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Auszug Katalog _ La salle du monde II _ Kunsthalle Bern _ 1995

I

H.Ch.v.T. In 1992 you created *the fête of the moment*, your contribution to the symposium 'Unbounded vision', that we organised in cooperation with Gerhard Johann Lischka in the Museum of Fine Arts Berne. You decided with your contribution to be the host in Bern. The guests were welcomed in a room with an excellent bar, objects like flower walls and ground drawings as well as light and sound installations. One year later you elaborated the work *La salle à manger* for the art collection Château d'Oiron in France. What relates the two works?

R.M. The title of my contribution to *the unbounded vision* describes a time; the one for Oiron defines a place. Both works contain the element of a Dinner, a fête. This tradition has been maintained over centuries, like that of sculpture, and it interests me a lot as if a photo has been taken from a certain culture. They don't present fêtes for artists, but public events with an admission. It was twelve Francs in Bern, in Oiron it was the participation and the willingness of being portrayed by me as well as being exhibited in public. Another common factor is the repetition, which for me is a precondition for these ephemeral works. The dinner in Oiron takes place every year on the 30th June. My fêtes¹ and games have a basic structure of at least two successive evenings. A social event like the opening of an exhibition...

H.Ch.v.T. ... the art on its own is so much more important, it stands above all the social events, that are organized in relation to art. I understand *the fêtes of a moment* as something much more essential than any opening of an exhibition with its social expression...

R.M. ... but it is an important element and the social even may be the most important at all. We meet colleagues and friends there, we discuss everything and nothing. I often like seeing exhibitions alone; but sometimes I miss this moment.

Back to your question concerning the relationship between *the fêtes of the moment* and *la salle à manger* in Oiron. At the time the symposium took place I prepared the work in Oiron. Often I am pregnant with several works at once. Some of them lose their necessity in the course of the process, others became clearer and clearer in a way I could not have guessed at the beginning.

The next step in Oiron was to continue the relationship by linking inside and outside, two different systems, and to reduce the artistic action to the linking. The important thing for me is here the reciprocal relationship in the work, so to say that the inhabitants of Oiron give their portraits to me, and I invite these people for dinner. That's a mutual gesture and an exchange of values. I'm also interested in these two formally different works because of their association with a moment of perception, that is created by personal presence. Nobody knows what will happen during the next five, six hours, and all participants create the work by their presence...

What stays is nothing but the remembrance and personal pictures. The events are what they are and have no necessary connection in the sense of the opening of an exhibition, that concerns more or less art insiders, and presents another structure. *I love moments in which nothing happens*, said Buñuel, and so do I.

¹ 1985 *Everything and much more*
Hotel Schweizerhof – Kunstmuseum/Kunsthalle Bern
1989 *In the network of the systems*
Ars electronica Linz/A
1987/88 *Championship in the own Land*, Part 1 + 2

In the exhibitions of *la salle du monde* like here in Bern, for instance, I show heterogeneous works which have no linearity, and these works are nevertheless like satellites in regard to the global project. They differ in their forms and are mutually dependant. It is a question of your own view. My creative process is based on these multiple aspects of perception. There are links where just the knot is interesting, and not the length and the shape of the strings. This method corresponds with my way of dialogue work; in and with the society with its evaluations and places.

H.Ch.v.T. I know that the tension between the social system and the individual belongs to the basic parts of your thinking and of your artistic form of expression, and it also seems to appear in *la salle du monde*. In every culture you take very personal portrayal of the people together with the three objects of the local ritual of eating and relate them to every other person. Everybody eats from his personal set. You show the relationship between individual and society in a very radical way. Is this new or are there other similar works?

R.M. *La place centrale* in Biel, created on the occasion of the exhibition *Tabula rasa*⁴ is a work which also picks out these relationships as a central theme.

In the new works I show here in Bern there is also the aspect of individual personal relationships. Personalized objects that everybody who is interested can receive – I call these works *la salle privée* – should be seen as an element of a random human network which will be manifested by a dinner in Paris or by a book.

I would like to add an idea of general nature. There are not only virtual simulations which are important to our time, there is also the opposite pole. The category of human presence with its mutual communication is the impact giving point for virtuality as a part of the social network.

H.Ch.v.T. I see an essential difference between your work in Biel and the work *la salle à manger* in Oiron. In Biel you involved the people in the streets. In Oiron you invited personalities you knew to participate...

