

Interview

JOSEF STRAU

Docking Station, de projectruimte van Stedelijk Museum CS, presenteert 'Voices and Substitutes', de eerste Nederlandse tentoonstelling van Josef Strau (1957, Wenen). Strau neemt in de kunstwereld een bijzondere plaats in. Sinds het eind van de jaren tachtig heeft hij zich afwisselend de rol van galeriehouder, curator, schrijver, muzikant en kunstenaar aangemeten – hij verwierf er een zekere cultstatus mee.

Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen

Strau richtte eind jaren tachtig de alternatieve tentoonstellingsruimte Friesenwall in Keulen op en in 2002 de Galerie Meerrettich in Berlijn, een glazen paviljoentje aan het Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz waar hij performances, events, tentoonstellingen en installaties presenteerde van onder andere Jutta Koether, Isa Genzken, Josephyne Pride en Bernadette Corporation. Het programma trok vele vaste bezoekers, maar eind 2006 besloot Strau Galerie Meerrettich te sluiten omdat hij het programma niet tot een formule wilde laten worden. Bovendien wilde hij zich nu volledig aan zijn eigen kunstenaarschap wijden. Door zijn talrijke metamorfosen geldt Strau als een moeilijk te categoriseren figuur. In Duitsland heeft hij door zijn activiteiten een cultstatus verworven en is hij van invloed op een hele generatie kunstenaars.

The past decade you have developed an art world persona as curator, organizer, social catalyst. How do those practices relate to your current activity in which you focus more strongly on your own artistic output?

Of course, in terms of every day life experience being an artist and organizer are very different practices. It seems they are almost the opposite, when done at the same time. Almost like one practice 'torturing' the other. These activities are the result of a curiosity to play different roles in the same field, to change the work place sometimes by refusing classic role models and of course to believe, in a programmatic way, that the artist's practice must not necessarily be confined to production of objects alone. I was actually very surprised, when doing Galerie Meerrettich, how much of a problem it still is for many. I have been interrogated many times about what I actually am: a gallerist or an artist? Of course that is an interesting question for me too. For many it seemed to be an impossible combination of activities. To be more precise, it was perceived as a disadvantage or as indecisiveness, especially by certain people in Germany. When I stayed in New York for a while it was quite the opposite; it was understood as a special or at least a positive quality. I met with the same positive interest when I did a presentation of the Galerie Meerrettich at the Extra City Art Fair in Antwerp in 2006, where I presented my work in combination with the work of other artists. In Germany a combination of that sort would also have been understood as very unprofessional behavior.

Could you give us some insight in how the Meerrettich program came about and how, say a month's programming looked like? What were the ideas and 'mechanisms' that were steering your decisions?

Exhibitions changed at least every month, often even quicker. In between there were events like film/video evenings or magazine and book presentations. In the beginning the idea was that Galerie Meerrettich would be a public vitrine without gallerist: a glass box just for the passerby. There were already enough art spaces with a social function, so I pictured it more like a 'cold' object display. But then the openings became bigger and many of the artists wanted to use it for events. Almost all exhibitions were the result of conversations with the artists and not so much the result of programmatic decisions. Perhaps I should not speak about it too much, because it would sound too stupid probably. Let's just say the decisions were a result of sympathy mostly and connected to the promise of having good conversations during the whole realization process.

So it was a pretty personal affair, quick, direct and strongly connected to the social fabric of the Berlin art scene at the time. How did your current, quite different position evolve from that period? In what ways do you see those earlier 'independent' practices as opposed to the commercial realm?

Those strategies were necessary at the time, but also independent programs should try to develop new structures. Compared to the early nineties alternative programs now have become quite standardized; they seem to be defined by certain categories as well. It depends on the targets, but for me the confusion of categories and disciplines has always been an important issue for creating alternative practices. As much as it has been important not being dependent from administrative or organizational procedures. For me, it is pivotal to have an amount of independence from public funding. The procedures of public funding make you most dependent of all funding. You have to make

decisions at a very early stage, which makes it impossible to work on a continually changing situation. Your question about the relationship to the commercial art system is too big to answer here. What I can say is that it is one thing to talk about it and another to find ways to maintain working in a practical way. Many people argue that the 'market' incorporates and influences everything. I guess this is only true for a very small territory. I am actually amazed how the system completely ignores so many things that are just a little bit outside. Generally speaking, the changes of the market during the last ten or fifteen years have altered a lot in the way how people deal with each other. It has changed behavior, modes of conversation, etcetera. The market has become a phantom too, and it is not the market but the phantom of the market that has the strongest influence.

