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The Construction of Perception

On the artistic work of Stefan Banz

The thing that interested him most, Stefan Banz wrote three years ago, was „the question of the mutual dependence of the artist, the art critic, and the curator.“ (1) At that time, he was mainly known as a curator. One of the founding members and director of the Kunsthalle Lucerne, he was responsible for its programme as a whole as well as the staging of individual exhibitions. (2) Before that, however, he had performed various functions in the division of labour of the art system. He graduated in art history at the University of Zurich, directed a gallery for young Swiss art, contributed exhibition reviews for catalogues and art magazines and wrote numerous unpublished short stories and poems concerned with personal feelings in the context of reflections on perception.

Biographical colouring to comments on contemporary art is not very popular with the specialized public. The reference to genealogies and origins (3), as naturally declared a scientific method by art historians of past centuries as it was lived by the artists, has become unfashionable in the context of debate about internationalist modernism, the autonomy of the work and the reality of the image – and, despite the age of postmodernism, has remained so. It must be noted, however, and especially in presenting the artistic practice of Stefan Banz, that the autonomous work of art, auratic and self-referential, is a problematic myth: contemporary art, working with strategies of appropriation, bid farewell to it long ago. Retro and ethno reflection, (4) discussion of perception and communication, proto-scientific artistic experimentation lining up the knowledge to date, and technicist generating of virtual art realities have taken the place of utopian models and universal designs.

Multiple Reception

In the context of this parallel, differentiated artistic practice, the curriculum of Stefan Banz has special relevance for his work. The account of his vita reveals the outline and even the mainstay of his approach and working method, which, as he aptly remarked himself, is mainly concerned with the question of the interdependencies of producer, mediator, and recipient within the art system. In this sense, the curatorial, mediating, receiving and producing components of his work cannot each be considered separately: they influence, stimulate and presuppose each other, are involved in an intelligent play on correspondence and confusion, forcing the viewer to question the construction of his own perception, discern that of the artist, compare and judge the. Behind this approach, a research into perception, there is also the scepticism of an artist who has fundamental doubts about the auratic autonomy of the work he creates. Consequently, Stefan Banz's installations occupy that precise place which functions as the crucial point in reception.

The main attraction of his current installation works is usually a large-sized photograph. The motifs of the pictures are taken from the artist's immediate vicinity – the town of Lucerne, his house, his garden, the rural Alpine foothills, and therefore his current and historical home, are the setting before which his children, his wife and friends pose to be depicted by Banz from an 'amateur' point of view in every situation of life. The photographs are composed in such a way that, particularly in the context

of art exhibitions, they defy unambiguous legibility, they contain the seeds of that quality distinguishing the installation as a whole – “when coincidence and sharp-sightedness unite and the hidden mystery of reality becomes visible in its curious ambiguity.” (5)

In this context, a collaboration by curator Harald Szeemann, philosopher Jacques Derrida, art theorist Theo Kneubühler and gardener Wada Jossen, presented by Banz in 1992, seems particularly important. “Cultivating the Museum” was the title of this installation dealing with the phenomena which, although in a classical view situated on the periphery of art, had a forming influence on contemporary work, and which have precipitated the diffusion of the concept of art. Szeemann, whose shows brought the autonomous quality of works of art on an interactive, scenic-thematic level, had the sentence “Seeing better through Agency for Intellectual Foreign Work” stamped on the windows of the exhibition space, and the statement “Thoughts without humus are flowers without colours,” on the floor. “Physis en différance,” Jacques Derrida’s orthographically wrong but semiotically correct central statement, decorated the walls in red letters, while gardener Wada Jossen covered the floor stamped by Szeemann with a layer of humus and later with a blossoming, fragrant garden, where, last but not least, Theo Kneubühler set up a sort of screen where he dealt with physis as the relation of word and image. The collaboration of Jossen, Kneubühler, Szeemann and Derrida, directed by Stefan Banz, resulted in an installation which, in its poetic playfulness on the one hand and conceptual rigour on the other, made its point on the dissolution of the traditional, one-dimensional concept of art. Instead, it favoured one that could be applied in multiple ways, acknowledging the motive force of peripheral influence. (6)

Although Banz officially acted as a curator, the conception of the exhibition and the coordination of the four elementary positions can be read as a genuine act of creative will in the context of his work. This is even more justified as we see in retrospect that the method of intertwining different levels of perception is an essential element of his work. Consequently, verbal expression of visual thinking already represents a work of art: “Texts on, about or for art,” Banz remarked, “are (...) quite often really creative, that is, artistic texts that should be given the same status as the works about which they speak, at least to the extent that they have arisen from a creative intention.” (7)

The Public – the Stage

Museums, galleries, art fairs – everything is a stage, a playground and projection room for artists and curators to present their creations, put their works and points of view on debate. An art show becomes an exhibitionist act, it marks a precarious gap – the point where intimacy and privacy on the one hand meet with glamorous appearance, marketing, exposure and uncontrollable reception on the other. The installations Stefan Banz conceives mostly for his Zurich gallery (8) at art fairs skilfully and with sublime precision allude to that gap. “Bath” is the title of the work that is to serve here as an example of the strategy chosen by the artist. The installation is composed of three standardized walls typical for booth in art fairs, and a pane of glass separating the exhibition space from the circulating visitors but still allowing a full view of what is happening inside. A blown-up photograph is mounted on the back wall. The entire room is ankle-deep flooded with water, accessible only through a door in the sidewall and in rubber boots.