R.M. No, in Oiron it is also a random society which takes part in the work. It is not a representation of power or a chosen group; they are people who were there during the month when I created the work in the village. They were ready to be portrayed and exhibited in the castle. Some people I asked did not want to take part in this work. I did not choose the people, they came in the gradual flow of the work.

The criterium for me was that it should be the first 150 persons, anything else had its own momentum. It was an interesting part of the work in the sense of curiosity, thoughts and decision. There were lots of good conversations about art, the castle and the village while I portrayed them.

H.Ch.v.T. How is *la salle du monde* as a work of art placed in the world of art? You can't describe it as conceptual art. It is a project which has been put into practice for the first time, the other places will follow. The result is for me a clear picture. However, I am somebody who is essentially very sensitive. I see the people sitting at table, I see them eating, I see them discussing. Of course, I see the installation in Oiron first, and how it works in the event. It is a work of art, but it is not a painting, not a theatre play, not a performance. It is something really autonomous and new in art history. How do you define this work?

⁴ Zentralplatz/La place centrale
Tabula rasa Biel/Bienne/CH

H.Ch.v.T. In other words, *la salle à manger* is not conceived for the 'insiders'...

R.M. *La salle à manger* resulted from my analysis of the structures of the place. Like *the fêtes of the moment* and all my works. In Oiron as well as in Bern it was a public work, that means everybody there who was interested could be part of the work at a certain time. In Bern the people were informed by posters in the city and by announcements on the radio. In Oiron there were leaflets in the grocer's, in the bars, in the restaurant, and I also invited them personally to the project.

The art insiders, an awful word, were of course also welcomed, but today everybody is interested in art. I am interested in the curious ones. In Oiron they asked me for a project for this place with the castle, and after several stays in the village it became obvious to me that the castle is maintained by the population and presents an important *lieu de mémoire*.

I felt that I had to create a work which has more than a pictorial nature, something that asks the question about the relationship of place and people. That creates a place. In Bern I was looking for a room that was unknown to the public and that I made a public place for two evenings. In this way *the fête of the moment* follows the tradition of earlier works in this town that I have grown fond of.²

H.Ch.v.T. There are 150 persons participating in Oiron. Why this number?

R.M. That's a decision I made.

H.Ch.v.T. What did you serve at the first dinner in Oiron?

R.M. Terrine de poisson on a Framboise-sauce, Rôti de porc with vegetables, cheese and fruits, biscuits, cake and coffee, red and white wine. I put together the menu with the landlord and the landlady of the Oiron castle. They also own a nice hotel in the village. We speak about the habits of the people there and what they would appreciate. According to these reflections we put together the courses and their order. It is different every year.

H.Ch.v.T. I know that you are a gourmet. What is for you the relationship between eating, cooking and art?

R.M. What I am interested in is not just eating and drinking in its simplest sense. I like eating because of its variety in smell, taste, its visual appearance. In this sense even a tinned apple puree is excellent.

In these works eating and drinking is a part of the place. They are like a colour. Like an element of an existential ritual that I pick out as a central theme. Eating alone is still nothing. The surrounding, the light, our neighbours at table and the time belong to it like the presentation of the courses and the rhythm of their order. If you see these categories in relation to eating, they characterize our culture. It is the relationship between the ritual and the space that I am interested in. It is not just the attractiveness of eating, but also the influence on the location and the participants. They define a place for some hours, and these can be wonderful moments.

In a society where most of the people don't eat to survive, cooking and eating becomes a high art that I admire, and which has a lot to do with affection and eroticism. Indescribable with words, like all good art. It contains all elements of an artistic action, and the result can be sheer poetry.

H.Ch.v.T. You intend to put into practice this basic structure in six different cultures on earth. *La salle à manger* in Oiron was the first part. I see that you deal with a traditional human form of social life, the coming together for eating. I am extraordinarily impressed that you consciously or unconsciously found a prototype of our human existence and work with it in an artistic manner...