In the late eighties you started the Friesenwall project space in Cologne together with Stephan Dillelmuth. Also that programme gained a reputation for launching new artistic ideas quickly and with a minimum of red tape. In those Cologne days you celebrated a so-called 'non-productive attitude': living the social life of an artist without intending to produce objects of commercial value yourself. In the catalogue for the exhibition 'Make Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne' in 2006, at several venues in the US and Canada, you published the essay 'The Non-productive Attitude' in which you look back at those Cologne years. What were your conclusions?

In a very personal way the 'non-productive attitude' text was actually written as a kind of good-bye to the Cologne situation. Back in those days I read much theory and, as one misleading consequence, I made it a mark of distinction to become 'non-productive'. As an artist and as co-organizer of a space I thought a minimum of labor is a quality too. Something like: a high degree of conversation and discussion outcome with almost zero amount of production input. It was a kind of a formal beauty phenomenon, now just the beauty of self-corruption maybe.

But looking at the reactions to my catalogue text, I understand that I did not express my good-bye strong enough. I wanted to distinguish my recent work and life as much as possible from that period. I wanted to secretly distinguish myself from some of its other ex-proponents as well. As if telling them that so much has happened to me since then. That I have changed so much, that I am someone else. That I am not this guy anymore who is celebrating the artist life primarily; the guy who is mainly interested in all these social relations. And that I am not the one anymore who refuses to do real work, real production. I wanted to suggest that I am someone now who thinks production values are the most important thing in life, and that all the rest is quite a mistake, a failure, a misunderstanding of the 'real' values, which are the production values. Writing the text was a sort of game, a mixture of humor and desperation. Trying the impossible: suggesting to old friends to look at my and their role differently now.

So it was not only to say that I had changed, but to say, where I actually would like to be. To make such a fundamental and almost fictitious rewriting of your own role within a single catalogue text is probably a too difficult task. But I should say it again, Cologne then was full of exciting social situations. I just did not want to miss anything. About the real work I thought: that is for later.

Your artistic practice is rooted in the written word. Initially your writings took the form of articles for catalogues and art journals; later they became autonomous narratives presented in the form of books and posters in the context of exhibitions. Over the last two years you have been creating 'narrative spaces' in which you relate text to objects and examine the way text relates to the three-dimensional medium of the exhibition.

I have always tried to write. I have written a few articles, but it did not become a real practice for me. That happened only some years ago. To me, from very early on, writers were the most esteemed of all cultural producers. I always had the most fun with texts. About four years ago I discovered writing as a medium for creating narratives, or writing as a creation of a mechanism which creates itself – narratives of fictional or theoretical nature, or whatever nature. Since then I tried to put writing more and more at the centre of my work. I became interested in including text into spatial artistic operations. Since text, and particularly texts by the artist himself, for different reasons strongly resist that inclusion. Unfortunately texts still are often perceived as secondary artist's material that actually would just weaken the qualities of their objects.

Are there historical or contemporary references for your text-sculpture works?

In general I am very impressed by artists like Lawrence Weiner. I heard he comes to his exhibitions with just small pieces of paper with his texts written on it and that is it. This impresses me very much. And there is Dan Graham and Marcel Broodthaers. But I was more interested in them earlier and not only because of the inclusion of text in their work. Actually I would mention the architect Daniel Libeskind first of all. Before I started this text/art practice I wrote an article for *Texte Zur Kunst* about his Jewish Museum in Berlin. That building really means a lot to me. I almost should say that it opened my mind for the possibilities of text/space relations. As everybody else during the mid-nineties I

followed the so-called architecture discussions in Berlin. As most others I was just as critical and rejecting almost all theoretical discussions connected to this 'New Berlin' and also everything what was finally built. I only really liked Daniel Libeskind's project. It was uncorrupted and in every respect the opposite to all formalist thinking of the conservative architectural establishment. His emphasis on a narrative architecture, on a story telling space, was really showing me an exciting new field of narrative possibilities. There we suddenly had things like the story telling spatial object, or the narrative object to be put into another narrative space, et cetera. Because it is the Jewish Museum, narrative space is a very obvious and natural given for different reasons: the holocaust firstly. But the narrative impulse in Jewish culture in general played a role as well. Through Libeskind I saw its very contemporary possibilities.

