

Interview with Stefan Banz

By Thomas Wulffen

Thomas Wulffen: The work for the prison was an art-in-architecture competition you won. What kind of building is it exactly?

Stefan Banz: It's a newly built district prison, finished in 1998, a regional prison, but mainly for prisoners on remand. Everybody awaiting criminal trial is brought here, and when the penalty does not exceed two years. To this all newly conceived prison the examining magistrate is attached.

W: Is your work also extended to that section?

B: The work is really in two parts. In the prison section I had 51 personally selected names of people who had been in prison with the title of one of their works or an expression ascribed to them applied to the walls. In the magistrate section--in Switzerland this is called 'Amtsstatthalteramt'--I had 33 names of people who had fought for modern laws and a humane penal system put on the walls the same way, names like Cesare de Beccaria or Voltaire or Olympe de Gouges.

W: That means there's a public area?

B: Yes, the examining magistrate section is public. The whole work spreads around the stairs, hallways and waiting rooms there. In the prison, there's a smaller semi-public area for visitors and a large closed part. The work is situated in both sections there, where you have common passages like hallways, stairs, prison yard, sports field, and the like. Not in the actual cells.

W: But some of the people named in the inscriptions were long-term prisoners.

B: That varies a lot. From very serious crimes like Caravaggio's, who had committed a murder, to people like Balzac, who was in prison just for five days for insulting the King. Or drug offences as with Billie Holiday, Robert Mitchum and Keith Richards, but also sexual offences as in the cases of Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, who were both convicted for homosexuality. Not to mention the political prisoners like Nelson Mandela, who had spent 27 years in prison, or "curiosities" like Henry Lee Lucas, who had confessed to more than 200 murders in the USA in the seventies, murders that he had never committed. For that he was sentenced to death and almost executed on June 30, 1998. George Bush, the Governor of Texas and ex-President's son reprieved him the very last minute. So, there's a very wide range.

W: Various times, too?

B: Yes, various times, offences and penalties. From singers to artists to philosophers, mathematicians and writers. I have tried to cover a very wide range and included many different languages: German, Italian, French, English, Czech, Russian, Turkish, Latin.

W: Why is there this literary level? You could have just mentioned the names. But you make a dash and refer to a text.

B: There are two reasons for that. One of them is, I'm sentimental. I wanted a poetic note to it, with associative and metaphorical qualities. It simply sounds nice to read "Mata Hari--The Eye of Dawn" and look up to a sky that's sometimes blue, sometimes grey. The other reason is the public note to art in architecture and the extreme situation in a prison. I wanted to create a stimulant and provide the opportunity to inspire prisoners, visitors and judges etc. If I cite a concrete work, like "Don Quijote" by Cervantes, then maybe somebody feels like reading it, and they can get it at the library. The whole work also has polyvalent components: if, for instance, you have the inscription "Muhammad Ali--When We Were Kings" in the gym, then that casts a different, changed light on the situation of being in prison.

W: You said you were sentimental. Isn't that a main line of your entire work?

B: Yes, it is. I'm very sentimental.

W: In your work, the private sphere takes on a great importance. The public part is less present. In your video, "Door to Door," you lift the documentation of a real incident on an esthetic level.

B: I think we have to differentiate various aspects here. On the one hand, there's the private and the public, that's the individual and the society. I'm an individual, a model existence, and I live in a public society. And when the private plays a role then I do that from this point of view. How does the totally private interact with the general? On the other hand: the private is at first an economic component, too. As an artist--who is married, has two kids and lives in a petty bourgeois milieu--I'm exotic in this art scene. The art scene is not in the first place supported or determined by the social traditions--like society, family, heterosexuality, responsibility etc. In the struggle for existence in the art context you're also incredibly tense as a father, because you have to function

two ways in order to make a living. That results in the tension between private and public. There's the economic thinking first. When I don't have much time to feed my artistic interests, I look for a combination. That I began systematically to photograph my children has to do with that economy. I make use of the life with my children, and they have a lot of fun at the same time. Furthermore, there's the important aspect of reflection. When I began to do my work generally in this way, I realized very quickly that it's a different thing if you make something or if you show something. At that point I was getting interested in perception on the level of misunderstanding. To me, misunderstanding is something of a main theme. "Door to Door" is a good example. Here, the viewer asks himself: why does this neighbour attack me and beat me up? What is the external occasion? Perhaps what follows is the speculation that I had maybe acted incorrectly in some way? Or has this old man gone totally mad, because he doesn't know what art context means and what an artist does? He sees something exotic in him, who does not belong into a normal petty bourgeois milieu. And then the question follows: is what is recorded real or is it fiction? A typical main question of our time that irritates all the more since the violence that one knows from the media does not correspond to that shown here. That's why this incident in "Door to Door" seems very unreal, curious and fictitious. That has to do with the discrepancy between the daily mass of representation of violence in the media and the unspectacular reality of this everyday story that everybody thinks he or she understands because they think they have experienced similar things themselves. The prison work is also based to a certain degree on the idea of misunderstanding. How do you interpret, first, the person mentioned and, second, the work cited below in connection with the real situation of imprisonment? When I write "Nelson Mandela--Long Walk to Freedom" in the prison yard, and I know that prisoners in solitary confinement walk there, then that has something totally ambivalent. This ambivalence can only be resolved by the viewer, by making a decision to consider it either positive or negative. I provoke this duplication of levels and invite the viewer to make for himself the decision how he wants to read this work.

