

Vade mecum for a land surveyor

Text by Marie-Cécile Burnichon

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Whether working with landscape or designing forms, objects and installations for indoor spaces, Katinka Bock often has territory on her mind. What interests her is not so much the space Georges Perec describes as "the nothing, the impalpable, the practically immaterial"¹ as that of the city and the political, a space defined for and by a human community and suffused with custom, symbol and history.

Defining the locus

The limitless interest and curiosity she feels for the human sciences, physics and mathematics are the discreet sustenance of works striking in their formal simplicity and utter lack of literal discourse. Circles and lines make up their architectonics, while the projects take physical shape from such elemental organic materials as wood, newspapers, tar and stone. This soberness springs less from the economic imperatives most artists have to adjust to early in their careers than from an urge to avail herself of what is already available and in use "in" the world. No ready-mades here, however, for Katinka Bock is more the kind who builds, turns over the soil and scrutinises the heavens. Had she lived in ancient times she would certainly have been drawn to the "taking of auspices": in order to situate a new shrine for a deity, the priests delimited a window in the sky; if birds of good omen crossed this window, it was then projected onto the ground as the outline of the space to be consecrated. ***Das Konservat***, the work created in 2003 in the idyllic Münsterland countryside as part of the last Skulptur.Projekte quadrennial, echoes this early practice. Enclosing 2500 square metres of grassland with a three-metre-high wooden fence, she subtracted the area from the surrounding landscape in a version of what the Greeks called the *temenos*, the sacred space delineated by a barrier before the founding of a city. Into a world stripped of the divine she thus arbitrarily inserted an "art territory" which, once in place, was no longer challenged by the initially hostile local residents. ***Das Konservat*** is also a demonstration that space is never so apparent as when it has been "excised".

Getting down to essentials

Das Konservat is emblematic of the approach of an artist whose works often see her returning to the essentials of a situation. In the installation ***Zwei: Elephant/Echafaudage pour une colonne*** she focuses on the Place de la Bastille in Paris and the replacements put forward for the former royal prison after its destruction during the French Revolution. Using two antithetical forms, she recreates the period between the demolition of the exotic, elephant-shaped fountain Napoleon had opted for and the arrival of Louis-Philippe's July Column; in doing so she points up the

¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, tr. John Sturrock, Penguin Books, 1997. This translation by John Tittensor.

representational tug of war taking place between the two power systems that were the Empire and Louis-Philippe's republican monarchy. At the same time, because she separates the two objects rather than fusing them into a single hybrid, Bock uses her two modules to suggest a reading of the shift from classical to modern sculpture. Split wide open, the block of oak that stands for Napoleon's elephant seems on the verge of exploding, as if labouring inwardly to enable a form to emerge. By contrast the scaffolding – given its pedestal and the fact that emptiness is considered part and parcel of sculpture – becomes both a historical monument and a modern sculpture, with its openwork shape reminiscent of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*.

Generating space

In this sense a part of Katinka Bock's oeuvre offers a close fit with the new architectural trends that might be described as "zero volume architecture"² and which took over landscape and territory in the 1990s. Succeeding the city – the big obsession since the beginning of the century – they reinterpret such architectonic and spatial forms as surfaces, verticality, enclosures (the *temenos*) and elevated refuges. Characterised by "functional uselessness, a penchant for the hybrid, multiple applications and the capacity to automatically engender space",³ this is an architecture intimately related to art. A handsome example is *La Passerelle*, a sculpture soon to become part of a public space in Paris. In a fascinatingly ethereal movement, a wooden double helix turns on itself around and above a tree whose growth represents a long-term threat to its existence. In this race between the static (the structure, immobile despite its aerodynamics) and the developing (the tree), the observation point at the top could eventually become a leafy hideaway, a refuge. It is as if the domesticated natural world of the public space – in some cases structured in the interests of control, either by diverting people's energy or enabling their direct surveillance – is rediscovering in this installation the chance to spread its wings.

Archaeology of the walls and floor

Bock's contributions to the "Postproduction" exhibition at La Suite, in Château-Thierry, drew on the site's former function as a biscuit factory via, for example, the endless repetition of a movement: in *Schwelle* she spent two weeks filling a passageway between two rooms with folded newspapers. The resultant millefeuille seems so dense, so hermetic that not only is the pathway through the building modified, but the air circulation as well: she has also blocked the vents with paper, making the space airtight, so to speak. In other works like *Raus I/II* and *La question du centre* the relationships between outside and inside depend more on the mode of transit or dialectic. In the old biscuit factory she also seems to want to let the past show through, like the "bricks" in *Die Mauer* – in reality the same sanding blocks used for the Elephant – which are said to have come to light when the artist was stripping back the present wall. Here what belongs underneath comes to the surface, as is also the case with *Sol d'incertitude*'s Paris cobblestones, removed from under the bitumen coating that made them harmless since 1968. To "close the loop"

² See Aldo Aymonio & Valerio Paolo Mosco, *Espaces publics contemporains – Architecture volume zéro*, Skira, 2006

³ Idem.

– which for Bock often means changing something back into its original state – she individually dipped these cobblestones in tar, thus restoring their revolutionary potential.

"Seizing" the venue

Intrigued by the height of the biscuit factory's silo – 12 metres – Bock repeatedly threw from its roof lumps of modelling dough containing metallic pigment. Lying about the factory space, the thick black puddles of **Der Fall** mark the end of the lumps' trajectories and seem to point to the finite character of an artistic gesture permanently threatened – as Bas Jan Ader has demonstrated in his own way – by the fall into failure or emptiness. At the same time this "absurd" throwing seeks above all to test out – indirectly – the silo space, in a gambit similar to that of **45 Minutes I/II** and **60 Minutes**, in which the luminous imprint of Paris and Berlin is recorded using photography. In these works the exposure time is the duration of a circuit of Paris's ring road – in a Paris/suburbs diptych – or of a crossing of the German capital, with the lens pointed at the sky in search of Wim Wenders' angel from *The Wings of Desire*. Like some rediscovered aura, these portraits reveal a broken tracery of lines and dots, a kind of dense, mysterious Morse code yielding up two or three things Bock knows about these cities...

Marie-Cécile Burnichon, January 2007

English translation: John Tittensor