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Time Feathers and Aquatic Ear Trumpets

Ulrike Böhme's Investigation of Processes and Places

I

When one visits the homepage of Ulrike Böhme, there it is, right from the beginning: “ulrike böhme – art in public spaces”. In fact the majority of her work has been created for public spaces, albeit of a special kind. They often first come to be understood as public spaces through her artistic intervention.

Many of these places are in locations which usually attract no attention, until they enter the field of vision of Ulrike Böhme. They are usually places which in the course of casual day to day use are overlooked or are situations which appear to fall between the cracks because of their functions and processes. They are only uncovered and discovered as spaces with noteworthy processes, alluring qualities and unsuspected possibilities in the course of the projects.

Among them are large scale construction sites, underground garages, access roads or bridges. Very precise artistic interventions reveal them as mundane and at the same time special places. Through the interventions they are enriched, unveil their capabilities, and sometimes even evince poetic potential. The locations become recognizable together with their environs and are perceived as parts of specific situations – like a bridge over a river in Braunschweig in 2000: At both ends of the bridge Ulrike Böhme mounted a Janus-headed light object. A picture of the road traffic was visible from the river, the bank or from a boat, while from the bridge the picture of calmly flowing water was discernible.

II

Public space is an urban concept which entails artistic objects or other kinds of artistic interventions in public spaces, preferably in down town areas or smaller urban cores, as an element of design of a plaza, or as an aesthetic upgrading of a new or existing settlement. Some of Ulrike Böhme's works correspond to this expectation and have developed in urban contexts, in architectonic scale or in connection with interiors. But the scales are variable and the locations do not have to be in the city. Artistic interventions which generate locations with which one can interact and identify can be found in other contexts, in villages, in urbanized

landscapes or for instance along a river. Artistic interventions can also generate public spaces in these situations by creating multiple opportunities to perceive and adopt them.

Some of Ulrike Böhme's work attains the level of scale of municipal planning contexts. *In Strömen* (In Rivers), an exhibition in the framework of the Bergisch EXPO and the Regionale 2006 in North Rhine Westphalia is a project in this format: Ulrike Böhme curated an exhibition here, for which nine art projects were realized which could be seen by hiking along a river which formerly supplied the surrounding industry with water. Another of her own art projects, also realized in the framework of the Regionale and continued beyond that, also had large scale spatial dimensions. It stretched out along the river courses of the Wupper and Eschbach rivers in the *1000wassertal* (Valley of 1000 Waters), encompassing the entire extent of the area by focussing exactly on the experiences to be made at some particular locations there. *Wassersehrohre*, *Wasserhörrohre* und *Regenhörtonnen*, (water periscopes, aquatic ear trumpets, and acoustic rain barrels), objects made of steel which are intended to facilitate the concentrated perception of water, its movement or its sounds, help structure the paths. They make the water perceptible and nameable in its multitude of forms, qualities and modes of behaviour. And, there will be a contest to invent names for the 1000 special water locations in the *1000wassertal*.

III

Processes are important in Ulrike Böhme's work, whether they pertain to materials, objects, buildings, concepts or an exchange, communication and relationships to locations. But above all one topic always recurs in almost all projects – time.

One of the first larger works which still had a conventional approach, the *Brandwand* (Firewall) from 1992, created for the Württembergische Gebäudebrandversicherung, already reflects this orientation. It consists of twelve pillars of burnt pieces of wood and burned out or etched metal and addresses the transit of time in the tracks left by destruction. What emerges is a unique and fascinating impression of the material after its ruinous treatment.

In 1998 the project *Zeitfedern* (Feathers of Time) was created. The location is the broad and high roofed courtyard of the administrative building of the Württembergische Versicherung in Stuttgart. Every day seven glass feathers float gently and sedately downwards from the heights, a kind of clock that requires a little practice to read, which presents a recurring, languid, tender yet inexorable process in the daily rhythm. This clock is positioned among the surrounding offices, providing a calm and continuous backdrop on all possible experiences of

time, from the split second decisions to the hours that never end.

