

The Snowman

Interview with Kasper König

Florian Waldvogel

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Art critic and curator Florian Waldvogel asks Kasper König about his experiences with ‘Skulptur Projekte Münster’, which König has organized from 1977 to 2007. This interview outlines a glimpse of the changing relationship of art, public space and the urban environment. What impact does art have on publicness and public space and how can it influence our view of these?

Florian Waldvogel: What was the first sculpture you consciously encountered?

Kasper König : A snowman. The snowman is the ideal sculpture for the public exterior space: he’s not in the way, everyone knows him, he melts – and then he’s gone.

At the World’s Fair in Brussels – you were 13 years old – you saw Oswald Wenckebach’s sculpture, Monsieur Jacques, from 1956. This figure pops up in Catalogue II of the sculpture exhibition in Münster in 1977.

Yes, it was a harmless, ordinary little man in bronze, holding his hat behind his back and looking into the distance. Its inclusion in the second catalogue of ‘Skulptur Projekte Münster’ had no artistic pretensions. It is a photo of a bronze statue, a passer-by, a representation of the potential visitor. This reproduction in the advert section of the catalogue was a souvenir, a reminder of the trip my mother had given me. And of course it also had something to do with the theme of the exhibition; it was the kind of humour I shared with my mother. The statue now stands, a little lost, in Rotterdam, wedged in between two snack bars.

The intense controversies and discussions within the art commission of the city of Münster concerning the acquisition of a sculpture by George Rickey in 1976 led the Landesmuseum to do some serious thinking about the city’s unique opportunities and structures. The sculpture was ultimately purchased by the Westfälische Landesbank and donated to the city. People in Münster had traditionally been rather hostile towards modern sculpture. Klaus Bußmann, of the Westfälische Landesmuseum Münster, asked you to serve as curator of the project section involving contemporary artists. In addition to the art history retrospective exhibition ‘Skulptur’ in the museum and in the park, there was a free, conceptual component, within which various projects could be realized.

Well, yes, the whole thing was a productive misunderstanding. Klaus Bußmann was a member of the selection committee and there was a big commotion in the local press. He saw it as his job to inform the public about the history of modern sculpture. Bußmann had got the idea to set up a retrospective exhibition about the history of modern sculpture, from Rodin to the present, and asked me if I wanted to participate. I submitted a proposal for the project section and was also responsible for its implementation. But there’s a back

story to this back story: there was the collector Otto Dobermann, who had an art collection not far from Münster and loved to create art projects. He'd asked me to select a number of artists for this. Oldenburg, for instance, wanted to dig a hole in the ground – he'd done a similar project with a gravedigger in Central Park in New York. Christo's idea was to wrap an uprooted tree and display it on a giant pedestal on a small hill on the edge of a wood. There were also project proposals by Carl Andre, Ulrich Rückriem and other artists. The plans never got off the ground, because Müller, an art dealer from Stuttgart, who had close contacts with Dobermann, found it all too risky. Since I had already been concretely involved in this kind of project, I was able to quickly develop a concept for Bußmann. Firstly I knew the city well, and secondly, I was in touch with the artists.

Wasn't there public irritation when it became known which artists you had invited?

No, because the names of the artists were completely unknown. The innovative aspect of the concept was that the artists were allowed to choose the locations themselves, and these were inextricably linked to the works.

Why didn't you invite any land-art artists at the time?

The first exhibition was expressly about concrete objects.

In your trial project, a clear distinction was made for the first time between autonomous sculptures and site-specific works.

The term 'autonomous sculpture' was very clearly defined in an article by Laszlo Glozer. I had got to know Glozer via Claes Oldenburg's Mouse Museum, in which he was particularly interested. He'd written a fantastic article in [the newspaper] *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about Documenta V, and the context of the Mouse Museum played a significant part in his thesis. At my request he wrote a piece for the Münster project catalogue. In this text the concept of autonomous sculpture was consciously defined, in order to differentiate it from the next step in the evolution of sculpture. The exhibition of autonomous sculptures in 1977 in Münster was divided into three sections: first a retrospective of modern sculptures in the museum, second the autonomous sculptures in the castle gardens, and finally the site-specific projects, in which the sites, with their specific possibilities and limitations, played an important role.

