

## No One is Ever Innocent in Public Space

Bogomir Ecker in conversation with Thomas Wagner

*Thomas Wagner: Where does your art come from – the studio or the street?*

Bogomir Ecker: I went out into the streets early, back when I was studying, around 1976. In those days, Erich Reusch had a new chair in “The Integration of Fine Arts and Architecture” at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. I was interested in that, and I also thought something would happen in the field, something programmatic. But almost nobody else in my surroundings was interested.

*So the question was: As an artist, do you want and are able to work in museums or do you have to look for other places?*

It wasn't a pressing question in Düsseldorf and at the Academy; but it was for me, also in its political dimension. There were autonomist activist movements in many areas of society; people were occupying empty houses, disputing property speculation. Urban and public space was suddenly a topic. By contrast, public art commissions (*Kunst am Bau*) were met with utter disdain. At the same time, that was exactly what made following a seemingly exhausted line of inquiry interesting.

*What was the appeal of the city as a different space, a different sphere?*

Producing something that wasn't immediately recognizable as art. I had the feeling that the city offered room for creative freedom. With working outdoors, all sorts of things seemed possible. There were unconnnotated spaces; one could go unnoticed, no one really cared about art in an urban context. It was only later on, when I got in touch with like-minded artists – “Büro Berlin,” for instance – that I realized there were other people out there with a similar artistic approach.

*So the city's public space offered a way to break out of the confined zone of art?*

I wasn't looking for a broad audience, to the contrary. What I was thinking was more that the city was at my disposal as a studio. And as far as public recognition was concerned: exhibiting in some gallery was much more public than what I was doing, although I was working in public space. The city was like an anonymous, opaque shelter. And if anybody asked me what I was doing, it was clearly necessary to withhold the fact that I was an artist. There were some utterly absurd situations.

Back then I used to draw long black lines on different walls with black oil pastel. I was looking for a large, curved wall for this purpose. I finally found a suitable wall on Ulmer Höhe, in Düsseldorf-Derendorf, where the jail was located, with a “Rheinmetall” factory right beside it. Incidentally, this was close to the freight depot, at that time the place where new Leopard tanks were dispatched by Rheinmetall in the night – and during the Nazi period, it was the site of the deportation of Jews and others minorities to concentration camps. So, what a place! I

was oblivious to the historical context of the location. This was at night, and I wasn't sure where I was. I got on my bike, and while standing and balancing on it, I started to draw a line about three meters up the wall that extended for circa 30 meters. When I was almost finished, I saw two police cars heading towards me. So, I already belonged to the inherently "suspicious" generation, and it turned out that the curved wall belonged to a jail, where a RAF terrorist was imprisoned, to boot. The police ordered me to stop drawing on the wall and hand over my ID, which, of course, I didn't have on me. The situation was slightly bizarre. They wanted to arrest me, but I protested. I was persistent, but I had to come clean as an artist in this instance. An absurd dialog between a young artist and four indignant policemen ensued, in the dead of the night, in a bleak city wasteland in front of the curving concrete wall of a maximum security prison: "What do you mean, you are just drawing a line?" "Just a line. It's important. Only a line, and I'll be done in just a few meters. Nothing is being damaged, this is just a simple line! Just a line!" And then, I could hardly believe it, they actually did let me finish the line. What disarmed them was probably the fact that it was a trivial long line, and not political graffiti being inscribed on the prison wall. I was permitted to finish the job under police surveillance. Only when I left did they leave. Imagine that. And it took place in a political climate where the whole of society was engaged in a paranoid hunt for terrorists, to the point where it sometimes felt like living in a police state. The police were pretty trigger-happy at that time, because everyone was hysterical. The next morning I took pictures as usual.

*So you did artistic interventions at night and then documented the result with photographs the next day. How did that come about?*

Something was altered in the city, and the photo was proof of it, and I was glad to have an archive of my own actions. Gordon Matta-Clark was at the back of my mind, and other artists from the New York scene who made art outdoors, and whose works were circulated in only a few black and white images. Reading various French philosophers was another factor, especially Baudrillard. *Kool Killer* was particularly important to me, a slim volume published by Merve Verlag. Those were the driving forces behind my work. This sort of thinking had not arrived yet in Düsseldorf, it was an orderly provincial town. I was pretty much on my own with this artistic approach.

*And Beuys? Didn't he play a role in Düsseldorf?*

Beuys wasn't teaching at the Academy any more, but he was a major and highly relevant figure, who had uncovered a lot of underlying issues. But he was so close and dense and was dripping with lard – that was the problem for me. As a young artist looking for means of expression, there was no way not to give him a wide berth. Later, I got to know him in other contexts and could deal with him more confidently.

