

“To be inside and outside at the same time.”

Interview by Stephan Urbaschek, Director, Goetz Collection Munich

Munich, June 11, 2005

*Stephan Urbaschek: I had different approaches in mind and I'm tending right now to go back to your beginnings. Like, Teresa, you were saying that you were in sculpture class. What is your artistic background, Alexander?*

Alexander Birchler: Actually, I was first an art educator – Kunsterzieher or as it's called in Switzerland, Zeichenlehrer – and after that I started to make art. But you should go back further, Teresa. You didn't come straight from studio art. You came from literature.

**Teresa Hubbard: Right. I have always written and when I started university, I attended the Louisiana State University and took a number of courses with the writer, Andrei Codrescu. At that time, I used to make small drawings alongside my short stories and Andrei suggested that I should take some art history and studio classes. I was also very fortunate to meet teachers and artists who were very open to my background. Later, when I was accepted into the MFA sculpture program at Yale, I hadn't really made sculpture in the conventional sense at all. I was working with water, words and narrative. That was that kind of work I was doing when, later, I met Alexander at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada.**

*Which was in 1989?*

**Yes.**

*And then?*

**And then? [laughs] Well, there was a severe mixture of critical appreciation for Alexander's work as well as physical attraction. His approach and background was very different than mine.**

You were much more 'why' and my background was much more the 'how'.

**Yeah.**

My training was academic throughout the years, a rigorous, but classical academic training. Because I studied first ~~Kunsterziehung~~ art education at a Gewerbeschule – like a kind of vocational school, in Switzerland – my experience was based much more in technique and craft – the 'how' but never really the 'why'. I only started to realize that once I was out of school – working on my own, and when I went to Montreal through a studio residency grant from the Christoph Merian Stiftung. The residency I did in Montreal was very important for me, as it was the first time I was working full-time on my own studio practice after my studies in Switzerland. Yet, I was still just doing and making things. That was not like the training that you had, Teresa. That's when we met. I was amazed about your lack of the 'how'.

**[Laughs]**

You just approached art so differently than the way I was thinking about art. That was what we liked about each other. There was this different approach.

*Besides your personal attraction, how long did it take for you to realize that you could collaborate on a project?*

**At the beginning of the residency, Alexander and I were working separately, but we saw similarities and connections with our work, so we mounted a two-person exhibition of our individual work, called, *Liquid and Solid*.**

That was our first attempt at a sort of collaboration in a way. At that time, Teresa was building transparent holding tanks for bodies of water that she collected from different places. Through her writing and playing with modes of 'museological' presentation,

she was giving these objects an aura and a story. At that time, I was collecting found objects and making very precise replicas of each – rather like a conservator would do in a natural history museum. With these objects, I would orchestrate different kinds of tableau environments that were mirrored, doubled. That was exactly the moment we met, at that point. Coming from such diverse backgrounds, both working with sculpture, we were both very interested in building as a method of storytelling and the place of sculpture as a prop.

**[laughs]. Actually, the origins of working together were kind of practical. At the residency in Banff, there were a limited amount of project grants that one could apply for. We really needed this financial support and thought that it would be more interesting, more productive for us that, rather than compete against each other to get this grant, we should work on something together and apply as a team. So the very first step was actually based on economics [laughs]. Luckily we got the grant! [laughs].**

We didn't have any pre-conceived or long term 'strategy' about the collaboration. Making work was a process of getting to know each other, of working through our relationship to each other, figuring out our strengths, weaknesses, interests. And that has been some 15 years now.

**That first collaborative work we did in Banff, called *Small Town*, is documented in the exhibition catalogue, *Slow Place* from our exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel in 1997.**

In our very early works, we made different 'museums' and used the architecture and museological kind of language – not of a museum of art, but rather, of natural history museums. We used museology as a form of fictional narrative. *Small Town* was installed in an abandoned building in downtown Banff and was presented as a museum of doors. We built a kind of labyrinth inside the building with passageways, rooms and tunnels and all of the connecting spaces had doors, which we had collected from the community. There was a photograph next to each door that seemingly depicted the same door in a narrative situation and there was a small text

related to each picture. The environment was a mix between documentary and fiction. You couldn't quite tell.

**I think it also...**

...stayed ambiguous.

