

An artistic reconquest of public space

As a consequence of the far-reaching commercialisation of the public domain, events within the urban space can scarcely be imagined outside the market economy context. That makes it all the more surprising that „blümerant“ on the Gendarmenmarkt is not an overt or covert advertising campaign for a new cosmetic product, nor indeed is „blümerant“ the name of a new discount florist or an organic garden centre. „blümerant“ is art, an artistic action in public space, or to be more precise, an intervention, a sculptural incision into the structure of the square surrounding it. It takes the three-hundred-year history of the French Friedrichstadtkirche as a starting point to recall the Huguenot migration in the 17th and 18th centuries and how this influenced culture and society in Berlin and the Mark Brandenburg.

Art in public space underwent a fundamental transformation in the second half of the twentieth century: under the aegis of happenings, the Fluxus movement, Action Art and the concept of „Social Sculpture“ in the 1970s and 1980s, it developed into a space-related social and communicative sphere of action. Public space was first and foremost rediscovered by artists who adopted an approach critical of societal developments in their work. For this setting offers a direct encounter with the viewer: it makes the confrontation with art unavoidable. Public space offers a topical and tangible perspective when seeking to have an impact in public space. The often invoked contradiction between art and life, as well as the cliché of the artist alienated from his environment, is refuted anew – and very convincingly – with each artistic action in public space. Artistic actions in a specific space thus open up both individual and collective experiences and communication. To that end however there is a need not only for communicative capacity and potential, but also for the courage to move outside the protective space of the studio and the White Cube in order to face the public. This is not just an organisational display of strength but also a physical and psychological challenge for every artist.

The artists' group msk7 has been confronting this ambivalent task since 2004. Back then, the seven women artists in the group made their first appearance under this name and in a rather unusual vein: They set off with seven trucks on an artistic „Raum_Fahrt“ (Space_Travel) – the title of the action – heading from Berlin to Lodz for the first Lodz Art Biennale. Along the way they opened up the space inside the vehicles at six stopping points, showing their own installations as a mobile exhibition tour.

As part of „Lokale Schwerin“ 2005, msk7 cloaked a street in fog in Schwerin's old town, in the process creating a „Sfumato“ redolent with meaning, which referenced not only the picturesque nooks and crannies of Mecklenburg's regional capital but also recalled the fact that Schwerin owes its intact historic urban structure to the fog that frequently swathed the city during

bombing raids in the Second World War.

In 2006 the artists in msk7 travelled with four lorries in South Korea along the border with North Korea. At six staging posts along the route they invited audiences to play a symbolic game of ping-pong in the trucks.

And now – in 2007 – comes „blümerant“, a project msk7 initially developed back in 2005 as part of an artistic design competition.

The artists in msk7 did not devise a manifesto when they set up the group to work together in 2004. However, the artists involved share an approach to public art based on subtle interventions in existing urban structures; these artistic actions in public space generate values one can experience directly in social and communicative terms, and open up scope for viewers to participate. As a group, msk7 work with the motif of the provisional, for example when the cargo area in the trucks is redefined as a space for actions and exhibitions that can be deployed flexibly in a range of locations. The group's actions are also focused on the moment experienced, which cannot be preserved for eternity in some monumental cast, although it can be documented using photography or film. Each project comes into being thanks to a conceptual work process.

Drawing an analogy with the group's actions, msk7 sees itself as an open structure. For the artists involved, msk7 is a forum for developing joint projects in public space. In the process, group work serves as a stimulus as the individual artists develop their thinking and produce work. And it is only through the division of labour in the group that the artists also manage to launch projects on a larger scale. Let there be no confusion here - the msk7 group constellation doesn't aim to conceal the fact that all the artists involved also work as individuals and turn their own conceptions into reality alongside the group's annual projects.