*But Beuys was the person who made art receptive for public questions and concerns again. It was precisely because he confronted all the myths the National Socialists had appropriated, precisely because he didn't leave well alone that he won the public in Germany over for contemporary art – practically all on his own.*

As a figure, Beuys always attracted me. But as a 23-year-old student, keeping my distance was imperative. I ran into Beuys three times in the Academy's corridors, and I always had my portfolio with me. But I was always uncertain, and never showed it to him. After all, he was a charismatic leader, so as a young artist, one had to find one's own way round him – and that was where something very basic cropped up for me: I wanted to start from square one, in the middle of the city, engaging with its functionality. Without all the metaphysical baggage. I was interested in the fusion of art and the commonplace, I aimed for *fait accompli*. Beuys was too dense, too religious, too symbolic for me. I was interested in the social aspect of art, but with a straightforward and direct approach – and I wanted to get back to the simplest forms of drawing. Starting from scratch, just drawing lines on facades – in a way it was a fresh start, a great relief.

*When you drew lines on buildings in the city, the artwork became part of public space, but it was no public art commission, it was unwanted in the realm of architecture; neither architects nor their clients desired it. It was in the city, but wasn't really public, even though it was situated in open space. Right?*

It was this unmarked, raw terrain that drove me. There were wastelands, voids everywhere in the cities. The gaps that the war left behind remained visible until the 1980s. And as for the bad image of public art commissions – guilty by association – I didn't care.

All of the drawings on walls were a sort of tattoo on the external skin of the city. I wasn't sure yet how to deal with the substance of an urban structure, and before I approached this very complex situation, I started to cautiously carve signs into the dermis of the city's body without it taking note.

*And how did the whole of the urban body come into it then? Or in different words: when did the tattooist Bogomir Ecker become a sculptor, too?*

It was difficult and took a long time. First, I drew those minimal lines, then they turned into surfaces. Then I began examining traces and trails. The exchange of signs was the point of departure. Who is sending the message? Who is the receiver?

The first object I made was *Toter Briefkasten* [Dead Letter Box]. First one, then a whole street full of dead letter boxes. At that time – living in Paris after my studies – I had nothing to do with the art scene anymore, and worked almost exclusively at night. When it is dark, silence reigns, and it is easier to concentrate. All a street consists of is a streetlamp and the facades of houses. Everything else disappears. This is theatrical and expedient: things appear unreal, strange and pointless. What I didn't understand back then was that only by dropping out of art I had truly gotten into it.

*And in such an atmosphere, a dead letter box embodies a will to communicate, which ends in anonymity? The people participating in communication don't actually meet...*

In the dead letter boxes – which you couldn't open and in which all messages disappeared – communication was frozen, blocked...

*...someone deposits a message but doesn't know who will collect it and what they will do with it. Like a message in a bottle. Was it the interruptions, the discontinuities, which made communication particularly interesting for you?*

I think it was the urge to indicate a blank space, manifest it in an object. Simulation as a method came into play. It was a matter of slowing down the flow of communication. One thought relating to this was suspending a process that seems to run automatically. Stasis. For everything is precisely timed in the city, and it is a completely natural reaction to want to stop the city's ticking clock. At night, activity recedes and the city becomes a vacant space.

*So works like these are guided by forms of communication that are taken for granted in cities: we see signals and objects but we can't really establish a connection with them. We walk past people and places indifferently, without really encountering them. Communication happens, and then again, it doesn't.*

Yes.

*So is the communication we know from cities what is deposited in the dead letter boxes?*

It is an image. There are thousands of people in the city. Faces, glances, movements, gestures. But actual communication rarely takes place. Everything keeps in time on parallel tracks with no convergence. We rely on technology and barely communicate directly. We don't want to. We can't. Isolation is also a form of protection. These are paradoxical circumstances. At the same time, we need more and more gadgets, crutches and prostheses to get the simplest forms of communication going at all.

*Is that the reason why you produce strange apparatuses, with functions that are hard to determine?*

My problem was initially the form, creating the shape. Of course, I could have simply bought a mailbox, but I wasn't interested in that. It wasn't supposed to be a ready-made. And at the same time, I couldn't concede a sculptural form to this *box*. It was about simulation and deviation. Around the same time, I created a different piece, on the banks of the Seine: *Sprungschanze für Selbstmörder* [Springboard for Suicides]. An absurd idea that came out of the blue. So I built a sort of ramp by the Seine, from which you could have jumped into the river. In the middle of the frosty winter, in the middle of Paris. The ramp was a weird sort of box, just like the mailbox. So things were slowly coming together on a sculptural level. Back then, I didn't have a clear notion of what sculpture could be for me. I was slowly making my way towards sculpture, following narrative traces.

