

The following conversation took place in December 2013.

IG: Shall we start with the central aspect of your practice, which is time and again the starting point for the creation of works: space. For you, space, with its specific qualities, is not just the environment for works, but rather an important prerequisite and always part of the work as a whole. Could you explain this some more?

BR: That's true. Though space alone, or space as an isolated expression, is of little interest to me. Above all I'm interested in how spaces have an effect on us, or the ideas you connect to them. Therefore I understand a space as a place where various <symptoms> or, better said, signs from different sources and origins become visible. In this sense I understand a space not as a closed or stable entity, but rather as an element that is continually exposed to changes through time and movement. A space is dependent upon context – cultural, historic or ideological, for example; you can observe this clearly in spaces within urban development, be they public spaces or general residential conditions.

IG: Which means that for you a given space, a real space with all the changes or movements that you have just described, is always the condition and the prerequisite for the work you create there. This artistic approach is consistent with a particular attitude to how the work emerges and the artistic process: not going to a location with completed work, but rather developing something new from the given space, with all that which is at hand and contemporary there, and nobody – neither the artist nor the curator – will know where this will lead. Has this a particular appeal for you?

BR: Yes, you could say it like that. The given space is important to me, because I see it as a part of my work; it therefore also defines the work for a large part. As an artist, a space is always made available for you, on the condition that you work with it, even when you <only> place something in it. But I was always more interested in really dealing with the space, to see it as a part of the entire exhibition and thus of the work too. Perhaps a certain longing, a wish for <realism>, if you call it that, plays a part here: the given space is hardly changed, but with modest means, which sometimes seem exotic, it can be transformed into something sculptural or fictional too.

After every exhibition in which I have worked in this way with the respective space, (intervened with it, or maybe changed it so little that you hardly notice at a first glance,) I know a lot about the space itself. Like how it was built, what is behind the walls, how the floor and the ceiling were made and so on. You could perhaps say that it is a kind of research into a <microsite>. In so doing I also work with the original plan of the space in order to get closer to the idea and the conception of the room. But above all this kind of specific installation is, for me, about appreciation of the direct space, so about that which results from all the procedures and interventions, and therefore how this is experienced by the thing that moves within it: the visitor. If a space in which one finds oneself becomes an art object, then the visitor himself is in the middle of the artwork, he or she becomes a part of it and is, to an extent, also exhibited within it.

IG: That means, you follow the visitor's train of thought in your work and you consider how he or she might move, feel and perhaps also act in relation to what you offer, change or adjust slightly in the space?

BR: Of course for me it is about the movement of the visitor in the space, even if I want to keep this movement as free as possible. I do not try out a particular course or set a path to be followed. On the contrary, I try to create disorientation. The spaces that I want to present and offer are often passages, entrance areas or waiting rooms, i.e. transitory spaces, which carry a movement *per se*, or at least the expectation of one.

IG: When you talk about passages and other kinds of cross-over area and about the ways that one moves therein, it seems for you very clearly to be about the entire experience of the space which the visitor can have within the spaces you offer, rather more than about their apprehension of individual elements there. But let me prefix this with another question. How, or with what, do you begin when you plan an exhibition such as this one in the Kunsthauus?

BR: When I start to think about space, the empty room is at first as important to me as the full, activated room, if not indeed more important. The emptiness is in truth the material that I need, because I find or can conceive of real and imaginary movement in it. The elements that I later bring to it are only means to define this emptiness, the character and the identity of the space more clearly. Though the elements exist in their own right, that which links them to the context is more important.

IG: Can you clarify this more precisely, because this is the very thing that you will implement in your solo exhibition at the Kunsthauus Baselland. You will be dealing with the three upper galleries, adding architectural elements to them in order to change them; you will thus make a new viewpoint possible for the observer – and do that within a specific context.

