

Refractory fields of reference

Karen van den Berg, Ulf Wuggenig, Andrea Wolfensberger in conversation, ZEIT-LUPEN edizioni periferia, 2007. Translation: Jennifer Taylor-Gaida

Post-autonomous and outside

KvdB Andrea, here we are in Ulf Wuggenig's office at the University of Lüneburg, which has, for several years, represented how the position of artistic practice in contemporary societies is being reconsidered. We thought this was just the right place to be – with Ulf Wuggenig, an expert in sociological artistic issues, to talk about your self-image as an artist, your working methods and the fields of reference that are vital to your work. I would like to begin with a more general remark. Questions regarding artistic role models have frequently been a topic of debate during the past few years. In the 1990s especially, there was much talk of post-autonomous art and of a new political awareness in artistic practise, of art as »social engineering«, art as service and similar concepts. Your work seems to bear little evidence of this debate. You appear – despite all of your interdisciplinary ventures and forays into the realm of the natural sciences – to insist more on a certain autonomy of art, or on a space reserved for art. I would at any rate not characterise you as a political or social activist. How would you describe your own position and your self-image as an artist?

AW That's a very difficult question (laughs). My self-image can perhaps best be described as taking the role of »court jester« — not because my works are very entertaining or comical, but because as an artist you are always on the outside. At least, I feel very intensely this sense of not belonging. On the other hand, my work as an artist gives me the opportunity to obtain insights into many different worlds, something I value highly. I am interested in interdisciplinary work in various fields, from landscape gardening to cell biology. This wide range of interests does not come about out of mere curiosity, however. I think it also has something to do with the fact that my true reference points are not necessarily within the world of art. In that sense I do not exclusively represent the position of autonomous art, and this is what distinguishes me very strongly from many post-modern artists. I am interested in the questions explored by philosophy and the natural sciences at least as much as in artistic issues. And as far as politics goes: it is also a form of politics when you withdraw from politics – at least at first glance. I certainly don't take up any clear political viewpoints as the subjects of my work, but by deliberately abstaining from doing so, I also make a statement.

UW When you allude to playing the court jester, it reminds me of the classic idea of an autonomous artistic role that is neither determined by society nor integrated within it. The concept of autonomy has many facets; it means, for example, that an artwork is exempt from being determined by factors outside art, including social factors, or it may also allude to a certain self-definition of one's own actions. You don't pursue a particular political agenda as an artist, which can likewise be interpreted as an autonomous decision. Only autonomous artists have the privilege of deciding for or against political intervention. Does that fit in with your self-image? And what is your attitude to autonomy in the word's second meaning as I've defined it? When sociologists speak of autonomy, they usually mean the internal logic of the social system of art or the freedom of the artist to choose a pure, a social or a civic-minded concept of art. This does not mean that the artist stands outside of society with his or her production; this idea of autonomy is espoused more in art historical or philosophical discourses. From a sociological point of view, the artist is always part of the »society of art« at least, with work shaped by his or her position within it.

AW Good, I'll try to be more specific in my answer. I call myself an artist. That's an occupational title. In other words, I very clearly work in an area of society that is delimited in some way but of course that doesn't mean that I am outside of society. Both as an artist and in other ways, I am integrated into society and its social contexts. Nevertheless, I decide what kind of art to make and to what extent and in what form social aspects are brought to bear in my art. And my method of working consists of not making so-called »social aspects« explicit. On the other hand, I also make »artefacts« that come about as a reaction to pre-defined non-artistic circumstances, and are in part also executed by others. And that contradicts my understanding of a rigid concept of autonomy.

KvdB One might take as a yardstick the concept of autonomy established in the 1960s, particularly by Adorno. Here, the role of the artist consists in critiquing society from the position of not belonging to any institutional context. His or her task is to formulate criticism, though never explicitly, according to Adorno. In Adorno's view, art only obtains its explosive critical force when it insists on aesthetic autonomy. Only in this way it can offer resistance to society. These things have, of course, been described quite differently in more recent times. In the 1990s the focus was above all on the question of the contextualisation of art and the fact that artists, too, are entangled in power politics in the art world. So they are not »free« in the sociological sense (laughs).