*How did the city, the narrative and the object come together?*

I would come across a story and react to it – for instance by building *Sprungschanze für Selbstmörder*. Or, to put it another way: I was reading Baudrillard's writing on the “insurrection of signs,” engaging with urban issues – and ended up building these boxlike objects with holes. They were almost always hollow. You could almost say I was illustrating my thoughts. I created objects to assert my own thoughts within a very specific urban situation.

At the same time, I was imbued with the notion that pictoriality and narration were taboo in art. My goal at the time was to break through to something fundamental. An example of this was *Vertical Earth Kilometer* by Walter de Maria. I thought this artwork was absolutely fantastic, but at the same time I knew that that was not a direction I could head in.

*It is certainly a work with narrative components?*

That was probably exactly why I was so preoccupied with this work. After all, the urban milieu was full of stories you only had to notice and seize on. And it was just about at this point that pictoriality and chains of associations began to interest me.

*But you don't just tell simple city stories at all. For example, the way I've always understood your Lauscher [Eavesdroppers] is that they were anchoring and grounding something in a certain place. If these objects do narrate anything at all, then they narrate attention, where something that is streaming towards the viewer finds a space to resonate. Where do the signals received from the outside have their place?*

That actually was the next step. It was the result of frustration. Because all of a sudden, I had the feeling that I always carried the city around in my pocket, in a way, during my nighttime activities. After a while, I had started reacting like Pavlov's dog. I felt like a mongrel, sneaking through the streets at night, observing things. The city only had to show me one of its sexy corners and I would immediately come up with an intervention in reaction to it. So my doubts and my aspirations grew. My artistic practice needed to develop further, I was standing at a crossroads. So I began building objects that generated attention on their own account, that were more salient. Some people said I was betraying my principles. Everything is visible now! Until then, the more inconspicuous my sculptures were, the happier I was. My interest lay in implanting objects in urban space that were beneath the threshold of perception. The unexpected subliminal.

I was caught up in the situation I had created for myself; I fancied myself in the role of a Tupamaro of art. I was innocent, but I knew that it couldn't go on like this. Then I was invited to do a large exhibition for the first time – at the Museum Haus Esters in Krefeld. So I abruptly crossed over from the pavement to the parquet. Somehow or other it was something I wanted. Whether a dirty abandoned industrial building or a museum, it didn't really matter. But one thing was clear: I had to change my artistic strategy.

*Did that affect your relationship to the public sphere, to the city and the night? Did you stay home at night from then on?*

Yes, I stayed home at night and slept, just like everyone else. It also had to do with the fact that I was beginning to become a bit odd after two years of nocturnal work. If you don't want to acknowledge reality but are constantly grappling with it, then something is wrong. It was getting a bit psychologically dangerous. So I hit the brakes.

*So in a sense Mies van der Rohe's parquet liberated you from your obsession with the night?*

The exhibition came at the right time but, all the same, I ran right into a stone wall. The art wall. It caught me almost a little too early, as I had no room to maneuver. It turned out alright, I made works inside and outside, in the trees and the street adjacent to the museum. But subsequently I focused more on interior space, because I needed peace and quiet for my artistic progress. Outside, in the city, you have to be fast. You make your own agenda, you need a disguise so that nobody notices that what you are doing is illegal – there's no space for trial and error. Scout the location, take pictures, prepare the intervention, wear construction gear or something similar, quickly execute the job without thinking too much, gruffly play down questions asked by passersby, disappear as soon as you're done. Every move has to be spot-on. Working in the studio is different. There is room for deliberation, modification, moving things around. That turned out to be exactly what I needed.

*So you only became a true artist by betraying the night and your own ambitions...*

...you could say so....

*... and then you began to engage with forms and objects more intensely?*

It was a path I had always avoided. Up to then, my perspective was: Anything like that is academic gibberish; the only thing that matters is changing your surroundings. Action is decisive. The operative interference, the intervention at the right place, that was essential. The main point was to leave many traces in a city, which is already overdeveloped and chaotic in its own right, and to disrupt everything even more. I took this so far that I ended up having the idea of sawing off a piece of the Eiffel Tower. And so I did it. It was initially a joke. I had proposed it without meaning it seriously, in a Parisian bar with a bunch of people one night, and the morning after I got up and thought: actually, why not?