² 1982/83 *Italia-France-Deutschland* - Posters in the city of Bern
1983 *à la place de Kocherspital* Bern
1983/84 *Bellevue* Kocherspital Bern

R.M. I don't know. Others will have to answer this question. Sort of a border project which creates links between the systems. That's what I work with, and due to these forms of linking I offer an extended perception for discussion. Inside and outside the art definition. Maybe the category NEWS³ would cover it best. These works don't show the picture but the place where the existing ambience belongs in the same way to the work as my intervention. Several levels of perception come together in my work. Vertical links in a horizontal network.

H.Ch.v.T. I like this idea. I also can't categorize this work in the usual way. Exactly this fact is a great quality of your work. How do you understand the role of an artist today?

R.M. I've already heard that the artist is a whore. No, less serious; I can only speak for me, and I see the artist as a participating element in his time. He communicates in and with society. He takes action within it, he disturbs, he shows identity, and due to his activity he asks basic questions regarding reality. And last but not least lets cite Picabia who says that the head is round.⁴

H.Ch.v.T. Don't you think that *la salle du monde* contains more idealistic aspects than being a disruptive factor?

R.M. The first doesn't exclude the second. Something that can be categorized is always disturbing. Art and individual have to defend this privilege.

H.Ch.v.T. OK., you are disturbing within the definition of art. You dart sideways in creating a picture, but it can't be categorized as a picture...

R.M. Pictures can never be fasted. They are subjective. I understand the more or less classic media, which include sculpture, painting, objects, photography, video etc. as a means but never as an end in itself. I work with a category which brings relationships and dependencies to the fore; regarding social, communication, architectural or environmentally determined systems. During this process I saw that no dialogue is similar to another. I mean, this its nature.

III

H.Ch.v.T. Above you said that the contradiction were as important as the assertion...

R.M. ... there is a gap between them although they stand together. Contrasts have nevertheless much in common. Both poles show that there is something between, and I'm interested in both of them...

The picture is today not only related to the time, its more the space that counts, in a spiritual and in a material sense. We know, and we don't perceive. That's were I start asking questions.

H.Ch.v.T. Our living in space and time is an existential question. May be this is one of the few perceptions of mankind. We know that there is more than just one way of explanation. The picture is, of course, a brutal simplification of existence in space, it's like a road sign...

R.M. Well, of course we have a philosophical experience in space and time. However, have less real experience regarding the so-called public space and its sensitization. Otherwise I couldn't understand the environmental situation where human resources are attacked and destroyed by our own species. This has something to do with our cultural approach to 'space' and above all to the 'common land'. It involves economic

³ North - East - West - South

R.M. The work in Oiron is the beginning of *la salle du monde* and should be seen in a broader context. This existential part of the work is not only French, but also a part of the culture of the planetary city that exists in reality, for the time being in communication technology and economy. With *la salle à manger* I put an existential and cultural aspect up for discussion whose quality lies in its plurality. It is about three ordinary and basic commodities of the local eating ritual that I don't know yet and that I will have to find out at each place of the project, as well as the public place for the permanent exhibition.

By the way, I use materials for my works that are derived from the social context, from place and time. All these objects are always present and show a complexity that goes beyond their shapes. A form of spiritual dematerialization.

Every culture will ask questions which go beyond art discussions. These discussions are important to me, because the linking process starts there. You can say for instance that, when eating is made a part of the project, it concerns also not-eating, which in our society is paid for with a lot of money and encouraged by medical means. In other cultures this is called hunger. A more than tragic fact that we actually accept, although our lip-service say we would not.

H.Ch.v.T. You are speaking of hunger – is *la salle à manger* a political work of art, or in what way do we see it as political? Is this work a protest against hunger?

R.M. No, a protest in this form is cynical. If the ritual of eating is an element of *la salle du monde* in several cultures, so it concerns as well the fact of not-eating in other cultures. There is a range of views that I put up for discussion with this project. Due to its radically existential concept, *la salle à manger* touches in fact something that exists and doesn't exist at the same time.

H.Ch.v.T. In France you have portrayed 150 persons by the line of their profile on a plate, by engraving their initials on a glass and the print of their hands on a napkin. Will you repeat this form of portraying in the other six places?

R.M. The three ritual objects are defined by the ritual form in France. In any other culture these three objects will be defined by my perception of the corresponding ritual. I surely will find out different objects each time. I work this out in the place, and I can't tell today what I'll find there. There won't be a second Oiron. Every place is different, and so is every room, every installation, the three objects to portray the people and also the ritual itself.

