

HANS SCHABUS INTERVIEW

DP: Many of your works, whether installation or video, have something to do with your studio in Vienna – a place you seem particularly attached to. What are the reasons for this close bond to the space within the four walls you usually work in?

I spend a lot of time in my studio, more than in any other room, and this time, this period of time has motivated me for the first time to make these four walls the actual issue, the focus of my work. What these walls mean, what they hide, what they protect. ... Seen in this light, it struck me as the most natural and necessary thing to bring out this room in both a psychological and physical sense. The studio is the instrument of my explorations and reflections on space itself and it also facilitates my attempts to break out of it.

DP: In “Western” you navigated the Vienna sewer system in a little wooden boat that you built. What is behind this unusual voyage?

For an exhibition in New York the following question arose: How was I to get there? In the end I wanted to sail from the Old World to the New World just like the first Europeans. Bas Jan Adler’s “In Search of the Miraculous” was also a model for me. I constructed a small sailboat of the optimist class which I then turned into a pessimist model. It has wheels, a light source, and you can fold it together so that I could maneuver it any way myself. So that I could disappear unnoticed, I began my journey in the Vienna sewage canals. Emblematic of this is the post-war drama “The Third Man” whose soundtrack I also used for my film. I started at the same place where more than fifty years ago Orson Welles had also made his way through the stench. The arrival was documented on the East River facing Manhattan’s skyline with a photograph which was then shown in the exhibition together with the boat and the film. Later this project became a piece about travel, which meant that I could travel anywhere by boat – wherever there were waterways permitting me to do so. The next stop was the Manifesta in Frankfurt. Back in Old Europe...

DP: You often play with the power of illusion. Is it a system for amplifying the physicality surrounding you?

Yes, certainly, but mostly to question it. Corporeal and spatial boundaries are called into question, as, for instance, in a room lined with mirrors or illusionistic painting, simulating space where there is none by perhaps showing a door where there is only a wall. The subjective desire for a way out, even though objectively speaking there is none. I thus make use of an objectively meaningless activity to gain a subjective understanding while engaged in this activity – the failure in delusion and vice-versa. In reality the illusion is something similar to psychological space. And this is probably what interests me.

DP: From time to time you appear as the protagonist in your videos, as the main character. How important is this aspect of performance in your work?

Just as I make the studio space the subject of my work – on the one hand, as a personal space of possibilities and on the other, as a constructed space of reality whose limits invite constant exploration -, I also appear in my films and videos as a sort of ‘traveling salesman’ of my space of possibilities. There’s no one else who could assume this role.

DP: For the Secession space in Vienna you created a huge structure. You created your space life-sized but left it empty and immaculate. The title is “Astronaut (be right back)”. What are you alluding to?

This has to do with mankind’s spaces of expansion, just as embodied by space and the underground. The Secession is supposed to be my realm of expansion. It already resembles an observatory, a space station. And my astronaut has dug his way into the Secession. He has dug his studio in the Secession. Bit by bit. Through the mine under the studio, past the subway line, through the sewer system, etc. Using the ceiling and floor grid of the exhibition space which serves the astronaut as a transmission device for transforming his studio in its original scale into the main room of the Secession, the astronaut has finally pushed the spatial cube from below into the existing structure. From this perspective, it is an analogous process of beaming through the underground. Only 11 of the items from the studio have been lost, leaving behind only the volume or the capacity of the space, as a white cardboard box. As a weightless space ship that has no fixed place or direction, bound to the orbit of the Secession.

DP: For each of your works you make numerous preliminary drawings, designs, sketches. How important is this phase of ideation to you?

Very important because first of all there is nothing else. They are something like a projection surface for preliminary ideas, reflections, and references. They then grow with a given project and become the medium of detailed drawings, photographs, corrections, etc., leading up to the documentation. They constitute a process that has been made visible.

DP: You seem to be fascinated with traveling through tunnels, passages and narrow alleyways. What do you get from all these trips?

A bodily experience, finding a way out of the great labyrinth. Of course, there is none, but I won’t spare any effort in still trying to find one.

DP: Your structures seem to be derived from an interest in architecture. How much are they influenced by spatial experimentation?

The constructed space defines itself by its boundaries, by what neighbors onto it. It can, broadly speaking, be stacked, arranged, it can be structured, divided, ordered in rows, in layers. It is part of something. It is designed for a number of uses, contents and certain specific people. It asserts itself or is asserted. It is a structure and order that has become manifest. The space is my counterpart, my world, my boundary, my prison. I want to

understand the space. I try to penetrate the space, to destroy it. I want to expand the space.

DP: You are racking up a list of important exhibitions, the most important of which is that at the Bonner Kunstverein. What are some of your future projects?

I will try and prove that the world is a disk.