But you cite the »court jester« as role model. That confuses me a little. One might put it this way: The role that court jesters play within a system of rules actually toys with the fiction of the system itself, in other words, they act as if they were outside the system. But I'm not sure if this role is really a fitting description of your working method. Isn't the court jester someone who is by definition more flippant than you are?

AW Yes, of course (everyone laughs) ... I probably wouldn't be much of a success as court jester ... In terms of entertainment value alone ... I don't necessarily poke fun at society's sore spots like a court jester is supposed to do.

UW The court jester comes from a time when artists had a lower social status than they have today. The role of the artist has been considerably enhanced with the development of art as an independent social system. And at the top of the ladder at least, it's part of the social power field. Moreover, the significance of visual culture has also increased historically. I won't deny that a kind of court jester role might still be conceivable today. But there is a modesty in this self-image that appears unusual for contemporary artists. Artists today have more influence than court jesters did, don't you think?

AW I would dispute that. First of all, I don't know how great the influence of court jesters was – it probably differed depending on the individual – and second, I am afraid that the influence exerted by art is not all that great.

Media, conceptuality and the issue of transitions

UW If we think of the visualisation of the world, on the »iconic turn« to which artists have ultimately also contributed, then, in my opinion, increasing influence can definitely be attributed to visual art. The visual aspect has become very important in our society, including its recourse to symbolic techniques for asserting dominance. And the artistic aspect is also conveyed in commercial fields, such as advertising, design and marketing, which often adopt artistic developments after the fact.

However, as I see it, your works are quite remote from the kind of art communicated in society. For one thing, viewers have to be willing to invest a lot of time in them. Considering how much time exhibition visitors typically spend looking at video installations or works on film – not much longer than at pictures – then it's easy to imagine how difficult it is to communicate via the medium of the art video, as you do. What also seems unusual to me is that you found your way to painting through the detour of video. How do you explain the fact that you work with media that hardly anyone else combines?

AW My paintings are basically frozen videos, painstakingly copied video stills. The first pictures focused only on gardens, in other words, something that changes over time – the garden per se is a

very time-based medium, especially when one views it as an art form. I filmed gardens and wanted to arrest time as much as possible. This is where I got the idea of preserving them in oil. Basically, it really is about arrested time. That's why I had the idea of using oils. In this sense, I was motivated by purely conceptual considerations. It's not even important whether I execute the painting myself. I don't do any sort of gestural or free painting. My painting is pure translation from a digital to an analogue medium.

UW One of the characteristics of the highly modernist, autonomous phase of art was media specificity; think of the influential writings of Clement Greenberg. What do you view as the special qualities of the media you work in and how do you arrive at transitions between them?

AW I think that my works are basically about exploring the perceptual levels of space and time. My first works were sculptures. But even my first sculptures in the 1980s were not geared toward the idea of a physical »body«, but rather toward contemplating movement in space. I deal with the question of viewing angles, with the changes in lighting conditions and materials, and the legibility of reality with the passage of time. This preoccupation brought me to the moving picture. And film, in turn, led me to the idea of frozen time in pictures and to painting. The decision to work in a particular medium was always an afterthought. The medium is a consequence of the subject I'm working on, or of a place or a situation with which I'm confronted. As far as the technical mastery of the medium is concerned, this naturally means that I inevitably remain an absolute dilettante because I have to start all over again every time. This is a strategy of non-skill that I impose on myself. Why I do it...? Perhaps because I don't want to give in to schematic production mechanisms...

The principle of cooperation and the knife at the throat

UW In terms of quantity, you produce works only in small doses, sparingly. You have already briefly sketched what the artistic working process involves. You start with place in a physical sense. I would be interested in knowing what rhythm your work follows. When do you reach a decision, where does the impulse come from to start a new work?

AW It's very simple. I need a concrete place. A concrete request, a defined situation – and a time-frame. Otherwise, I just think and putter around trying things out without finishing anything, or I destroy it again immediately. I'm an incredibly disciplined worker, but strangely enough I don't bring a work to completion unless I know very concretely where it's going and when.

UW Then you must spend a lot of time on the go to find institutions that put you under that kind of pressure...