It was the very first time that artists were invited to create site-specific projects. Weren't the invited artists sceptical about this challenge? Joseph Beuys, for instance, spoke of 'aesthetic environmental pollution'.

Beuys was initially very sceptical, but he was also someone who was immensely motivated, and of course the presence of American artists was a challenge. The invited artists were incredibly motivated. I was amazed by their enthusiasm and dedication. And there was a point to their work, as well! There were no explicit political objectives, but the project did have social pretensions.

The term 'project' was also used consistently for site-specific works in the public space, for the first time, in order not to confuse them with conventional plastic works in particular.

Yes, ten years later, in 1987, the projects complemented the exhibitions. It was a fortunate circumstance that significant representatives of a new generation were able to make this credible based on their own artistic practice. The fact that I invited Jeff Koons unleashed a storm of protest. Katja Fritsch, for instance, was surprised that Koons had a lot more to do with her than she perhaps wanted. While the work is intended to be sophisticated and speculative and was based on an entirely different premise, it does clearly come from the same period. One artist that was recommended by Jean-Christoph Ammann and Maja Oeri was Stephan Balkenhol, and this brought figurative trends into the picture. Fritsch's

Madonna, the steel copy of the *Kiepenkerl* (hawker) by Koons, and Balkenhol's mezzorelievo on a façade. The 1987 edition was much broader in scope, and the diverse artistic premises brought out certain issues more clearly as well.

Andre, Asher, Beuys, Judd, Long, Nauman, Oldenburg, Rückriem and Serra were presented outside the exhibition spaces specially reserved for art and placed in a different context.

The artists picked the locations themselves. I did take the lead, because I knew the city well – I went to school in Münster for several years – but ultimately the decision was up to the artists. Sometimes a project was abandoned for financial reasons, but essentially there was a great deal of freedom. We didn't have clearly defined works in mind for which we looked for locations; we preferred to create conditions for experimentation.

The artists were also presented in the Landesmuseum itself.

Yes, with models, drawings and documentation.

Oldenburg's contribution was originally supposed to be much larger.

That's right. His work was placed beside the Aasee, an artificial lake in a park that was a marshy area until 1928 and was drained during the economic crisis, as a job creation programme. The workers were paid only in bread, pea soup and warm clothing, so that they could just manage to subsist. The Aasee was expanded after the Second World War, and Oldenburg was anthropologically interested in the growth of the city. The lake is situated outside the city walls, but very near the city centre. Oldenburg saw the Aasee as a plane of projection. He developed the whimsical idea of an American pool table with 18 balls, a project that harked back to a sculpture of plastic balls and a triangle. The water was supposed to represent the pool table, and there were three concrete balls – the number three already suggests quantity.

How did the project come to be concentrated around the Aasee?

Carl Andre installed a project on the spot where the Aasee had been expanded and the traces of that excavation were still visible. The excavated earth had been formed into a hillock, the positive of the negative of the lake, as it were. On this hillock Andre placed a line of steel plates: *A Line for Professor Landois*. Landois was a Münster eccentric, a biology professor, initially also a priest who was excommunicated for his Darwinist views. He also founded a zoo. Andre played on the life line with his title, literally and figuratively. Donald Judd elaborated on the sculpture he had designed in Yokohama for the architect Philipp Johnson, which consisted of a triangular wall whose inner and outer sides were oriented to the topography. Judd interpreted the surface of the water as a spirit level, perfectly flat and objective. The hillock slopes down toward the lake, and he connected the two as a sort of topographic correction. For a long time the concrete rings were not noticed as sculpture. Many passers-by thought the work had a practical purpose. Neither of these projects had any kind of unusual 'skin' you would associate with sculpture.

Did the inhabitants of Münster acquire a new perspective on art as a result of these aesthetic interventions?