*How did you manage to do it?*

I went up to the second level on the Eiffel Tower. Of course, I had to be camouflaged. I had a sketchpad with me for the purpose, so I was “disguised” as an artist. I held the pad and drew – but I had attached a hidden hacksaw to my lower arm, and when the coast was clear, I worked on sawing a triangle out of one of the steel beams with it. It took around six hours. I then hung up the sawed-off fragment on the tower with a piece of wire. It was all pretty risky. Afterward I called a few people and told them I had created my first “mobile” on the second level of the Eiffel Tower. The piece hung there for about half a year. Then it started to bother me that my mobile had become the destination of pilgrimages for people from my scene. I had a picture of it, that was enough. So I took the triangle down and threw it into the Seine. It felt good to know that the Eiffel tower was a few hundred grams lighter. Since then, by the way, I've never been up the Eiffel Tower again.

*Was there a drunken, nighttime notion of a different form of public sphere behind such actions?*

Performing actions didn't satisfy me in the long run. In those days, sculpture as a mode of action was not unusual. I couldn't see any further artistic possibilities in it. The logical next move might have been to get into politics in order to change things – but I was an artist.

*So you gave up the strategy of inconspicuousness?*

My artistic strategy was based on an understanding of the city itself as a provocation. My vision was to make something different, quieter, more innocuous – and thus potentially more effective.

*What does it mean to behave inconspicuously in such a curious space as the public sphere? Isn't it normal not to really stand out in the city? Did this strategy change when you turned into a professional artist? Did the point then become being conspicuous by merit of inconspicuous objects?*

Inconspicuousness is linked to an artistic method that considers the initially inconspicuous to be the only real thing in an urban environment where everyone craves attention. I really do like it when something is totally quiet and maybe has more of a revelatory effect in retrospect. My art is meant to function like a virus. Sometimes viewers are immune, sometimes the symptoms only show up weeks or years later – regardless of whether I'm working in urban space or in a museum. I always had a preference for small things, which seem recalcitrant at first sight, don't please the eye, on the contrary, are easy to overlook. That still interests me today. That's why I still have trouble with very large works. At the same time, it's exciting to work on a large scale.

*So how, for instance, did the work Aliud in Duisburg develop? It is monumental and, what's more, a public art commission too.*

First off, I thought the architecture of the building in Duisburg really worked. It was also nice that the building is located in middle of the city, but also at the periphery. Even though just across from it boats set off on the official harbor cruise route, there is also an industrial area there. And right there is where this huge depot was built – the building is, in fact, nothing more than a huge department store for the North Rhine-Westphalian police force.

*You did always have a good relationship with the police...*

Well, in the course of time I learned how to talk to all kinds of people. A department store for police equipment, from ballpoint pens and erasers to guns: I found that interesting. And the place was exciting too. The building actually creates a stage, a quiet, enclosed space within a space, an opportunity to make an appearance. That's why the really big sculpture hangs like a marionette in center stage on a girder, and this was extremely technically challenging to realize. At first there were major issues with statics and vibration, but the highly motivated structural engineers and architects solved them.

*They are hanging "bodies" in a double sense, which play with associations with the human body and with technical repositories....*

*...I try to avoid distinct figuration...*

*...and are suspended indefinitely.*

My sculptural “bodies” are always in somewhere between the two. The objects I use are in a way also like “figures.” For instance, microphones or remote controls.

*Do bodies turn into objects in this case?*

No, bodies are bodies. My use of these objects developed primarily from an exploration of cognitive phenomena. Especially of the sonic type, dealing with the complexity of balance and spatial perception via the ear. Moreover, my understanding of the physical is determined by the idea and history of automata. After all, automata have become ubiquitous representatives. That has always been an important thread in cultural history for me. So many of my objects and sculptures are something like perceptual prostheses. I don’t produce marionette figures, but anthropomorphic resonance can’t be avoided with these shapes. You make two holes next to each other and everybody immediately says: those are eyes. In these shapes there is always a connotation of the human body. But hanging, suspension is interesting on a sculptural level. The marionette association helped me to redefine the sculpture. It is like an upside-down pedestal. Normally the center of gravity of a certain weight rests on a pedestal; if you turn it upside down, the point the body is hanging from becomes the pedestal. An ironic reference to the obsolescence of pedestals in contemporary sculpture is also part of the Duisburg work: there is a box located at its lower end – a vestige.