BR: I will intervene in the existing architecture of the Kunsthhaus in the sense that I am going to build two false columns in the exhibition spaces. On the one hand these should disrupt the character of these galleries, on the other augment them. The two columns are – architecturally speaking – credible, so they could also be fulfilling a purpose in the particular place they stand. At the same time they also remain foreign, because they relate to another, removed place. Thus I want to retain the original identity of the space with its support system, passages and treatment of space, and at the same time infect this identity with precisely placed foreign bodies, so that we end up with a third space – a space whose character and function can not be so clearly defined.

IG: What do you mean exactly, when you say that you would like to relate to another place, at a remove? Are the columns that you are placing a reference to a particular place and do they indicate something specific?

BR: Yes, they refer to another place, which is more public, but without meaning a specific place that I could name – like an underground station or an underpass, for example. The sizes and the materials of the columns describe more the general usage of exterior public spaces. The galleries, in contrast, with their sizes, divisions and their sequence communicate the particular comfortable and harmonious atmosphere of interior spaces to the visitor. The comparison of the two differing characters of space, however, establishes a new, open space. You could almost say that a schizophrenic – in the sense of a completely antithetical – moment of spatial appreciation becomes possible, a moment in which something new can emerge.

IG: I would like to get closer to this once more, because you have just spoken about a 'third space' that you create for visitors in your larger installations. Let me try to describe this: you deal with the given architecture, with its particular qualities such as light, material and sound, etc.; you intervene in it, such as by introducing new architectural elements, as you are now doing for the Kunsthhaus and have already done several times in other locations. By these actions you sometimes change the character of a space fundamentally, depending upon the scale of your intervention. At the Kunsthhaus now you are showing, alongside your intervention, a projection of a video with about 80 black and white images of neoclassical architecture. Is this a part of the third space you are offering; does it lead to the oppositional feeling you just referred to?

BR: Not really. The projection stands for another level and has nothing to do with the space itself directly. The spaces that are shown in the projection are literally drawn from another place and another epoch. They show details and fragments of a neoclassical palace in the eclectic style of the 19th century. The mixture of these differing styles of building – Greek, Roman, Egyptian ... – becomes ever more intense through the numerous individual images. All this allows the viewer a labyrinthine journey through time. It is also important that the projection comes out of one of the false columns, one of those that I'm building. I wanted the projector to be located inside one of the two columns, so it would be as if the black and white pictures were being generated by the architectural element. My idea was to have a present, a real architecture, which is reflected in another past architecture. Or to put it another way: a real space that displays the past and generates it at the same time. For this reason the projection does not represent a concrete third space, but rather an emergent mental space.

IG: Why do you choose these images of architectural fragments from a particular time in the past and not from the contemporary architectural vocabulary?

BR: This project is about the deferred action of spatial perception and architecture. For the most part the photographs in the projection show neoclassical supporting structures with monumental columns, beams, pillars, arches and so on. This architectural past – to my mind magnificent – is projected from a normal column within an urban context. Despite its modesty, the column also carries within itself this very history of earlier architecture. The connection of past and present by means of architectural elements is interesting to me, because of course you relate to the past when you design something in the present or for the future. Naturally that has to do with a certain degree of objectivity, but also to do with idealisation and misunderstanding. I wanted there to be tension between the projection and the real space in which space and fiction infuse each other.

IG: For me that is a nice observation about your work: that on the one hand you design possible spaces with real and fictional, and in this case projected, places and spaces. On the other hand you enable the development of a tomorrow that progresses from the yesterday and the today. How significant a role does the history of the place where you are working play, or is your interest of a rather more formal nature?

BR: My interest is first and foremost formal and relating to space. But that inevitably also includes the history of a specific place. I hesitate somewhat to make references to the use and the past of an exhibition location, because I want to stick with an open language of space. My site-specific interventions should transform, shift and perhaps also augment the nature of a space, rather more than explicitly define it. But there is often not enough time to really engage with the place. A true examination of all aspects of a site takes place more in my photographic series, because I have more time available.