That's hard to say. At some point something changed, and everyone was surprised that such a discussion flared up in Münster, of all places. The situation changed – suddenly people wanted the exhibition to be held more often. At the 1997 'Skulptur Projekte' it was fortunate that Documenta X had been postponed a year, so that the two exhibitions took place simultaneously. The 1997 edition of 'Skulptur Projekte' got a lot of international attention and became a hot tip for insiders.

Can you say something about the response to Michael Asher's work?

Asher's position was rather exceptional. Until 1977 his work was almost universally ignored – except for a small group of people who followed it intensely – or it was not understood. His project was repeated in 1987 and 1997, but by then it was perceived as an anachronism. At the first edition of 'Skulptur Projekte' Michael Asher was one of the youngest participants. In his proposal he had explicitly explained that the caravan, which was positioned in a different location each week, was meant as a metaphor for a city undergoing change. It made sense, but it couldn't be understood if you just saw the caravan.

And Bruce Nauman?

That unfortunately was not executed. Bruce Nauman's project did not get off the ground because there wasn't enough money. It would only have made sense if the upside-down pyramid were given a permanent site, specifically alongside the new facilities of the Chemistry and Natural Sciences Faculty, between the organic chemistry and inorganic physics and chemistry buildings, where the geometric, sunken plaza would have totally altered the perception of the piece. At the time there were conflicts with the public works department about the construction of a basketball court, which incidentally was never built. There was absolutely no understanding of the execution of the project. It would have been pointless to realize the project only to take it down again.

There was also little understanding of other projects. Why did the management of the Landesmuseum refuse to accept the work by Joseph Beuys, for example?

The director of the Landesmuseum at the time was a numismatist. When he refused the donation, Klaus Bußmann, the head curator, decided to resign. Bußmann went to the university and later became director of the Landesmuseum after all. Marks, the collector, was prepared to donate Beuys's *Unschlitt* (Talk) to the museum without stipulating that the work had to remain there permanently. *Unschlitt* was later moved to the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach and is not in the Hamburg train station.

The university did not want Rückriem's works on its grounds either.

That's right. There were partnership agreements between the invited artists and the city of Münster, which owned the land. Both partners were given the option, within two years, of leaving a sculpture where it was, and of purchasing it. If this did not happen, it was our job to remove the work. Richard Long had made it clear that his work was not intended as a permanent installation: it was dismantled after the exhibition. In Judd's case, the city had agreed in advance to let the statue stand; otherwise the costs would have been out of all proportion. There is also, theoretically, always the option to execute Bruce Nauman's work, as well. In 1997, there was an opportunity to realize this work: Flick, another collector, was prepared to pay for it. Flick had come to Münster twice, and I had persuaded him to sponsor the work. Bruce Nauman was prepared to settle for the honorarium of 50,000 DM from 1977. Flick was willing to spend double if Nauman made a work for Münster that was transportable, a concrete object of which Flick would be the owner. Ultimately, however, this didn't happen.

In 1977 there was a conventional sculpture exhibition in the Landesmuseum and a project section in the urban space; for the 1987 edition the presentation in the museum was a supplement to the project contributions. In 1977 there were nine artists; ten years later there were 64. How did this large increase come about?

The 1977 exhibition consisted of three parts: a historic retrospective of modern sculpture in the museum, autonomous works in the castle gardens, and finally the project section, which I was responsible for and which I had initiated. Ten years later the whole exhibition

revolved around this project section. All the artists who had participated in the first 'Skulptur Projekte' were also invited for the second and third editions.

And why only seven women artists?

That is unquestionably due to the fact that sculpture is dominated by men.

Another difference from the 1977 exhibition was the great number of figurative works.

They were not in the majority. It was *one* aspect that came out that way.

Jeff Koons, Katharina Fritsch, Thomas Schütte, Stephan Balkenhol . . .

There just happened to be a number of projects that suddenly went back to the figure or the figurative. If certain trends come up, you follow that track, and then those works become credible as individual contributions as well.