A girl about four years old is depicted on the photograph. The child is naked and innocently lying in a bathtub from which the water seems just to have run away. Her hair is still wet, but the rubber plug is where it is supposed to be – in the drain. Photographed from above and emphasizing the amateur quality of the shot, the photographer's foot is sticking into a corner of the image. Intention or not? Hitchcock effect or amateurishness? An accident? An imminent crime? An allusion to art history's inside myths à la Vermeer?

The balance of sensory, physical presence on the one hand, and subtle allusions and unanswerable questions on the other continues into the spatial ensemble. Observed from a safe distance behind the pane of glass, the water missing from the tub is scenically taken up by its presence in the booth. The glass wall may recall Duchamp in the viewer well versed in art history. And it evokes the Minimalist claim on the right viewing distance, which in turn is put into question by the fact that one can walk around in the installation. The moment a visitor enters the booth, his role is transformed, the detached viewer is forced into involvement and exhibition, turned into a part of the artwork. He enters the stage himself, is contextualized by the work and becomes an actor. Sewage worker? Vice cop? Art critic? Criminal?

Although Stefan Banz's play on our nerves, our personal experience, subliminal feelings and art consciousness is illusionist, the connection of the various levels of both the work and perception is made in the viewer's head and can hardly be controlled by the artist. But Banz seems precisely interested in striking chords unknown to him and getting the viewer to start reflecting on his own reflection – a device apparently more and more important in our instant media world. When soap opera heroes become more familiar than one's own neighbours, virtual reality thus triumphing over actual being, then the question of the authenticity of one's own perception needs closer examination.

Private Sphere – Art Sphere

Considering the question of the mode of representation of his work, it may be justified to situate Stefan Banz's work within the movement of contextual art. But in contrast to the epistemological works, this tendency produces, Banz's work not only aims at problems immanent in the system, but also develops a decidedly private idiom. This apparent in the fact already pointed out that his photographs are limited to intimate motifs, their ambiguity deliberately defying clear explanation. On the other hand, the matter-of-fact exposure of his private world gives them an intersubjective timeliness that has its fattened equivalent in the mediated presentation of highly intimate questions on a talk show level. Stefan Banz's photographs and installations, however, do not come up with psychologizing explanations and soothing formulas like TV's question and answer person Margarete Schreinemakers. On the contrary, they multiply the catalogue of questions – the ways of decoding his installations are varied and suggestive, and insistingly appeal to the viewer's imagination and consciousness. Thus set between seemingly sentimental, private superficiality, and inscrutable suggestive force, his works refer to the peculiar tension between wish and reality, the same way as, for instance, the films of David Lynch do, (9) and call for an interactive, processual way of perceiving, constantly checking on being and appearance.

The advancement towards “inner periphery,” (10) the explicit artistic treatment of what we seem to know, what could happen in our own home, prompts various

reactions in the viewer. The exhibitionist mode of the artist has its counterpart in the voyeurist one of the viewer – a voyeurism which is all the harder to bear for its being directed at an object reasonably well-known, namely, one's own sphere of life as prototypically represented by the Banzian family idyll.

The casual focus on ritualized and well worn patterns of perception, what Boris Groys called "reasonable cultural experience," (11) is a thread running through the complex work of Stefan Banz. Whether it is the modes of representation and reception of contemporary art or the simultaneous and provokingly indifferent presentation of stages of his private life, filling up with individual experience in viewers' heads – his installations and photographs succeed in creating a projection screen so thickly woven that every answer the viewer comes up with in reply to the questions posed by the works runs into a void and turns up new questions. Reversing and multiplying and returning to the sender, this oscillation can be compared to the projected multiplication in a hall of mirrors – only there the nightmare disappears with the viewer.

February 1996

Translated from the German by Simon Lenz

- 1 Stefan Banz, "The Activities of the Kunsthalle from 1990 to 1993: An Overview," in: Kunsthalle Lucerne, Luzern 1993, p.5
- 2 Monographic shows with Urs Frei, Hannes Brunner, Heimo Zobernig or Larry Clark altered with thematic exhibitions – "Autoritratto del Blu in Prussia" (curated by Paolo Bianchi) or "Cultivating the Museum" (curated by Stefan Banz). A complete list of exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Lucerne can be found in: Kunsthalle Lucerne, p.64.
- 3 Nevertheless it seems important, in connection with Stefan Banz's career and exceptional position in the art world, to draw attention to influential role played by Lucerne critic, perception and image theorist, and artist, Theo Kneubühler (b. 1945).
- 4 See Christoph Doswald, "Ethno, what Ethno?", in: neue bildende kunst, No 4/5, Berlin 1995, p. 110-116.
- 5 Stefan Banz, Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld, Ostfildern/Stuttgart 1995, n.p.
- 6 The art magazine *Artis* 5/92 was published instead of a catalogue, another indication of peripheral influence on art and its reception.
- 7 Stefan Banz, "The Activities of the Kunsthalle from 1990 to 1993: An Overview," op.cit., p. 19-21.
- 8 The installations conceived by Banz for *Ars Futura Galerie* Zurich were commissioned by the gallery. This is mainly important for judging those presentations which put his work at the service of other artists shown by the gallery.
- 9 See the Lynch films *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*.
- 10 On the concept of "inner periphery," see Christoph Doswald, op.cit.
- 11 See Boris Groys, "Über das Neue," München, Wien 1992

This article was published in: Stefan Banz, *Dive*, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz 1996, p. 25-31.