IG: You've just mentioned your photographic series. These are, to describe them briefly, photographic collages, which you have developed over a longer period of time. Some of these

appear, at first glance, to be old, well-thumbed postcards of particular places, landscapes, exterior and interior spaces, and the longer one looks into these image worlds, the more clearly one observes the optical stumbling blocks and breaks in the images. The different image sections that you have drawn from diverse sources and then put together are collaged and orchestrated so skilfully that a great deal only becomes apparent gradually.

Can you say something more about this, regarding your motivation for this work, one that has been part of your practice for many years? What role does the space that you picture in the process play?

BR: In truth this work has been pursuing me for many years, since I completed my studies in the mid 1990s actually. My motivation was – and still is – that these collages should continually develop over the years. If it were only about optical illusions for me, then I would probably have stopped long ago. It is more important that the optical illusion is only a means to create a picture, a picture that seems at first glance to have the attributes of a photograph. These attributes enable the viewer to perceive the collage as if it were in fact a photograph, before they can deconstruct the image bit by bit. It is this moment of reconstruction and unease that I am interested in. In this moment there is a loss of (one's own) place and chronological consciousness of time, because the photograph, i.e. that which I see, ultimately remains only as an idea and a memory. And of course there are questions about the medium of photography too, but through the reconstruction it is possible to generate new connections and spatial conditions.

IG: Are you also approaching general questions of perception here, and one's own localisation in what we see or think we recognise?

BR: Yes, exactly. With a photograph you ask yourself, as if it were obvious, what is to be seen in a picture, where and when it was taken and so on. That means that the process of viewing a photograph has always an inherent need for spatial and temporal context. With the photo-collages this process takes place too, before it is almost concurrently disrupted. I find these very moments of disorientation of placement interesting, and the time that they require. At this very juncture yet another space is opened up, in which particular conclusions can take place on another level.

IG: Earlier, in relation to my question about other spaces, you spoke about locations like underground stations or underpasses. These are first and foremost spaces of transit, so not the kind of places where people spend a long time, in comparison with cultural spaces like museums, concert halls and so on. What is so appealing to you about these places where movement usually takes place and indeed dominates? You were talking in connection with your intervention for the Kunsthaus here and also about a passage that the visitor can and should put into effect.

BR: Passages or similar places interest me because they provoke a movement. They represent an interconnection between two or more places. They are non-spaces, so to speak, because they never retain either information or presences for long; they are more akin to channels of flowing information. And strangely a vacuum is generated from this movement, because these places are not thought of as living spaces. This is probably why we experience passages, streets, bridges and so on as uncertain, unpredictable places. Transporting and translating this transitory aspect into an exhibition space means in fact confronting the protected environment with an undefined situation, and bringing in something open and to a degree unpredictable. My intention behind this is not directly to generate an experience of space but rather more to generate conditions that have the potential to create a new situation.

IG: That brings me to a fundamental question: what role do you believe architecture has in society today? In 2013 you designed a series of calendar pages on which you depicted architectural fragments from two garden cities, *Le Logis* and *Floréal* in Brussels, as larger than life-size watercolours. These planned or garden cities were often designed in order to structure and cultivate life; calendar pages – not in this format but in a more manageable size – often hang in living rooms in order to bring an attractive image of places or landscapes within the four walls. Thus the question, what role do you accord architecture or also its portrayal within society?

BR: Architecture and urbanism make and form our living spaces *per se*. In my work I behave like a user of these spaces – or maybe, you could also say, like a resident – and not like someone who only pursues concepts. Everything is real and present. This is why I'm often more interested in the space between buildings and streets than the building itself. The calendar pages show this too. This is the space that is available and which can be formed. This can also be viewed as something positive, because these spaces offer endless new possibilities. I see this examination, thus, as a legitimate, even a necessary 'non-decorative' exchange with the existing, real (spatial) situations that we are given.

Ines Goldbach - Director Kunsthaus Baselland