**Yes. Also, in *Small Town* and in other works we did during that early period of time, we would 'play' ourselves, appearing physically in the work, as museum attendants.**

*The performative act was something you liked as well?*

I think for us it was very much about getting to know each other. It was all about role-play. In all of the early works, we always used each other as models, positioning and directing each other. This process and the process of changing roles around really helped us to learn about the various aspects of making pictures: from the tasks of the director, model, photographer, lighting and carpentry work. It was almost ten years of just working with each other in this way, before we started involving other people in the production. All the years of 'learning by doing' really helped us to build up confidence for working with other people, particularly in taking the step of working with actors.

*Did you also have a fascination for those dioramas in the natural history museum?*

**Absolutely – the early installation works played directly off the history of the diorama. Looking back at what we were doing, in works such as *The Fox and the Hare, On Loan from the Museum in Us* and *The First and the Last*, it's very clear that we were working our way through the history of illusion in relation to the photographic apparatus.**

We were documenting, photographing our diorama installation work when we began to see that with the photographs, something very nice and unsettling was happening in photographing an already frozen moment. Using a camera really opened up a

realm of possibilities for us, of what we could do with conceptual as well as spatial and physical depth, of playing between the layers of background, middle ground and foreground. The camera gave us a real sense of those layers as sculptural space to work with inside the photographic frame.

*And that is something – and I am jumping one step ahead now – that you took up in building as well, that sculptural aspect?*

**Yes, in photographic works such as *Noah's Ark, Falling Down and Stripping*, treating those three spatial layers as a potential for narrative space was a very important realization for us.**

*When you did those museum pieces, did it also have to do with you being young artists trying to find your space within the museum and art world?*

No, it was rather the opposite. Of course we had some ideas of how these works should function within the art world. But at that time, we lived and made work almost exclusively on the periphery, rather than in urban centers.

**These early works were a way of not just getting to know each other better, but, because we were moving around so much, it was an integral process of getting to know a place. Another aspect that was important for us was that visitors interested in our work also included everyday kind of people, not just a specialized art audience. It has to do with my social and personal background, but accessibility is something that I value. It's still important for me that our work is accessible – that a viewer who is not necessarily specialized and well-versed in contemporary art can be touched or 'pricked' by the experience of seeing our work.**

Yeah. We were thinking a lot about accessibility at that time. I think, initially, that's why we were attracted to looking at different kinds of museums, like natural history museums, science museums, because they obviously have a different audience than art museum.

*People have less fear of going into a natural history museum than they have of going into an art museum. Maybe it was subconscious but it sounds to me as if the concept 'museum' was in the back of your head somehow.*

**Yes, I think it was. In retrospect, what we were trying to do was to use the familiar narrative kind of structures of a natural history museum as a way of getting people in the front door, while slipping the art in through the back door.**

That is exactly what it was! That approach continues to be part of what we do: with the photographic and filmic work, we offer quite an inviting, visually lush atmosphere. Through the 'back door' we slip in temporal and spatial disjunction, narratives that don't easily 'add up.' It's at that point where the viewer participates actively as an author.

*You once told me that you were trying to make works that touch people, that this is important to you, independently of the subject. It's something that you try to accomplish with your works.*

**Yes. It's about finding the best medium to carry an idea and to carry the emotion of that idea. In our work, often that 'emotion' in a narrative sense, is built up and found in the language of the camera, in using its potential as a voice – a voice with a flawed point of view.**

The photographic work *Stripping* was – in terms of our development along these lines – one of our most important works. We were living in Berlin at the time, and based on what we were seeing around us, we began setting up a camera and building fragments of apartments as freestanding sets, in the studio. One thing that the camera perspective could do was to point to a kind of continuity that was wrong. To be inside and outside at the same time.

*Like in Eight?*

**Yeah, similar! *Stripping* led us to many other works afterwards: *Gregor's Room, Eight, Detached Building* and *Single Wide*. In *Stripping*, all our efforts**

were built around the place of the threshold of these rooms, and by this relation of a 'threshold' I mean also of course, a reflection of the internal life of the character who appears in the picture. The threshold between the inside and the outside appears as a black strip in the middle of the picture. It's like photographing an already taxidermied moment and doubling that moment over. What happens is that the image appears to be stuck between two frames. In fact, when we would bring our film to the lab to be processed, the lab technicians were totally confused about where the frame started and where it ended, so inadvertently, they kept cutting our shot in half! It took quite some explaining, but eventually we got it sorted out.

