

INTERVIEW



Katja Strunz

ZEITTRAUM

Gesine Borchardt

GESINE BORCHARDT: *Your sculptures evoke the vocabulary of classic modernism: Constructivism, Suprematism, Minimalism — Aleksander Rodchenko, Kazimir Malevich, Robert Smithson. What drew you to the forefathers of reduced form?*

Katja Strunz: The reflection on modernism happened by chance, through a collage that came about during my studies in 1997. I had been working on documentation for my exhibition "Country" by cutting up all photos and copied material. Then in the evening I stuck the remaining snippets into a transparent folder. Suddenly I realized that the unintentional arrangement inside the folder looked like a Constructivist collage. I decided then to copy the collage, to obscure its origin, and now the collage looks like it could come out of an art history book.

GB: *Did you then pursue a form of appropriation art?*

KS: Art always has something to do with mimetic processes. My idea was to reduce the mimetic process of imitation itself, but in another form, as appropriation art has done

up until now. It's not about the exact copy of an artwork for me; it's much more about the legacy of artworks instead, for example recollection or memory, or the establishment of a kind of *Nachzeit* [aftertime]. I have continued to develop this notion of 'aftertime' — for example in my works with old clocks.

GB: *In the 1997 exhibition "Country" there was a work of yours that very concretely referred to a Robert Smithson sculpture, yet another artist before your time. What exactly here is 'aftertime' for you?*

KS: I recreated this object of Smithson as if it had become old. I took the mirror surfaces out as if they had broken or fallen out. I argued that Smithson's work *Untitled* (1963-64) had gone blind over time. While Smithson intended to create infinitude without space through mirrored surfaces (something very visionary), I strived for profane spatial limitedness. The exhibition title "Country" was a play on Land Art. For the exhibition site I chose a ramshackle officer's mess hall in a French military barracks; an interior space and a deserted institution, one devoted to

the implementation of power and border regulation of the country. Here, I wanted to question the goals and ideals of Land Art.

GB: *Are you alluding to your inclination toward the ruinous lost utopias of artworks and the ruinous visions of Constructivism?*

KS: Yes. In this case the ruinous would be the gravity under which ideals collapse.

GB: *Why does Constructivism play such a central role?*

KS: During my studies I searched for a counter reaction to the art of the '90s and I missed the power of material in clean over-designed conceptual art works. Material is subject to the laws of gravity and therefore also temporal decay. This always has long-term effects on an artwork, even when it claims to be timeless. For example, artworks collect dust or break. Constructivism appeared to me to be an inviting, dusty specter, reflecting time and material oblivion. I connect constructivism to a failed attempt at something new. One could say that these unfulfilled promises still have not been put to rest in our present



time. The past has not retired, it is still living.

GB: Isn't there also failure or "time and material oblivion" in other art movements, for example expressionism?

KS: Certainly. Constructivism nevertheless preserves both the conceptual totality of art and a kind of realism of the subject. That is what makes it particularly interesting to me. There is something else very fundamental about constructivism: the unfolding of structures. My works are created structurally and therefore Constructivist works are similar.

GB: As a theme, "time" was excluded from modern artistic approaches. If anything, it was classified with literature or music. Are the forms of modernism a welcome medium for you, to establish a moment in time?

KS: It is a fact that my work presents itself as modernist or Constructivist; but of course other contexts are employed. And now the historical orientation of my work makes a difference. A screen print of mine perhaps illustrates the difference: in a seemingly Constructivist graphic image I incorporated writing that said "Aktive Stagnation" [Active Stagnation]. The graphic is reminiscent of Constructivist posters with political backgrounds, but my message is very different. For me it is a point of reference for the overlapping of time and not its advancement. I live today in a very different age.

GB: Isn't that a very romantic or nostalgic position to have?

KS: No. The romantic or nostalgic idealizes the past; they are somewhat escapist. For me it's ultimately about the perception of the present.

GB: In a sense Minimalism also came out of

Constructivism. Your approach is quite different. Can you say what separates you from the Americans?

KS: Seriality, perfection and industrialism have never interested me. I have always had a fondness for handwork because it is connected to slowness. Aside from that, my works do not stand alone; they are part of a larger process.

GB: Is that a specifically European position? Do you particularly relate to a European tradition?

KS: Perhaps it is an interest in metaphysics — by that I mean that everything is logically connected and that an artwork is more than itself.

GB: Your works bring up associations with the figurative, for example curtains or wings. Is that intentional?

KS: I understand abstraction as a reductive process. I often reflect on these processes of reduction, from which I make connections and demonstrate something like morphological similarities. I welcome associations: the association with wings comes from the long period when I painted eagles and other birds of prey. I am also a big admirer of Marcel Broodthaers' Eagle Museum [Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 1968]. The idea of custody of what was once free that is now dead in a museum as in a mausoleum. That is how I consider the museum, as a kind of cemetery.

GB: November of last year you had the opportunity to design the exhibition space for Polish Constructivist Wladyslaw Strzeminski's retrospective at the Museum Stucki in Lodz. How did you tackle this challenge?

KS: That was a very beautiful task. Among other things, I received insights into a body of work that had a lot of depth to it. Strze-

minski was a very progressive and multifaceted artist. My main mission was to define the exhibition's architecture. Naturally it needed to present Strzeminski's work optimally, but also had to respect the curators' concepts. For me the curator's decision to present the work thematically rather than chronologically was very important. For me, personally, it was important to place the works in the present but to consider their historical dimensions.

What resulted was a kind of spatial language. The exhibition architecture was based on a single word — it was the neologism *Zeitraum*. I linked a second T into the commonly used word *Zeitraum* (period of time). In this way there is a contraction of several words into one: *Zeit* (time), *Traum* (dream) and *Raum* (space). For the typography I used one that Strzeminski had invented. Each wall corresponded to a letter. In certain places the space had a labyrinth-like character and it was impossible for viewers to read the word. This however was intentional. Also, in dreams, one experiences a picture's illogical synchronicity and uses *Nachbilder* [after images] of the past as truth. The past becomes the present. That is how I understood my engagement with Strzeminski's images: they were taken away from their time and have now entered into a new period of time (*Zeitraum*).

From left: KATJA STRUNZ, *Im Geviert*, 2010. Installation view at Saarland Museum, Saarbrücken (DE). Courtesy Saarlandmuseum, Saarbrücken. KATJA STRUNZ, "Nachzeit," 2011. Installation view at Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin. Courtesy Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin. Photo: Jochen Littkemann. KATJA STRUNZ, *Zeitraum # 9*, 2010. Exhibition display for *Afterimages of Life*, Wladyslaw Strzeminski and rights for art, Museum Stucki, Lodz (PL). KATJA STRUNZ, *Einfalt der Vier*, 2010. Steel, wood, paint, 431 x 560 x 560 cm. Installation view at Saarlandmuseum, Saarbrücken (DE). Courtesy The Modern Institute, Glasgow; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.