AW Actually, that's what I should be doing, but I have a family with two children, which is why I keep my production at a low level. That's not the only reason, though. There were years when I produced more, but then I deliberately put on the brakes. At some point I had the impression that it was becoming mechanical, everything was turning into mere attitude; I began to repeat myself. I want to allow myself enough time for the works, to allow them to mature, and sometimes that really takes a great deal of time.

KvdB So you don't work according to the principle of self-commissioning?

AW I can set myself tasks, but in order to really bring them to a conclusion I need a context.

KvdB And without an official task, you are like a scientist in a laboratory where no products or results need to be produced. Would you describe it like that?

AW I suppose you could put it that way. Despite all the hermetic qualities that are perhaps inherent in my art, communication is my most important motivation. If I have the impression that a work will never be seen, or I don't know where it will be seen, then my drive diminishes.

UW This perhaps brings us back to the theme we addressed at the beginning. There are sociologists who say that artistic production should be understood as »collective action«. They use the word »collective« very broadly, thinking for example of the participation of »assistants« or of people who produce the paints, canvases or brushes; but I would like to find out about the collective share in your work in a narrower sense because you often collaborate with others. You say that you need

an impulse from outside and that you therefore often cooperate with people who do not come from the field of visual art. How do these cooperative ventures come about? How do you find your partners, and why do you look for them outside the field of art?

AW I often take the initiative. For example, the commission for the Zürcher Kantonalbank: The Kantonalbank wanted to introduce some sort of »nature« – that was the competition brief – into a room where, because of lighting and climate conditions, nothing »natural« could survive. To implement the brief, I proposed a concept that would bring into play pictures of nature in various stages, media and levels of transformation using a video, a wall painting and finally living plants. I lacked the knowledge and skills to realise my idea. So I asked a landscape architect for help and we developed the plant curtain together. For the realisation we then also called in a botanist and an electrical engineer...

KvdB Did that involve more than just »technical support«?

AW Yes, the plant curtain was a joint effort. But the fundamental idea of working out various stages and transformation media of the concept of nature – as well to ask why there was this desire for nature and plants in a bank in the first place – this had already been set down beforehand in my concept.

Positions, delimitations and questions of provenance

UW Not unlike scientists, there are certain artists who take a clear-cut stand. The statement they make in their work – openly or covertly – distinguishes them from predecessors or competitors. I have the impression that this is not really of primary concern to you...

AW ...to distinguish myself from other artists?

UW I mean to take a stand in your work that firmly sets it apart from another...

AW It's my own...

UW I'm not questioning that, but does setting your work off against other approaches play a role for you?

AW The point of departure for my work is not to differentiate myself from others. I find it enriching the more approaches there are. Perhaps I'm very naïve here. Sometimes I stand in front of work by other artists and think: My God, why didn't I do that (laughs)? This once happened to me with a work by Olafur Eliasson. But then I take pleasure in excellent work and try to react to it. Differentiation or the strategic claim to a specific approach in the art context is not a motivating factor for me, though. But obviously you can't repeat something you know and something that has already been done.

KvdB And which older artists have had an impact on you?

AW Beuys, Land Art or James Turrell. In Beuys, especially the existential and cross-disciplinary aspects. But Fischli/Weiss are also important to me, because they discarded the heroic stance peculiar to the generation of Beuys and Land Art. In a congenial way they don't embody the artist-as-genius but instead make art with a large dose of humour out of everyday objects.

UW It is striking how important questions of perception are in your work for the Kantonalbank. You studied in Geneva in an environment in which people took a completely different approach to institutions like banks – with their special social features such as economic transactions or aspects of power, etc. This seems to interest you less, however; it's more the spatial circumstances that you take up in your work, is that correct?

AW At first glance, yes, but, as I said before, nature was the competition theme. And what interested me especially was this paradox that a bank in the middle of Zurich, where business dominates, should choose to invite prominent artists to submit proposals for »Kunst-am-Bau« (Art for Buildings) on the subject matter of nature. I responded to this wish in full, precisely because I found it so absurd.

KvdB Do you have a problem with being used as a sort of decorator in this case? What is your attitude toward this kind of job?