The link between cultural differences is important. An imaginary red line around the world, that is *la salle du monde*.

H.Ch.v.T. Which culture will be the next station for *la salle du monde*?

R.M. Contacts exist in Europe, in Canada and in Vietnam. It will be put into practice step by step. Not by me alone, but in co-operation with a network of different persons who share the idea and support it in their own way. It is probably the first *la salle du monde*.

It is always possible that priorities change due to political or personal circumstances. Also the way can change again and again.

H.Ch.v.T. I like the openness in this longterm work, and that it is a process. Are you also open concerning the chosen place where you make your installation accessible to the public and lay the table?

R.M. It will always be a public place of a community. It can be any museum as well as an airport building. I'll define the place in cooperation with the local authorities. The important thing is, that it must be a public building. The installation is conceptualized in such a way that the daily routine and function of the place won't be disturbed. The frieze as a formal aspect is given.

systems as well as religion and science. That's where I'm asking what sort of philosophy is it that we are characterized by and that we defend so desperately. Maybe the human being needs a catastrophe before it acts. If this is the case, I'd call this a fatal 'error in programming'...

H.Ch.v.T. ... do you understand "space" in a broader context, as a sphere to live in?

R.M. This is my primary sphere, filled with cultural consciousness of different kinds. *La salle du monde* is my artistic assertion. I wonder what that means? Does *la salle du monde* only take place in the heads? These are the questions I ask in my exhibitions in Aachen, Stuttgart and here in Berne.

H.Ch.v.T. Lets return again to the artist's work in space. In Oiron you consciously included very simple sculptural categories. The glass hangs on the wall, it stands on the table. The plate stands in the installation, and it lies on the table. The napkin lies on both places. Stand, lie, hang – these are your means, they are basic means of the classic sculpture and of the sculptor. Are there similar basic elements in your other works?

R.M. I'm very interested in reflections regarding sculpture, architecture and picture, but they are not my concept. The elements develop in the dialogue with the situation. In all my works you will find relationships to the means of art. What classic means or not – that is not important to me. Even the language of forms of Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Beuys can be called a classic.

Today there are new questions to be answered, they demand a form, and they exceed this discourse. Where they lead to – we have to work it out. I'm always curious. Nonetheless, I'm interested in the questions of form, not only those chosen by artists, but also in their historical and social dimension.

H.Ch.v.T. I know that you have a huge knowledge in art history. Another day you told me about a kind of a basic form you saw in China one year ago. It is a circle with the centre cut out, a flat ring. As I understood, you see this form as a symbol of the world and also as the essence of artistic creativity.

R.M. When I was in China last year, I saw this form very often in everyday-life, so in gardens, as jewelry or in museums, like in Changsha where you can see rings made of jade which used to be burial objects 4000 years ago. Nobody in China could give me a credible explanation regarding these objects and their significance. They told me it were a symbol of money, but I think that's far too modern as an interpretation. Without any further knowledge about this tradition, I used this form in my works in Fribourg⁷. Even today it plays an enormous role as a form – think of the computer- or music discs. An information store that is – seen from outside – of technical anonymity. Information is not visible. Like pictures which exist and are invisible. The disc-ring is like a cell surrounding a smaller one. It might be a very central sign, like iris and pupil. I don't know, but I'm fascinated by this form.

⁷ 1992 *The view*
The station
Centre of contemporary art / Kunsthalle Fribourg/CH

H.Ch.v.T. In time, some of the people portrayed will die. How do the people in Oiron feel about the fact that they might miss one or two persons at the yearly annual dinner?

R.M. As you said, this fact can't be denied. Two people died in Oiron. It was beautiful that these two persons were more present in the conversation than anything else. The work is related to a certain time, and in fact, one day there will only be the installation to present a memory of it.

H.Ch.v.T. It just strikes me that people are already in preserve their lifetime a part of a museum. This could also mean that our culture transforms gradually into a museum...

R.M. Well, Europe – the world museum. But this is only possible, if Europe builds walls around its values. Refuses to think about the global view and changes.

A formal presentation and its exhibition is today rather quickly regarded as museum-like. Every portrayal has museum features. Works of art without a museum-like aspect are immaterial values or works which only continue to exist in memory; their conception is ephemeral. There is a souvenir sometimes, but nothing more. Both categories are present in the work of Oiron, the object as well as the subjective souvenir. This is a field of tension I have always been interested in. Even photos can't really satisfy this idea. They don't convey the process, the smell, the taste, the feeling of the place or the conversation. No 'mediatization' of this moment is possible.