*And then you took up these ideas in your video Gregor's Room II?*

Well, yes. It was a lot about looking at the threshold as a physical place and a place of psychological rupture: back and forth, up and down. It follows along the idea of a filmstrip, of a moment of being stuck: of the cinematic apparatus being mechanically stuck, along with the characters being physically and emotionally stuck. With *Gregor's Room II*, I was seeing and thinking about this room as an ideal kind of camera. I've heard that when Vladimir Nabokov taught the story by Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, he would ask his students to draw the floor plan of the room in which the character, Gregor Samsa, lived, based on how Kafka describes the room in the story. I don't know if that story is true, but it certainly speaks about the precision with which the room is described. So, from reading *The Metamorphosis*, we were able to build the room. We placed it, with movable "wild walls", in the middle of our studio in Berlin. We really became fascinated this kind of room.

**With all three parts of the *Gregor's Room* project, we used the room as a world unto itself, an unsteady interior, a kind of place which is continually going through a metamorphosis. In each part of the work, the room is undergoing a transformation, it is being emptied out, stripped bare, renovated.**

The video *Gregor's Room II* was an important transition into the current body of video work, although, prior to that, we had always been working with video as a tool, as a very useful process for other work. So anyway, once we had built the set of

*Gregor's Room* – it was sitting there like a huge box in the middle of our studio. When friends would come to visit, we'd invite them to stay overnight inside the set. At first we really didn't know what to do with it, but we needed to build it and live with it for a while. We placed cameras inside and outside the room, sliding the "wild walls" back and forth, changing the lighting and 'looking' at the interior from different perspectives. We even moved the room to a different location where we could 'look' into the room from above. All that led eventually to the photographs of *Gregor's Room I and Gregor's Room III*. One day, I took my bike and just started to ride around the exterior of the set, in continuous circles, looking at the room. With the doors and the window of the room being open, as I was riding past these openings, it reminded me of the shutter mechanism of a camera. So, eventually, we put a camera on the bike. That's when we realized that we needed clearly to work with this as a continually moving image...

**Process is everything for us, it's how we reach ideas and come to know what is the best carrier for an idea, an emotion.**

*I would like to ask you a little bit about the exhibition context with the title Imagination Becomes Reality. It looks at or examines the painterly aspects in today's art production of all media. From what you have been telling me now it really sounds as if it wouldn't matter too much which medium you are using because it's about your ideas and thoughts and the narrative that you want to get across. In your catalogue, House with Pool, you also show the little storyboards.*

**Yes, we both paint and draw, and for our video work, there is a lot of process-orientated work that involves building models, making sketches, drawings, paintings. We have sometimes exhibited these artworks, for example, the watercolor storyboards from *Eight* and the *Trailer* model from *Single Wide* which was recently shown together with the video work at the Whitney. In the *House with Pool* book we really wanted to include some of these items, as well as pages out of our sketchbooks, in order to open up this process, to show our choices made along the way, including how things start to come together, or don't.**



For me, I think about your question and painting more in relation to how we use light. We are deeply conscious of using light as a medium. We are very specific up to a certain point of obsession when it comes to how we want a space, a person, or set to be lit, what is visible in the frame and what is not – where to start with light and what color to use. The process of drawing, building and painting is very similar to riding my bike around and around the set of *Gregor's Room*. It's a process of thinking and looking.

**Yeah, it was the same thing when we worked on *House with Pool*. When we first saw the house, it was empty and hadn't been lived in for a while. Although we didn't know what we wanted to do there, we both immediately felt that it was 'perfect.'**

Knowing that the house was going to be torn down pretty soon, the house became a studio for us. We spent every day there. The feeling was just right, and we realized that there was some kind of potential we could reach inside and outside of this house. It took us time to discover what to do. Spending time in this house, there were a lot of small things that led us to do what we did. It was summer when we made drawings, photographed, listened to sounds in and around the house, walked and swam in the pool. And what happened on that front lawn, what strange noises we heard, hidden and scratching in the air conditioning shaft, what happened to us during those three months in the house, all that led to the narratives and parallel storylines that we came up with.

**It's almost prototypical for our process, in the way it works – in how the disparate pieces come together.**

*The why and the how?*

**Yes.**