The time that is “given”, the most important time, is the “now”. Ulrike Böhme realized this idea in a long-range project from 1999 to 2002: *Pictures of History – Temporal Works Accompanying a Construction Site for the House of History in Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart*. The central object of this work was an orange flag, 420 by 500 cm, emblazoned with the word “NOW” which was hoisted every fortnight over the same location at the construction site, in order to be photographed in conjunction with the construction progress to date. 64 prints, 30/40 cm, which if they are viewed in the sequence of their creation, show in fast motion 64 frames of the emerging House of History, are the photographic result of the work. For the opening of the building, at the end of the process the work was presented in small format as a flip book.

IV

How can one mark the elapse of time, and open it to reflection? In 1996 Ulrike Böhme answered these questions which were preoccupying the arts at the time in a complex and playful project. It demonstrated the most varied strategies for the portrayal of time, from the handling of memories to the generation of memory storage facilities. The location of the realization of *Zeitzeichen* (Time Inscriptions) was the construction excavation for an underground garage beneath a new central plaza in Gerlingen. The installation was temporary and was itself an omen of its own foreseeable extinction. Today only written and visual media bear witness to the project.

Bands of mirrors in the already traversable underground passages of the garage were inscribed with selected, classic statements about time. As they are reading old and new reflections on time the readers saw themselves reflected at the same time. Challenging and noble ideas like “success”, “force of will”, and “magnanimity” were inscribed on the steel construction struts, which after their service at this construction site were dispersed and recycled to other constructions sites. The places of birth of the craftsmen, construction workers, architects and building sponsors appear like the names of historic sites in a memorial room on the walls of the emerging garage, in order to be painted over again. A spotlight illuminates a passage from Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Hyperion”: “But everything rises and falls in this world ...” in an otherwise dark room – and above ground, there is a oversized hourglass in the form of a giant cloth funnel from which 92 minutes worth of sand time trickles down and translates into 92 minutes of time.

V

Processes in which locations are connected with feelings and actions are especially central in Ulrike Böhme's more recent projects. The ritual is one of forms, in which a repeated sharpening of awareness of what is always the same is possible: With every repetition the basic conditions for the ritual are confirmed. In that sense ritualizations offer ideal preconditions to link up locations, social groups and actions in lasting relationships. However, when a ritual becomes a hollow, indefinite historical reference and mutates into an unknown occasion for an event, then it loses its revivifying power. The principle of ritualization and its possible occasions and not old rituals is what interests Ulrike Böhme. In her work ritualization is a means of generating current identifications and memories that are meaningful today and then translating them into living traditions. Therefore old rituals are critically examined, new forms developed for old occasions and, where it seems that rituals are missing, completely new ones are designed with the participation of those who are involved.

For instance from 1999 to 2001 the *Wachstumszeichen* (Signs of Growth) project on the construction site of the Bad Rappenau city hall accompanied the construction process and lent new forms to the older rituals of ground breaking, corner stone laying, topping out and dedication. In a project called *Safe* from 2002, a glass container in which citizens from Stuttgart can place objects has become the corner stone for the Neue Galerie in Stuttgart. In 2008 the project for laying a cornerstone for the Neue Bibliothek in Stuttgart turned a new page in the form of a field covered with white sand on top of the surface that was to be built upon. The white marked "page 1" had the dimensions of DIN-A4 sheet of paper magnified by a factor of 100. It was inscribed by the cut of a spade in the Form of a big "1" that exposed the dark earth beneath.

A long term ritual, which can be called a completely new discovery, is the result of a process which Ulrike Böhme conceptualized and designed with the enthusiastic participation of five villages, which after a new incorporation are now called Hohenstein. These villages in the Schwäbische Alb have been jointly administered for years, but have no spatially defined centre, and lack the preconditions to assemble them in spatially articulated way. One result of the exciting process in Hohenstein, which is intended to provide an answer to the question of a centre, is the *HohensteinTISCH* (TABLE of Hohenstein).

In 2003 twelve wooden chairs on a concrete platform were placed at central locations in each

of the five villages. But there is only one table, which belongs to all the villages and in which the road network which connects them all is carved. In the newly created ritual this table is the central object that changes location every year during the large and multiply conceived *HohensteinTISCH* festival in June. It is bestowed as an official gift from one village to the next and placed between the twelve chairs. The joint mayor, and a guest of honour – in the first year it was Ulrike Böhme – as well as two representatives each from the five villages take their places around the table. The first complete cycle of this ritual, whereby every village will have bestowed the table on each of the other villages, will last twenty years – after which it could start up again from the beginning.

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