Not all the invited artists were able to execute their projects. Hans Haacke's Hippokratie proposal for the city's buses was never implemented. Why was that?

Public transport is a service of the city of Münster, and it is required to refrain from disseminating political messages.

Ulrich Rückriem's work, which was removed under protest in 1977, is back; why was that?

In Rückriem's case we had always hoped that the university would buy the sculpture, and we even had financial support from Westphalia. But the university didn't want the work.

The university didn't even want the sculpture as a gift!

That's right. Ulrich Rückriem then sold the work to the Grässlin family. But on their estate in the Black Forest it stood forlorn on a mountain meadow and actually had no meaning anymore. The sculpture has a direct connection to the church, and it is back in Münster.

In Claes Oldenburg's project, the three Giant Pool Balls were supposed to be supplemented by two extra balls. Were the production costs too high? Why was the work not expanded?

Firstly it was too expensive, secondly this work essentially already existed. I believe that you should not focus too much on your own history, that it is sometimes more meaningful to start new projects.

Michael Asher was also back. With the same caravan?

Yes, it was the same caravan. Except the hubcaps had disappeared. It took a lot of trouble to realize this project.

Because of the hubcaps?

Yes. We advertised in every possible camping magazine and searched for those hubcaps forever. We finally found them at a wrecking yard.

The labels 'art in the public space' and 'site-specific sculpture' have become generally accepted concepts, and were considered synonymous.

That's true, but 'site-specific sculpture' was an existing expression we never used.

Initially the sculptures were supposed to remain in place for a year. Sol LeWitt's work Black Form Dedicated to Missing Jews was removed with a power shovel by order of the university rector's office. It's disturbing to see representatives of 'intellectual Münster' protesting such a sculpture. Why did the second edition of 'Skulptur Projekte Münster' still not succeed in dispelling the prejudices of the public?

There had already been a great deal of controversy in advance of this project. The most prominent argument of its opponents was the work's black colour. The caretaker might collide with it in his van, and other similarly dubious arguments. In reality there were all sorts of aesthetic and human motives at play. We didn't back down, because there was a binding contract. Then someone did crash into it. The safety argument was brought up again, and the work was removed after all. Those are just the democratic rules of the game. The sculpture now stands in Hamburg-Altona, on the site where the synagogue once stood. This fantastic work finally found its place. A few days before the catalogue was due to be printed, Sol LeWitt had the idea of giving his sculpture a title, something he had never done before. With it he clearly alludes to Münster's past, even *before* the era of Nazi terror and mass murder. In fact it was a very modest gesture, but it aroused intense hostility among the city's inhabitants. Keep in mind these were proposals, and a proposal is considered and then accepted or rejected. I remember, for instance, a sculpture by Richard Serra on the Friedrichsplatz for Documenta VI. The idea was that the work would remain there, but because the buildings standard commission protested and the city of Kassel was not prepared to buy it, it had to be removed. The piece was then placed in front of the train station in Bochum. During a discussion with the city council, its sponsor, Galerie M, had pressured the various parties with arguments about censorship and repressive policies. The claim was that it would be fascistic if this important work of art was not acquired immediately. The sculpture, which had originally been designed for Kassel, subsequently ended up on a traffic island in front of the central station in Bochum. But they should have realized that people who worked in the steelworks there would now be confronted by the same material that they produced, without being able to appreciate its quality. What's more, people with baby strollers were no longer able to walk straight across to the station. It's all very well to fight for a cause, but then you have to accept when the public, in the form of the elected city council, doesn't agree. Until now this has gone well in Münster, without mutual recriminations.

Why did Jeff Koons's Kiepenkerl not remain in Münster? The [insurance company] Provinzial Versicherung wanted to buy the work, didn't it?

Yes, but to replace the traditional *Kiepenkerl* with a stainless steel version – that's unthinkable in a city so proud of its traditions! The figure had been donated to the city by merchants after the war, and they were not prepared to replace the bronze *Kiepenkerl* with the new one. The sculpture now stands in Los Angeles, and local papers have reported a few instances of tourists from Westphalia visiting the museum there and being flabbergasted to find a symbol from their home region.

