The Construction of Time
A Conversation between Nikolaus Hirsch and Bettina Pousttchi

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Nikolaus Hirsch: In your work you are intensely involved with the phenomenon of time. Yet your approach to time is very unusual: time is reconstructed and set back or paused and synchronized. For several years now, you have been working on the project *World Time Clock*; you applied the demolished Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic) to the Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin; and the theme of your latest work is the reconstruction of Frankfurt's old town. What does time mean to you, and how does this influence your work as an artist?

Bettina Pousttchi: When working with photography and reflecting on how the photographic image functions, the subject of time is inevitable. The subject of space is also inseparably connected with the dimension of time.

NH: Your new work on the façade of the Schirn alludes to the dramatic urban planning transformations in Frankfurt's old town and the associated visual politics. The core of Frankfurt's old town was, before being destroyed in the Second World War, a heterogeneous fabric that had evolved over centuries with a wide variety of interpenetrating layers of time: it was not a city made from a single mold but rather a complex superimposition and juxtaposition of Roman, Carolingian, medieval, early modern, and modern buildings. Hence we ask not only: can history be reconstructed? But also: which history or histories?

BP: *Framework* refers to the urban situation and the historical context of the Schirn Kunsthalle, but at the same time it goes beyond it. The debate in Frankfurt over reconstructing the historical old town interested me because it raised many questions that are of general or global interest. How do we approach our cities? Who determines how they will be altered? What is the life expectancy of architecture today? And who decides that?

NH: The debate over Frankfurt's old town gives the misleading impression that it is simply a reference to the Middle Ages—in other words, that it is clear what is to be reconstructed. It is supposed to be about half-timbering, about half-timbering as synonymous with the old town. The title of your work, *Framework*, has two meanings. It refers to *framework* both in the sense of architectural structure and in the sense of a political construction. It becomes clear that history is not a completed era but rather a construction in the present.

BP: The question is indeed which of the many epochs that make up the architectural layers of a city that has evolved slowly do we want to remember? Which history are we rebuilding, and whose history undergoes public representation? Which cultural framework do we thus choose and what local and national narrative constructs such a selection? What's important to me is adding a transnational perspective to the local debate about supposedly German traditions. For example, the composition of the half-timbering pattern on the façade is influenced by Middle Eastern ornamentation.

NH: Unlike *Echo*, this work is very geometrically structured. What geometries are you referring to? How close does the façade installation try to come to the original half-timbering? What details and materials do you reconstruct? What geometries do you follow? What is just a line, and what do you leave out?

BP: The motif on the eastern façade is derived from the half-timbering elements of the Schwarzer Stern (Black Star) House; the rotunda is based on the Wertheym House. I photographed these houses on the Römerberg, in the immediate vicinity of the Schirn, over a long period of time and developed the work from these photographic source materials.
The basic geometric structure of these two ornaments adopts the façade grid of the architecture. Three stacked squares cover the area of one window. The appearance of the photographic motifs makes no claim of mimesis. They were not conceived naturalistically and do not attempt to objectify anything; rather, they represent a very subjective interpretation of reality. The half-timbering elements have been straightened out and slightly altered. They are something like a memory of themselves—an impression that is further reinforced by the inserted black-and-white lines.

NH: How did you get from the half-timbering to the ornament?

BP: For the composition of *Framework*, I studied the principles of the construction of Middle Eastern ornament. Ornaments as repetitive geometric systems have always fascinated me, as have the differences in how they are appreciated in various cultures. Early Western modernism defined itself, among other ways, in opposition to ornament and all superfluous decor in favor of a reduction of form to the essential. In Eastern cultures, by contrast, ornament continues to play a very important role.

NH: It seems to me your work describes an essential aspect of the discussion: the transformation of a constructional, tectonic logic of the load-bearing structure into an ornament that still recalls the tectonic but increasingly becomes a mere surface phenomenon.

BP: The original function of half-timber construction has not been adopted for the new buildings in the old town, which are instead being built in accordance with the latest methods and standards. In this way, the tradition of half-timbering is reduced to a surface, to a pattern for the façade design. The new urge for old half-timbering is, it seems to me, a desire, not for historical construction methods, but rather for a surface embellishment that got lost in the modern era. *Framework* starts there.

NH: In *Echo*, you got involved in the discussion of the demolition of the Palast der Republik and the reconstruction of Berlin's Stadtschloss (City Castle). The Temporäre Kunsthalle, which initially had work by Gerwald Rockenschaub on its façade, mutated into a miniature version of the Palast. Unlike the planned reconstruction of the castle, however, it was not faithful in all its details but rather altered several parameters and hence its representation in general: the scale is off; a color image becomes black-and-white. Can you explain this shift in further detail ?

BP: *Echo* was not conceived as a miniaturized reconstruction of the Palast der Republik but rather as a kind of afterimage, a visual echo, of the original building. At the time I began work on it, the Palast had just disappeared completely from the

cityscape, and the site of its long-running demolition was suddenly planted with a green lawn. This urban void was glaring. *Echo* covered all four sides of the façade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle with 970 individually applied paper posters. This photo sculpture stood on Berlin's Schlossplatz for six months, in almost the same place where the Palast had originally been. I had to adapt the structure of one building to another, much smaller one. To that end, I researched photographs of the Palast in many archives. I wanted to know how the building was perceived, how it was documented, the visual axes from which it was most frequently perceived. The motif took up the essential structural features of the building. The overall appearance was covered by a black-and-white grid of lines, which added a layer of mediation to the photographic image.