W: The same thing applies to you as a person, too. You change your roles, as an artist, a father and a husband. Also, there's the change of parts within the operating system of art. You're an artist and you write about art. I find that aspect very intriguing, especially in a very conservative art scene.

B: Absolutely. I'd say too that art has become an extremely conservative discipline that doesn't know much tolerance (any more) and that operates very strongly on the basis of power. It's the old Darwinian principles that decide what gets to be seen and what doesn't. The range is very small. I think art today should more think about how it can find its face--its autonomy--again, because at the moment it lives totally on other contexts. The world has become very fast. This fastness art (which is in itself slow) draws from well-known mechanisms, for example those of the movie business, sports, pop music and the computer world. The art scene is a user world, it takes up very typical elements that determine those contexts, adopts them and composes or compiles them together. This brings great dependency and it has troubles keeping up or re-shaping its own identity. That's a great dilemma. Until recently the star cult was extremely frowned on. Pop music used to be strongly inspired by art (Andy Warhol). Today, it's the other way round: they try to popularize the quality of art with the partly thirty-year-old mechanisms of pop music (for instance, its star cult). I think that's really a pity, because it consists in taking over something that has been in existence for a long time and has elsewhere been presented better and more vehemently.

W: But isn't that rather a shift from production to distribution? The star cult is needed in order to popularize art. Art has always gone back to something that lay outside. It has represented the world or changed it in its face by scientific means, but it has never been as autonomous as may have been its dream.

B: Yes, if you put it positively you might see it like that. In the past, art has lived on the idea that it was something intellectual, elitist. Today, it wants to popularize itself, because it has realized that there's only one small corner left in the whole context of perception. When it becomes too popular, however, it's very quickly, as a counter-reaction, accused of banality. That again shows the schizophrenia in which art lives. My work also deals with similar mechanisms of reality and fiction, or of authenticity and fake. Relationships that are very delicate within the art scene, too. The art scene lives on representation, it loves metaphors, and it's rather uncomfortable with reality. I often hear the reproach that my photographs leave an uneasy feeling. But this uneasiness only arises because as a viewer you can't put yourself outside the pictures. Because they come

from the normal bourgeois world, everybody thinks they know them, and that the metaphysical, voyeurist gaze doesn't apply. So they identify the photos with themselves, and that's what makes a lot of people feel uneasy. Toward the end of the last century, around 1880, Etienne-Jules Marey invented motion photography. He constructed a gun with which he could take 24 pictures per second. He proceeded like a hunter and shot his pictures. That immediately inspired the firm of Remington--see the wonderful writings of Friedrich Kittler--to invent the machine gun. This example shows very nicely the difference between authenticity and simulation. If you don't simulate, then that has consequences for your life, and if you do, then it hasn't. What, then, is the function of art?

W: It's not the critic who has to answer that question.

B: I can't answer it either, I just know that it interests me.

W: How do you situate your work as a critic and curator in this context?

B: I have done a lot of curating in the past: Cultivating the Museum, Larry Clark, The Nightmare Leaving the Bed, Heimo Zobernig etc. For a certain time I tried to work as an artist at the same time, but I realized that was too difficult. There you had the old mechanisms of a conflict of powers. You step into your neighbour's garden that doesn't belong to you. So I decided to give up curating for the artistic work. As for writing, I never really worked as a critic, just as a theorist--theoretical thoughts on art and its perception. I still do that. I take that liberty. And when I feel like putting something into words, then I do that. But since 1993 I haven't really worked as a curator.

W: That's good on the one hand and bad on the other.

B: If you look at it in a negative way, then I have surrendered before a richer possibility. But as an artist I have also learnt to let go of things, which can turn into something else and expand the context in their turn. That's a positive component. As a curating artist, you're always in danger never to let go of anything. W: But the artist lets go of his finished work anyway.

B: Yes, but does he give it to the public or the curator who in turn creates something different out of it? I still stand by the opinion I had eight or nine years ago. Everybody in the art context has the same importance, whether he does his work as a curator or as an artist, as long as he intends to broaden, to expand the process of knowledge. I see no hierarchic differences at all here. And I don't have any problems with exhibitions where the curator is more at the centre than the artist. He simply has to acknowledge that he puts himself at the centre and has a certain intention.

W: To return briefly to the work for the prison. The starting point was your knowledge of certain figures, your theoretical base that you enlarged through research.

