connection with the Volkspalast initiative, which sought to realize a flexible-use venue inspired by his work in 2004. There is also a connection to the concept of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, the idea of a temporary exhibition space and a building that is to some extent a "flexible" structure. How do you see the architecture of the Kunsthalle, Markus?

MM: Well, it's a box, a shoe box. But there's one thing we need to be very, very clear on, and that's the fact that nothing could be worse than this "cloud" proposed by Graft. So: hail to the box, hail to the box. One of the interesting things about your project, *Echo*, is that your actual medium is photography. The elements you work with are photographic prints, and yet what you actually end up producing is something that almost falls into the category of urban planning. In terms of transdisciplinarity, perhaps you could say something about how a work that operates with the medium of photography suddenly turns into something completely different.

BP: For me, it was a fascinating process to observe this work over the course of the months that it was on display and to photograph it on site. Usually, I photograph reality, then alter the photographs, and exhibit them in a white cube. But in this case, my altered photographs were suddenly standing in front of me in reality, in the form of this enormous photographic

sculpture. It was quite fascinating to be able to approach my own photography as a photographer, since the reality shift that normally takes place between my photographs and the environment was now taking place within the photograph itself.

MM: Right, that's interesting.

BP: The fact that the installation was on display in the public space for such a long time – six months – meant that, among other things, there wasn't just one single absolute view of the work, since everything was in a permanent state of flux. It wasn't just the light and the seasons – the condition of the building and the urban environment of the Schlossplatz in particular were constantly changing and at a tremendous pace. That's another interesting difference between projects in public space and exhibitions that take place inside of an art institution, where the white cube is the constant and the exhibited works are the variable that changes over time. At the Schlossplatz, for six months my installation *Echo* was the constant and the exhibition space, the city, was the variable. The result is that there is now this extensive series of photographs fusing photography, sculpture, and architecture.

MM: Which brings us back to Hans Ulrich's question about transdisciplinarity. Your project involves photography in the public space or outside, and of course as soon as that's the case, photography immediately becomes something else.

BP: Exhibiting my photographs in the public space was a totally new experience for me and a great challenge. Not just because you reach a much broader audience than you normally would in a gallery or museum, but also because it's an altogether different experience from exhibiting your work in the privileged and protected space of an art institution. For example, there were no opening hours, the work was available twenty-four hours a day, for free and for all. I'm going to produce another work in the public space in a couple of months. This time it will be on the facade of Art Basel, where I've been invited to install a photo installation as part of the *Art Public Projects*. I'm curious to see what will happen there.

HUO: We still don't have a great transdisciplinary institution, and building that Fun Palace at some point in the future is still my biggest unrealized project. What is your biggest unrealized project, Bettina? What are the streets that have not yet been constructed, the "unbuilt roads of Bettina Pousttchi"?

BP: There are many; they often involve other disciplines. For example, for a long time I've been wanting to develop a stage set. And given that I normally take my photographs more or less independently and as part of a little team or even alone, I'd also very much like to do some applied photography as a member of a large team of specialists – a fashion shoot, for example. For some time, I've also been thinking about a project involving a world order in which all time zones have been abolished.