NH: It seemed essential to me that different scales be superimposed. The result is a hybrid between two buildings.

BP: *Echo* was the transformation of an existing building into a different one, similar to something I had done earlier in the video *Double Empire* of 2000, in which I remodeled the Empire State Building through cinematic means.

NH: In *Echo*, by applying the façade of the Palast der Republik you worked with the subject of time in a special way: where the national symbol of the German Democratic Republic was once mounted, you placed a large clock. There was another clock on the back side, which the original lacked as well, showing a different time. What was your intention? What does this temporal structure refer to?

BP: The form of the clock was derived from the state emblem of the GDR, which was composed of a wreath of rye, a hammer, and a compass and had been located on the west side of the building. In *Echo*, there is a clock on both the eastern and western façades, each showing a different time, differing by exactly one hour.

NH: *Echo* is not a reconstruction in the manner of historical preservation but rather a subjective construction.

BP: Yes, in that respect, too, *Echo* was not a reproduction faithful in all its details but rather a subjective interpretation. The focus was on the question of how to approach history and memory, and the role of photography in that. History as subjective construction was already a theme in the video *Reset*, for which I filmed a historical review of the past millennium on Times Square in New York during the night of the millennium, and then assembled the photographs into a new narrative.

NH: Are the two clocks appearing in the photo sculpture on the Palast der Republik a superimposition of two works, *Echo* and *World Time Clock*?

BP: In 2009, when I received the approval for the project on the façade of the Temporäre Kunsthalle, I was working very intensely on the *World Time Clock* project. That probably influenced the development of *Echo*.

NH: Can you discuss the ambitious *World Time Clock* project, which will have involved many years and much traveling? How did it come about, what is its current status, and how will you wind it up?

BP: *World Time Clock* is based on the idea of a world time clock in photographs. For the project, I will travel to every time zone in the world and photograph a clock in a public space, always showing the same time, five minutes before two. *World Time Clock* began while I was living in London for a period in 2008. At the time, I was traveling frequently between London and Berlin. The one-hour time difference between these two closely connected places always amazed me and made me think about this specific order to the world. The first clock in a public space I photographed at five minutes before two was the one in the main hall of Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, for the photo series *Take Off* in 2005. This "mother of all airports," as Norman Foster once called Tempelhof, was still in operation at the time, and I landed there frequently. The striking clock in the departure hall triggered a work about traveling, time, and photography.

NH: And were there influences other than that clock?

BP: I live not far from Alexanderplatz in Berlin, which has the wonderful Urania World Time Clock, a relic from the GDR days. This kinetic sculpture from 1969 shows, mechanically, the time in all time zones of the world. This sculpture is an early example of global thinking, produced in a country where free travel was not permitted.

NH: How many clocks will you photograph? Is there a specific numerical logic that establishes the formal framework?

BP: The series will consist of twenty-four photographs in all, corresponding to the twenty-four hours of a day. Currently, a little more than half of them are finished, and the rest should be completed by the end of 2012.

NH: One of the most astonishing interventions was when the island nation of Samoa took measures to shift its time zone by twenty-four hours; it skipped December 30, 2011, and in doing so jumped to the other side of the International Date Line. The strategy was to turn away from the United States and turn toward the economy of the Asian world. But perhaps the economics of time suggest more a jumping back and forth than a "hammering out" of the once strictly geometrically organized system of twenty-four time zones each measuring fifteen degrees of longitude.

BP: Samoa's decision may have been economically motivated, but it also reflects political changes. Since December 2011, Samoa has belonged to a new time zone that links it to the Asian world. Samoa had changed time zones once before, in 1892. At that time, the idea was to move closer to the American economic zone. The example of Samoa clearly shows how far this cartography is a social decision, one that is dynamic and changeable. Some countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and India have not adapted the one-hour system and thus their time is shifted by half an hour from the prime meridian. China has decided to have only one time zone, despite its enormous east-west spread.

NH: Would a single global time zone be conceivable?

BP: The system of time zones was from the outset a reflection of political relationships and associations. In that sense, it would be conceivable that in the

future there might be only one time zone, as the photographic world time clock suggests.

NH: *Echo*, *World Time Clock*, and *Framework* are works outside the protected space of a museum. What interests you as an artist about such an exposed situation? How important are urbanism and architecture to that? Are you interested in the fact that in this context, power and politics are no longer abstract, no longer just discursive assertions, but seemingly concrete and visible? They are, in a sense, embodiments of ideology.

BP: Artistic interventions in outdoor spaces are clearly distinct from works in the protected and privileged space of an art institution. Public space is subject to different rules, and they can be experienced there immediately. In my sculptures, I often use objects that order and structure public space, such as crowd barriers and bollards. They are transformed in a way that reveals different temporal phases. There is a difference between reflecting on visual politics in theory and causing new realities to become physical.

NH: How does the role of the artist change in the process? Is it related to the question of whether you as an artist can intervene in public space and thereby become a political figure?

BP: Working on architecture about architecture, rather than on models, permits an artistic practice between architecture, sculpture, and photography. It is an occupation of public space with an artistic assertion.