AW Very divided: none of the public artworks I have created have survived, except a small inscription that nobody sees. I have a major problem with that because I sense that most contracts for art in public space are token gestures. At the same time, however, this is still what interests me the most: to react to an existing situation and act outside the art context.

UW I want to come back once more to your studies in Geneva. I notice that you have hardly exhibited there. You evidently did not integrate yourself into the Francophone art world. What are the reasons for this?

AW When I arrived in Geneva in the early 1980s, the ESAV (Ecole Supérieure d'Arts Visuels) had just been reorganised and was strongly moulded by the 1968 movement and by French structuralism. At the time Geneva offered the only pure training in Switzerland in the fine arts. I found that it was a very, very good education. After my studies I did maintain contacts there and also had several exhibitions. I can say exactly why these contacts ultimately tapered off.

KvdB Would you say that you learned specific production strategies at the art academy? And, if so, how would you describe them?

AW I did not learn any production strategies, but I did learn about a clear attitude.

KvdB What tasks should art academies fulfil, in your opinion? There are some where discourse is the main thing. They focus on discussing the field in which they operate; people exchange views on various theoretical modes and maintain a stance of constant reflection on the field of art. Then there are art academies that are more oriented around media and working through them, where there are, for example, painting classes and where the goal is to develop one's own artistic language and pictorial signature. How did you experience your studies in Geneva? And what course do you yourself follow today in your teaching at the University of the Arts in Bern?

AW In Geneva, the discursive aspect naturally took precedence. In my opinion, at the time Geneva was one of the most progressive schools in Europe. This willingness to entertain a discourse threatened to become ideological, however. I try to pass on to my students in Bern much of the freedom we were given in Geneva. I teach painting and try to invite a wide variety of artists to come and teach with me. Of course, I can only pass on what I know and can do, but I think I know my limitations quite well, and that's why I bring in other people who can help in teaching a certain kind of painting, for example, Antje Majewski. The University of the Arts in Bern grew out of the traditional School of Arts & Crafts, which was clearly more media-oriented. So there was no tradition of a discourse on art that was wide-ranging and well-informed. I find it very important that this field should be more strongly emphasised in Bern. But I'm probably not the right person to take this on.

In closing: markets and female changes in direction

UW We haven't spoken yet about the art market. You exhibit both in galleries and public institutions. How do you view developments in the market? We are currently witnessing a market dominance like nothing ever seen before in art history. What does this mean for art, and for your own production? Apart from art for the art market in the narrower sense, recent institutional developments also include biennial art and biennial artists...

AW ...and now there are also the trade fair artists...

UW ...exactly, but the discursive sub-system represented by the international biennials and triennials that are meanwhile found all over the world, or by certain large-scale exhibitions like the Documenta, has likewise established itself and seems to be evolving its own inner logic. Are you part of this sub-field?

AW No, I've never been invited ... (laughs). I think my works are so dry that I have no chance of operating other than the way I do at the moment.

UW You're not integrated into a particular network?

AW When I was in Zurich, I did have a network; I also had patrons there and everything ... but I withdrew from it.

KvdB Why? You're anything but ignorant or an extreme loner. You go to many exhibitions and are

very well informed.

AW When my children were little I deliberately turned down exhibitions, because I knew that if you really want to work internationally you have to spend a lot of time on the road and can't take your children with you. I can't imagine how those two things could ever be compatible. I don't know how others do it ... But it's not »only« for practical reasons. I think that I also embrace a strategy of denial and perhaps, by switching between media, I make too many changes to be understood by the market. What it takes to establish yourself in the market is not hard to figure out, but it would not correspond to the way I work. My works just aren't »loud«, not even the large ones. Nor are they »beautiful«; they are very dry and demand plenty of time. I want to work extensively in specific places and in close contact with specific partners rather than simply executing commissions with a team of assistants. I therefore deliberately work with deceleration. So there is in fact a network – but perhaps one that is not immediately visible to those outside it. Actually, it would be interesting to study the biographies of women artists to see how single-minded they are. I believe that this idea of art with a »single« orientation is distinctly male. Women are simply forced to switch direction more frequently (laughs) ... to my mind at least.

UW ...because?

AW Well, because there are simply other things in life; I also think that their ideals are not so high-minded ... I don't know. That would really be an interesting subject for sociology...