Could you describe the nature of your texts? Are they purely personal? Do you refer to any literary sources eventually?

They should not be perceived as purely personal. The references are very indirect, but during the last months I looked at some old texts, like Rousseau's *Confessions*. I also studied certain philosophers whose work I ignored before, Schopenhauer for instance, to find some early theories on the question of authorship, or what is the source of writing, before the theories of unconsciousness were developed.

For your recent shows in Cologne at Galerie Buchholz and in Amsterdam at the Stedelijk, you produced six text posters, which are connected to lamp-objects. Your Cologne show is called 'Voices' and the counterpart in Amsterdam 'Voices and Substitutes'. Can you shed some light on the text-object relationship in these two projects?

All posters in both shows include three or four different text parts. However, they cannot be understood as fragments of a larger fictional text frame. Neither are they subject to an overall lay out. But they can have the function of abstract images: images of black and white 'colour fields'. Of course the posters primarily function as texts. They are quite lengthy writings, following certain narrative structures. The reading of the texts will take some time, so I printed them for the visitors to take home. The posters can be read later, almost as an extended visit to the exhibition.

All six posters refer to a writer or to a personage in old texts. And in the case of Libeskind the poster refers to an architect – as a kind of poetry architect. To give the text/object relation some form, I present the texts as 'certificates' for the production of the objects. Today products go more and more accompanied by certificates. The value of the product is not only defined by its object qualities but as well by the conditions of production, which can only be interpreted by the attached texts. I somehow try to imitate this new fashion of transparency in production, which fits well to my desire for almost confessional writing tendencies. So each object includes a text that describes the conditions of production as well as partly deals with the life conditions of its producer. This is the frame. The texts are quickly written, resulting from a mode that borders on the style of *écriture automatique*. Therefore the texts sometimes move into other or related subjects. The poster size printed texts are the same in both exhibitions. For the Cologne part I exhibited groups of objects like still lifes, each connected to one poster, to one group of texts. In Amsterdam I want to create one larger object instead. This should transfer the practice of the writings into the space, by building a sculpture in a mode similar to the idea of *écriture automatique*, a spatial substitute of the *écriture* process.

In your work lamps appear a lot. You attach texts to their shades or they seem to function as illuminators of written pages. Even in your Meerrettich period social congregations were organized around lamps. What status do lamps have as objects for you?

I started using lamps as objects by using them as text 'carriers'. For example I put a booklet with texts on a ribbon and connected it with the lamp in a way that one could use the booklet, in other words the text, for pulling it to turn the light on and off. In general I connected the text to the art object, the lamp, to become an object for expensive privileged reading – in order to organize private sponsoring for my writing experiments. The same text one could have just as well as a copied booklet. I continued using objects in connection with texts in several ways, making different alterations of simple lamp objects. The alterations were understood as allegorizing moments in the narratives. Actually I tried to avoid the 'simple' measure that the lampshades are just used as illuminations of the text. I tried to keep the lampshade independent from the text, avoiding a too direct connection. Ironically I saw a kind of economic game in them. Lamps are popular flea market objects and I sometimes feel that I am living the life of a flea market trader, keeping the pure text work somehow outside of any economy, giving it for free, although the text is a legitimization of their financial value.

In another show the lamps functioned almost as actors. They looked like different characters on a stage, each carrying a text. At the recent show in Galerie Buchholz they are smaller and part of a still life-like ensemble of objects, each connected to a second object, which is more a lamp-like object

instead of a lamp. Similar to the author problem in the texts, in the sense that there is a divided authorship expressed, that they follow not exactly the own voice of the author. Altogether the lamps are objects, which can very well be used in connection with different functions.

Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen is curator in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and coordinates Docking Station

'Voices and Substitutes' by Josef Strau is on show until January 6, 2008 at Docking Station in Stedelijk Museum CS