Compared with earlier projects, „blümerant“ appears rather static. However, it must be said that many visitors to the square had their curiosity tickled when this temporary installation was being put into place. However they remained simply viewers and did not have any scope to play an active part in the artistic events at first. In that sense, „blümerant“ assumes the form of an „art work“ to a much greater extent than earlier projects: passers-by see it as a delicate relief on the ground in an installation referring to a particular space, which slots into the extant structures as it grapples with the square and its history. There is a greater emphasis in this project on the viewer's action in terms of tangible comprehension. It is only when people start to move through the space that they begin to grasp the installation. In the process, the flight of stairs leading into the theatre, the Schauspielhaus, becomes a kind of reading lectern. The paving

serves as a pattern for a sort of crossword puzzle comprised of precisely those words absorbed into local Berlin slang from the French of immigrant Huguenots. In a nod to the Reformation ban on images, the artists do not deploy paint for their inscriptions on the ground but instead pieces of lawn, known as sedum mats, which are used for roof greening schemes. These are made up of a mix of mosses, lichens and grass, which not only makes them particularly easy to maintain but also gives them a living form. As a plant-based installation, „blümerant“ does not conceal the history of the square, nor does it allow grass to grow over history. Instead it would be truer to say that the project literally inscribes itself in the history of the square, to make what is past and thus forgotten become legible once again.

Through the temporary installation, „blümerant“, a new garden lay-out comes into being, which does not simply fundamentally alter the way the square looks now but also recalls that the central section of the square in front of the Schauspielhaus was laid out with lawns, fountains and flowerbeds from 1886 to 1936. If we dig just a little further, we discover too that this central portion of the square was called Schillerplatz until the mid-1930s. It had been given that name in 1871 when the Monument to Schiller was erected, expressing bourgeois efforts to attain reform vis-à-vis the monarchy. However, in 1935 the National Socialists had Reinhold Begas' Monument to Schiller removed. By then Schiller's „Don Carlos“ had long been blacklisted, for in the Third Reich the demand proclaimed in that play, „Sire, give us freedom of thought“, was something that could perhaps still be thought but certainly not pronounced. Revealingly, the play also remained blacklisted in East Berlin until 1989.

The lawn and the Monument to Schiller were succeeded in 1936/37 by „militant paving“ – to cite the term Berlin historian Laurenz Demps coined in 2001: a rigorously geometric grid of square paving slabs across the central expanse of the square, which subsequently served as a venue for various National Socialist events. Remarkably, this grid paving is still extant today and was not called into question either after 1945 or after 1990.

„blümerant“ playfully and subversively opens up a kind of crack in this totalitarian rigid grid. The installation thus attains a second level of signification, extending beyond the history of Huguenot migration around the Gendarmenmarkt. At the same time, it discloses that the square's current appearance is to a significant extent the result of a manipulative political orchestration of urban space. „blümerant“ reveals msk7 as a group of artists with a very conscious focus on content in their work, addressing historical and political references in the process. They do this subtly and symbolically. The exploration of the thematic references is not imposed upon the work, emerging instead as one takes a closer look, from observations developed while moving around and through the installation, and from the reflexions that go hand-in-hand with that. It gives tangible expression to the notion that recalling and pondering

the multiple historical strata of this place, which have fallen into oblivion as a result of the interventions in 1933-1936-1945, is a laborious and gradual process, which continues into the present. Just one example: it was not until 1988 that the Monument to Schiller was once again erected in what is now called „Platz der Akademie“. The upheavals of the war had left the statue stranded in West Berlin, where it adorned Lietzenseepark in Charlottenburg from 1951 on.

The artists in msk7 bring about a remarkable reconquest: over the last 15 years the Gendarmenmarkt has developed into one of the most popular sites to stage large-scale spectacles and commercial events. „blümerant“ bucks this trend. No entrance fee is demanded in this case; instead the general public are offered, outdoors and for free, a profound experience of history and the particular development of a central Berlin urban space. Through the installation's site-specific form, msk7 also moves beyond the popular trend of placing prestigious sculptures in Berlin's historic centre. That means „blümerant“ is not at all a case of product placement by msk7. That was one of the crucial reasons why the Kommission für Kunst im Stadtraum (Committee for Art in Urban Space) from Berlin's Mitte district supported and promoted this installation. It unobtrusively sets the multiple relationships of the locus at the heart of the presentation rather than the name or the market value of the work's authors.

Martin Schönfeld (Berlin, 5th of May 2007)