B: I try to modulate my artistic work in a sense that it implies both aspects: that it instantly functions visually, but that at second sight there are deeper contextual aspects of content and emotion in the foreground. My works are always founded on a tension, a paradox: beautiful--ugly, lovely--brutal, agreeable--uneasy, etc., where in effect neither of them hits the mark. That has to do with misunderstanding. I have an example: one of my most successful works was shown in the exhibition "Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer" at the Kunsthaus Zurich in the summer of 1998. There I had five large glass cubes, each of them 3 metres high and 1.5 metres wide and deep, put up in the room with the Baselitz paintings. There were gymnastic apparatus that were fixed to the insides of the glass elements. If you had used one of the gymnastic apparatuses, the whole cubes would have crashed. The question comes up at once: can I use the work or do have to see it metaphorically? It had at the same time a very present, haptic level because of the apparatus, and a very transparent one because of the glass. To the dominant and almost overwhelming Baselitz room came the playful element of the apparatus and the viewer's response. The day after the opening you could read in the paper that you could use those apparatus at your own risk, in order for once in your life to see the upside-down Baselitz paintings the right way. You could for instance hang on the rings upside down, then you could see the Baselitz paintings the right way. That's a metaphorical possibility, but in reality you risk your life. The public, on the other hand, took what was said in the media so seriously that the responsible people panicked. There you had twenty people a day who came to hang on those rings or the horizontal bar and look at the Baselitz paintings hanging upside down. That's what interests me, the potential misunderstanding that's always there, even in the simplest things. And indeed everything you do at a museum is subordinated to the law of insurance and of safety, or in simple words: even if somebody would have hung on the rings--it actually happened--nothing would have happened, because the object was made of security glass, and the apparatus would have been torn off as soon as you had more than 10 kilos hanging there. An essential condition of the organisers in the interest of safety.

W: That implies that you include the viewer's response in your work. That means after all that the experience from your work as a curator goes into your work as an artist.

B: You're absolutely right there. You can go so far as to say that in a narrower sense I still do curatorial works. My work as a photographer, for instance, lives on the "incidental" snapshot as much as it does on the concentrated selection of single images that I do afterwards. My photographic work is in a certain sense curatorial or reflective, because I think about how concentrated a photograph must be and what it should connote in order to live up to my standards of quality.

W: Those criteria are not, as with most photographers, those of content. You select the photos from a different standpoint. That changes the form of the photograph. To what extent are the criteria of content decisive for you?

B: I'm after all a person who functions esthetically. I react intuitively or emotionally to certain groupings of colours. There are also practical necessities. When I photograph my children I start from a large format. The child seems taller than he or she is. Shift of reality. But now there's the practical necessity, because I take most of my pictures with a small pocket camera, so I can act and react fast and more freely. The resolution is relatively small, so I can concentrate on a few things, like a face, and try to get the whole concentration and ambiguity in there. So, esthetics is a factor in determining the look of the photos.

W: I am thinking of the portrait of your child with the black tongue. That's the moment that rings in the misunderstanding.

B: Yes, exactly. That picture is absolutely perfect in this sense. If I tell you its real story you understand precisely what I mean. Now, I'm in town with my little boy. At a kiosk he wants a liquorice bar, so I buy it for him. He starts sucking on it, and suddenly he says; "Papa, look, my tongue's all black." And I say "wow," pull out the camera and take a snapshot while we're crossing the bridge. And because it's already dusk, it's late autumn, perhaps five thirty p.m., the background--in spite of the flashlight--disappears completely. That produces a totally different way of expression, the picture tells of sadness and melancholy, but the reality was the opposite: he thought it was funny showing me that tongue. That reveals a specifically photographic element. Photography is the most abstract visual medium there is, because it has nothing to do with life, because it doesn't happen in time, because it just takes a split second of life, and there's no before and after. That's why there are such misunderstandings as with the boy: cheerful, cheeky, but on the photograph he seems sad and melancholy. That's totally exciting, you can't do that with video to the same degree, and it doesn't work this way in painting.

W: That's exactly the element of difference that comes with the song "Buenos tardes amigo" that's sung by your son.

B: Yes, the singing is real. I have recorded it for "Nonchalance," a travelling exhibition by Christoph Doswald, the way Jonathan was able to sing it at that time. He made quite an effort, and it was real. This REAL is a very strange word. It's real, you feel it as real, and then you hear it in a certain combination and it sounds totally absurd. The child did not play a role, he just sang. If, however, I hear this singing in a black exhibition room with the photo with the black tongue, then reality is removed to a different, to many even haunted dimension that irritates even more if we pay attention to the lyrics of this Ween song sung by Jonathan. It tells of a good friend who killed the singer's brother with three shots in the back, until finally it's revealed that it wasn't the friend but the singer himself who did that, or the person impersonated by the singer, or the child with the black tongue or the singing child or the listener, viewer ... When I tape my children, my wife, or recently a boys' choir or a street theatre troupe, then it's always as it is. But the framing, the length, speed, concentration or presentation turns it into something that's totally absurd. That doesn't mean I only make works of that kind, but that kind of work interests me most. It's life as fiction and fiction as life, threat as fake and fake as threat. The assurance of disconcertedness and at the same time the disconcertion of disconcertedness.