However, *la salle du monde* as a whole demands mediatization, but not each moment of it. This artistically new form can to show the links between different cultures. Mediatization is a necessary and contemporary instrument in our time. The unification of the places will take place in the media. At the end of the work, there will be a documentary, a book and a CD-ROM, accompanied by texts of different personal views and thoughts regarding *la salle du monde*. Sociologists, ethnologists, writers, art historians and other people will be involved, people who have a mental approach to the object and put their personal understanding of *la salle du monde* into words. Our conversation is a part of this.

H.Ch.v.T. Are you present at each dinner?

R.M. As far as I can, I'll be taking part.

II

H.Ch.v.T. The first of your works¹ I saw was one of your first installations at a time when an installation was called action art. It was a hall in the Berne Museum of Fine Arts where you cut rectangular parts out of the wall surface with absolute regularity. The surprise was behind it – in turn bricks or plaster. The frieze in Oiron is also presented in a strict regularity. This is one of the traditional basic forms in art presentations. A row of columns in a Greek temple is meant as a regular sequence. This strictness can be a style, and these regular structures seem to be a very primary form of expression for you.

I wonder if there is a principle of order shining through which also appears on the social level due to the equalizing of the guests during the dinner. This principle of order, doesn't it show fascist traits?

R.M. My working with serial sequences is taken from the logic inside the work. Of course, if order becomes a general and dominant principle in social life, it has fascist traits. I show my view on the things. My work results from the exchange of the time and my culture, and regularity is a part of reality, like scales are a part of a fish. Every work demands a certain form which has to be defined before, during or after its creation.

H.Ch.v.T. Back to *la salle à manger*, where you used the profile line as a form for an individual portrayal. Now you show a new work – *la salle privée* – in the form of vases, a double portrait, where the faces of two people give the silhouette. The profiles determine the form of the vase. They are to be understood as a negative, and they exist apart from the vase. These objects show the relationship between two people. Fifty couples can order a vase from you, each of them is hand-made and individual, an original. You hold the view that this is a possible presentation of couples or lovers, or two people who like each other...

R.M. The picture results from the vase's ambience, its background; it is separate from the object. The portrait is shown by the placing of the vase. What you see is not what it is. Well, in future we will have to deal much more with these questions touching reality. It is not me who presents somebody, but the person who decides to have an individual or a double portrait made, presents himself. It is a form of self-presentation. The vase is personal, a personal possession, and at the same time there are relationships to other owners. This work will be finished by the book which will create the links. I'm looking forward to this.

H.Ch.v.T. Yes, also in the work of Oiron the relationship between individual persons plays a decisive role. The frieze on the wall, the dinner... Why actually this form of vase?

R.M. It's a receptacle, like a plate, that everybody knows. It can be used, and a vase will find a place in every room.

H.Ch.v.T. I suppose you had several reasons to limit the number of double portraits to 50?

R.M. The imaginary links between the owners create a network which finds its presentation in a catalogue. This is an important part of the work, and 50 is here a sufficient number. This is a principle for my purchasable works – I mean the works which go on a journey. In a series of works are sometimes 50, or 150, sometimes 4, 6 or just 2 specimens. Each of them is unique, except the print-works.

H.Ch.v.T. Your work is preconditioned by the steady contact with and between people. This led you to China, where you worked together with students at Universities and Academies. Could you just tell me something about the experience you had there?

R.M. I stayed in China together with Bernard Fibicher and Mingjun Luo-Wagner. Another project is in preparation there. My stay was determined by the work with the students, by visits to studios and exhibitions, by many discussions with artists and professors, and not to forget – by the excellent cuisine. In the streets as well as in elegant restaurants.

The work in China raised a lot of questions concerning the meaning of form and artistic work. I'm right in the middle of it. It is disturbing and exciting that my reflections always include doubts. Am I right?

Well, the roots of artistic reflection there today are not based on the excellent works of the Chinese tradition like calligraphy or miniature. I mainly found art styles from schools in Paris, Moscow or New York. Contemporary art usually shows part of its own cultural tradition. In visual arts, I didn't find this, but I did in every-day-life.