*The ear experiences space differently than the eye. What does that mean for sculpture as spatial art? In your works, do you variegate perception in various manifestations – as a system of observation and surveillance – in order to turn it against itself in a useless monitoring of what is useless anyway?*

As part of our bodies, our ears perceive in a completely different way than our eyes. Our ears are able to discern panoramically, that is, spatially. By contrast, our eyes are constantly refocusing and actually only dance across surfaces. We are in the age of the focusing eye, the age of the scanner and surveillance. The ear was always a corrective for me, something that is receptive in a different way, capable of tuning in. The orifice of the ear is a membrane that makes the body permeable in both directions.

*So listening is an activity?*

Yes, an ear can also deliver a signal. Or rather, one depends on the other. So I built aural objects and installations with both capacities – active and passive. If we transfer this approach to society, to a social structure, then inevitably the focus shifts to our communication, our media culture. We never know who is being observed when, who is the observer and who the observed party. Are we voyeurs because we want to see everything? Are the media the voyeurs, watching us see things? Who is the perpetrator and who the victim? Who is the marionette? Who is pulling the string? There are no easy answers, because each of us is a part of the media system. No one is innocent.

*Has that had a new influence on your works in public space?*



Losing your innocence doesn't just mean a loss. You also gain new options. So you shouldn't grieve over it too long. The loss of communicative innocence also results in new possibilities for art: Suddenly it is possible to observe a small canal in a landscape with surveillance cameras, put the images on the internet and generate an incredible amount of complication and confusion of communication there.

*Does that mean you are reaching back to approaches from earlier works?*

Of course...

*The line on the wall and the canal under surveillance – in both cases, not much happens. The line is there and the canal is simply there.*

All the artists I like always do the same thing over and over.

*I mean something else: isn't the situation of communication and the disguise very similar in both cases?*

There he is again, the man in the cloak of invisibility...

*...and that's who you are when you pass through the city and into public places? You put a lot of effort into the canal piece, creating a situation which can be watched by everyone on the internet, and which has images of catastrophes taken from the web attached to it...*

... looping, looping, looping... and looping again...

*... along with a mischievous style of staging such endless communication loops. What consequences does that have for your perspective on the public sphere?*

Today the public sphere means something different to me than what it meant in 1980 or 1990. Things have changed; the cities and the terms of perception as well. My actions in the eighties relied – among other things – on the existence of vacant spaces in cities, and today one cannot avoid noticing: they no longer exist.

*Did your art revert to the realm of the public art commission because free space in cities had decreased?*

Perhaps. Additionally, what several of my colleagues and I were doing in the eighties has meanwhile become the norm. Every event agency today has some old warehouses with a few dead pigeons in a corner in their portfolio. That doesn't bother anyone any more. On the contrary. The location seems all the more authentic. When fashion shows and receptions for managers are hosted in places like this, they become irrelevant for artists, and a different approach is necessary. Each generation of artists has to find its own answers. I was more or less reacting to the status quo. But in the long run, you can't stay in the balcony seats heckling like the two old guys in *The Muppet Show*. That gets boring fast. Besides, art that only makes side notes is purely reactive. Good art has always triggered something, even if the reaction was delayed. Nowadays I am more interested in creating a

set of conditions than commenting on given conditions. Today the scope of work for artists is complicated, because the art world is such a bubble, and it sucks up, digests and discards everything at such a high velocity. How do you deal with the situation? Do you want to withdraw into the white cube? Produce art for the three hundred richest people in the world only? Or for the global caravan of thirty-four thousand biennials? Or are there any other options? Those are today's questions and marching orders.

*You collect old press photos. Press photography is a medium in the public sphere that has changed fundamentally in the last few years. Not that there is no press photography anymore, but today it is all digital. What does it mean that analog media, based on contact with reality, are increasingly disappearing? Is this similar to the aforementioned lost innocence? You lose something and gain something else? What happens with the public sphere when the way we get in touch with reality changes?*

These photos are an appropriation of reality to me. There's no other way to reach shuttered places and layers; phenomena which have such a formative influence on society that we don't even notice them. Before it all disappears, I am trying to record some of it. By establishing a personal archive of all of these photos, an archive of the uninterpreted comes into existence.

We are, after all, experiencing a continuous and radical reduction of the type of material which allows us to understand things. Everything is shrinking. Even though the most trivial things are rehashed publicly to an obtrusive degree, causing stupefaction via mass media, a substantial form of the public sphere is disappearing. This is paradoxical – and politically dangerous. With the broadening of the information pool the possibilities for manipulation are increasing, while new immaterial pathways are developing. For an artist, especially for a sculptor dealing with the materiality of reality this is a difficult situation. Questions arise: Where is the free space now? What is my sculptural material? Where to begin? The public sphere has become a complicated and contradictory matter.