

Peter Herbstreuth / Staging public space Performative spaces by Stella Geppert

In: Stella Geppert // ach so // Objekte / Installationen / Interventionen, Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, 2006

These days the concepts intended to help organize and discursively control reflections about public space are coming off the printing presses so rapidly that their staccato increasingly illuminates the concepts themselves rather than artistic practice. Public art is no longer public art, but is instead art in the public interest, a service, resistance, counter-public, district work, interaction, city marketing, festivalisation, entertainment or just downright universalizing. Art of the public. Yet beyond all the terminological fireworks, the stars sparkle. Still to illuminate are the constellations in which Stella Geppert's ephemeral undertakings become visible.

She has taken on the drastic changes in perceptions that occurred since the 1990s regarding art in public and utilitarian areas, and she often works "below art's perceptual threshold"¹ on routes of inner-city movement. Depending on the task and on her interpretive freedom, she also takes theoretical reflections into account that have been discussed in the German-speaking art world since that time. Although the analyses and propositions of Guy Debord², Henri Lefèbvre³ and Frederic Jameson⁴ were sufficiently well known – even if from secondary sources – it was not until the 1990s that they became increasingly relevant to curators, jurors, artists and art critics for evaluating public art proposals and projects, and for making decisions about their implementation.

This theoretical aspect should be considered as a climate of discussion of the past few years, but not overstressed. Ultimately, artists rarely follow theoretical guidelines, but orient themselves instead on the results of socially relevant analyses, especially if these are urban analyses dealing with artistic interests, and also reflecting the criteria and preferences of curators and jurors for temporary outdoor projects.

Lefèbvre's theory of "differential urban space", which he developed in 1970 as a complex framework of isotopias, heterotopias and utopias to contrast with the homogenous space of rural and industrial locations, is relevant to Geppert's approach. Lefèbvre states that the differences which come to light and establish themselves in space do not originate from the space as such, but rather from that which settles in it, collects, and is confronted there with the urban reality – and that opposites, contrasts, superimpositions and parallel existences take the place of distances.⁵ Continuing these thoughts in later essays, he observes that urban spaces should also become manifest through artistic interventions, should offer playful possibilities for the individual adoption of public interests and concerns, and generally should enhance the sense of possibility and create "structures of enchantment". This is why, as he concluded his pamphlet with prophetic flair, the future of art is not artistic, but urban.⁶ In this way he points to art as a form of action. However, his considerations, like those of Debord, Jameson and many of their interpreters, are based on the retrogressive paradigm of estrangement – a diffuse variable, the zero value of which cannot be calculated and the various degrees of which cannot be assessed.

In the foreground of Stella Geppert's work stands the individual interaction with objects. The objects, however, are simply media. They are introduced in order to do something with them, are material that is freely available to play with, and confront passers-by with the unfamiliar and with something that is functionally undefined. Therefore the question arises of how to represent the interventions, and of how they are combined with photographic investigation. What status do the photographs acquire, and how does documentation turn into a work?

Documentation of the everyday

The artist generally adds a short commentary to the photo series, disclosing the intervention's experimental design and defining its points of departure in order to illustrate the structure of the reality she has documented. As soberly as for an accounting statement she outlines her course of action and underlying intentions. This produces the context in which she wants the series to be seen. The photos are documents of her undertakings in outdoor and indoor urban spaces. No picture stands on its own or proposes itself as an absolute representation of the whole, for the idea of the whole is extrinsic to