The dialogue between history and contemporary art was also continued in Münster in 1997. The project concentrated on three places: the Landesmuseum as a central public space, the Promenade and finally the Aasee, so that it was incorporated into the urban setting.

We didn't want the whole thing to get out of control. The 1987 exhibition inspired many imitations, and I was concerned that the popular entertainment of an Easter egg hunt would distract from the essential point. So Klaus Bußmann and I thought it sensible to provide certain guidelines for the many contributions, without subjecting the invited artists to too many restrictions. We proposed certain routes we had in mind. And when other possibilities presented themselves, we tried to be open to alternatives and even plan a different route. Or we said to certain proposals: come up with an alternative for a different

location, and maybe that way a different work will emerge. But eventually you reach the point when you have to make a decision. I was very attentive to that, so that it would not get too disorganized.

To what extent did the concept of 'publicness' in Münster change for you after the second edition? For you personally?

The concrete working conditions in 1977 and 1987 were great; at the time I was living at my mother's house in Münster. My mother died after a grave illness just before the 1997 edition, and that created a certain detachment. My personal relationship with Münster underwent a major change, and I incorporated that experience in my exhibition. I came to the realization that the 1997 edition had to have a certain open-mindedness and quality, with less emphasis on the overall organization of the contributions.

With Nam June Paik's contribution, art freed itself of the duty to challenge expectations and gave itself over to festivalization with total abandon.

Paik's work made one thing very clear: the more money you spend, the more success in the media. He used that grandiose Baroque decor for his fleet of cars. The series started with a limousine from the year his father was born, and Mozart's music poured out of that Cadillac. The theme of this work is the festivalization of society. Paik communicated this in a highly unconventional, witty way. That's what I meant when I used the word open-minded. In 1987 Paik had placed his TV Buddha alongside the moat. A dilettantish, home-made bronze Buddha statue sat in front of an empty television. Ducks swam around it, quacking. This installation was a Buddhist simulation and a perfect poetic image to make a clear statement about the world.

Ten years, later, on the other hand, Paik went all out, and I thought it was great. Those silver cars seemed to dissolve when the sun hit them, and then you only heard the *Little Night Music* against the backdrop of the Baroque castle. This ingeniously conceived festival work was a kind of trip through time. The question of correct proportions has nothing to do with big or small – the criterion always has to be how you use them.

In 1997 there was friction between the church and 'Skulptur Projekte' again.

Yes. The church authorities demanded that Ayse Erkmen's helicopter take a different route on Sundays.

And Tobias Rehberger . . .

Yes, the *Zölibad*. At the Aasee, there is a swimming pool for seminary students, which belongs to the diocese. This bathing pool, which is near Judd's sculpture, is nicknamed *Zölibad* (*Zölibat* = celibacy) and is not open to the public. Rehberger wanted to open the swimming pool to everyone during the 'Skulptur Projekte', but the bishop refused. He undoubtedly had good reasons to say no.

Can you tell me something about the parameters of the fourth edition of 'Skulptur Projekte'?

In 2007 we again posed the question of the relationship of art, public space and urban environment. We invited international artists to delve into the changing conceptions and current perspectives of these issues. Münster, as a city, in all its clear organization and with its specific demographics, is a fantastic field for this kind of long-term study. You might say Münster is the prototype of a medium-sized, European university town – in other words, simultaneously exemplary and atypical for a big city. As in Berlin, Hamburg and Frankfurt, we can detect here the social as well as the structural changes taking place in Germany, in an expanding Europe, against the backdrop of economic and social

globalization. The title 'Skulptur Projekte' should be understood in a programmatic sense. We have delved into the question of what contemporary sculpture can signify at this time, how it manifests itself in the media, in society and at the artistic level, as well as how it can influence our conception of publicness and public space.

Why did Klaus Bußmann not take part this time?

Klaus Bußmann resigned prematurely as museum director following an intense controversy in cultural politics in Münster. I get along well with Bußmann; he was of invaluable counsel and assistance to me throughout the preparation phase. He was and is the *spiritus rector* of the 'Skulptur Projekte'.

How was the void left by Bußmann filled?

The museum post has been filled. I had outstanding cooperation from Brigitte Franzen of the Landesmuseum and Carina Plath of the Westfälische Kunstverein [art society].

The number of invited artists is far lower than for the third edition. Is it over for large-scale, culturally directional exhibitions?

No, it's to do with the fact that many works from the previous editions are still in place, and they now form the backdrop for the new works.

Thanks to this new, open approach, we were also able to open up the exhibition thematically.

Bruce Nauman's work has now finally been executed. Did he get his 1977 honorarium?

His honorarium was adjusted for inflation, and it was very modest.

Why did the city not acquire the works by Martha Rosler and Silke Wagner?

After the 'Skulptur Projekte', a special art commission was appointed and recommended that the city acquire nine of the projects. But the culture commission of the city of Münster refused to purchase the projects by Silke Wagner and Martha Rosler. Silke Wagner had designed the work *Münsters Geschichte von unten* (Münster's history from below), a monument to the social and political activist Paul Wulf, who was sterilized by the Nazis in 1938 and fought his entire life for the compensation to which he was entitled. The American artist Martha Rosler also examined Münster's political past with her work, *Unsettling the Fragments*. For 'Skulptur Projekte 07' she placed existing architectural elements in a different context. The art commission had recommended the city acquire Rosler's relief of a 1930s eagle, which she had placed in front of the Münster Arkaden – a shopping complex in the city centre. The acquisition of these two works was rejected due to pressure from the political parties CDU and FDP, which hold the majority in the city council. Those are just the rules of the democratic game.

Both works deal critically with the Nazi past and Münster's history during the Third Reich. Do you not see a connection?

As I said, those are the rules of the game in a democracy.

Do you still believe, after the debates over the works of Rosler and Wagner, that critical art in public space can generate a renewed interest among the public for visual art, not as aestheticism but as a conversation with objects available to everyone without limitations, not as merchandise but as a communal social experience?

We should not place too much value on this debate; this discussion is a political process and the battle is far from over.

Does the public space still really have a function as a platform for societal conflicts?

Definitely. Obviously conflicts were brought up for discussion, even though that was not necessarily the premise – not in 1977, not in 1987 and not in 1997 either. A good exhibition has coherence; certain things become understandable in relation to other contributions. The challenge is to create something that does not happen inside a museum space, where you expect nothing else. Art must be credible, and at least one unbiased person must be able to understand it.

Did you succeed in giving the conservative citizenry a different perspective on art?

It has never been our intention to be didactic. I would also not wish to characterize Münster as a conservative city. People think Münster is an old city, but actually it was utterly devastated during the war and rebuilt in the old style. The patina of reconstruction creates the illusion that it really is an old city, but it isn't at all. It's easier to combat certain cliché assumptions when they are clearly defined than when they remain vague. The citizens of Münster may be stubborn and sometimes a bit complacent, perhaps, but what makes the 'Skulptur Projekte' so appealing for Münster is that the city gets a lot of international attention. In my opinion, this has contributed to a certain openness.

How does your personal CV look, after four 'Skulptur Projekte'?

My balance sheet is very positive. In the end we managed to have more than 30 sculptures remain in the urban space. The most important aspect, however, is that these are quality works, and that they continually prove that they can reinvent themselves.

Will there be a fifth edition in 2017? And with you as curator?

I think so. But it's hard to say what the situation will be like in ten years. I'll have some sort of function, if only to maintain a certain level.

Is the snowman still the ideal sculpture in public space?

As a metaphor, yes. When something has substance, that's always an exception, not the rule.

Florian Waldvogel was artistic director of Kokerei Zollverein / Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik, Essen, from 2001 to 2003 and has been curator at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Arts in Rotterdam since 2006.

Tags

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