

A Citizen Amongst Citizens

On Seraphina Lenz's Long-Term Project "Werkstatt für Veränderung"

Like border rivers, the large streets of Berlin divide the districts, separate them into dark districts here and colourfully renovated ones there, into those with old or new buildings, with many young people or with few. Life on the other side of the roadway is different. In the neighbourhood of Neubritz, located in the Berlin district of Neukölln, in spite of the fact that roadways also divide the residential quarter, everything is, nonetheless, somewhat different. Although Britzer Damm and Buschkrugallee delimit the quarter from neighbouring areas, the new segment of the motorway in the middle of it does not divide the residents but rather brings them together. This is because the lid over the underground artery was closed and Carl-Weder-Park was planted. Since 2001, it has been the centre of the redevelopment area with its new and old buildings in which primary school children and pensioners, Muslims, Christians, and those without a religion, the self-employed, the unemployed, and the employed, young mothers and young men from gangs all live. The park is thus something like a communication hub for all these different people, and a community centre without a roof or a programme. Here, the "Werkstatt für Veränderung", an art project led by the Berlin artist Seraphina Lenz becomes active in the summer. It can already be recognised from a distance as a result of the light blue colour with the butterfly logo. Light blue shines the container for the Werkstatt, light blue are the overalls of the cleaning team that removes the paper and dog dirt from the lawn at the beginning of the art season: a calming colour that seems has a sculptural effect in the green of the elongated park. Light blue, therefore, were also the 1,000 helium balloons that tugged at benches, fences, and the hands of pupils, or simple flew into the sky in 2002, the first year of the Werkstatt. And light blue were the deckchairs that the Werkstatt hired out the following year and that have since then given the park the appearance of a lido — today the neighbouring pizzeria is responsible for hiring them out. In the summer of 2004, the Werkstatt then dedicated itself to the subject of light, with actions including an evening of readings under standard lamps, a one-week lantern workshop for children, and a meeting of neighbours, who lit up their park with light sources that they had brought with them. All these actions temporarily changed the look of the park — by means of a usage that goes beyond the possibilities suggested by the park architecture, and gradually alters

the impression of the green area. On the evenings of lights, for example, Carl-Weder-Park seemed inviting and cosy rather than instilling fear, as big city parks otherwise readily do in the dark. The Werkstatt für Veränderung works on commission for the Bezirksamt Neukölln, which held a competition as part of its search for art to provide the park with an identity. It, nevertheless, does not make commissioned art in the traditional sense – what the commissioning authority ultimately receives is open. Since the Werkstatt does not add anything permanent to the landscape architecture but rather seizes on the way the park is already being used in developing its concepts. Although it can plan, the realisation is in the hands of local residents. The Werkstatt only makes an offer, and this is what distinguishes it from much artistic work in the urban environment. It neither installs sculpture nor offers art education, nor does it do project art, and thus does not establish social facilities in cooperation with local residents or plan an entire park, as occurred in Hamburg. In short: the Werkstatt does not work toward a concrete result. One could instead call its actions “performative interventions”: one-time actions that briefly intercede in life in Neubritz. Nothing remains of such an action except for memories and souvenirs such as postcards. It is specifically this that makes the actions so memorable: Do you still remember when...?

The Werkstatt does not provoke. It adapts itself to the surroundings to such an extent that the signature of the artist remains recognisable, but the main actors are the neighbours. Without their participation there would not be a project. As a result, the Werkstatt has to respond to criticism and suggestions, change plans, be responsive. Seraphina Lenz comes again each summer, prospectively for ten years. This is also something that distinguishes her project from those of other artists, who leave once their work is done and only learn how neighbours and passers-by react to it indirectly. The Werkstatt für Veränderung is, therefore, also about conversation and exchange, about give and take. It is, so to speak, very democratic: not in the sense of a form of government, but rather in the sense of participating with equal rights in the designing of public life.

The Werkstatt für Veränderung continues the tradition of Public Art, or more specifically: of Community Based Art. Yet in contrast to its well-known predecessors in New York or in Hamburg, its goal is not the creation of a new area, not a community garden or even an entire park that comes into being as a result of discussions with local residents or particular demographic groups and many shared hours of work. Seraphina

Lenz also does not see herself as an instigator of initiatives concerned with improving specific areas of life, such as those established at the suggestion of the Viennese artists' group *Wochenklausur* to address the medical needs of the homeless in Vienna or to bring together the jobless in Berlin and advise them. Concerned here, therefore, is not "intervention art (as *realpolitik*)", as the art historian Holger Kube Ventura once called it. One might instead speak of a modest offer — an offer that the local residents around the park in Neukölln can take advantage of, or not. This might bring to mind the famous library that Clegg & Guttman once set up in control boxes on streets, in which neighbours were able to exchange books, and which were meant to function on a foundation of trust. But Lenz's *Werkstatt* seems much less sculptural, and is based not on trust alone. The artist, who is present every year on weekends, retains control of dates, objects, and actions. Trust, is, however, also called for in *Carl-Weder-Park*. The artist has to be able to rely on the fact that no one obstructs the process or even destroys what has been created, and the local residents have to be able to rely on the fact that no one wants to push them to become better or also only other citizens. And still more: the *Werkstatt für Veränderung* seems to strengthen trust in the everyday on site and with the public and in the abilities of the people around *Carl-Weder-Park*, be it with the notebook full of recipes for good traditional fare from around the world that the local residents have put together, or with a film in which the children of the neighbourhood demonstrate their abilities. At first glance, this might seem to be a modest aspiration. It is, nonetheless, possibly a fitting response to an open debate that persistently assumes that citizens behave in a faulty manner: be it with the accusation of insufficient integration, be it with the absurd assertion that Germany is having "the wrong" children, be it with the insinuation that people allow their children to eat too many chips.

With its democratic approach, the *Werkstatt für Veränderung* addresses a criticism of the urban environment as above all artists themselves have expressed it. In the 1990s, the intention of furnishing the urban environment with further sculptures, statues, and objects, which had to compete with the numerous interventions of authorities and companies in the city space and whose presence the other users of the city had not requested, seemed increasingly arrogant. Too much is too much. In addition, the question circulated of what right artists had to force art on the eyes and ears of local residents and passers-by without their being asked, to accost them with sensory

impressions and manipulate their perception in places where they were, however, also only “citizens amongst citizens”, as the sculptor Inge Mahn once formulated. The Werkstatt für Veränderung is familiar with this misgiving. Seraphina Lenz, therefore, also intervenes in such a restrained way in Carl-Weder-Park because the building of the motorway has already changed so much in Neubritz — and art should not become the icing on the cake of urban development impositions.

Art in the urban environment makes a more modest appearance. The era of making expansive gestures is over for now; and those who attempt them nevertheless know that they are mostly citing their predecessors in doing so. There are, however, also more mundane reasons than civic modesty for the restraint. On the one hand, the empty public coffers: when a local authority allows itself art in the urban environment today, then only still rarely with high follow-up costs, as in the case of a fountain sculpture. On the other hand, sculptures, statuary, and installations increasingly benefited the state and the economy in the 1990s, assisted tourism and city-marketing, manifested the national desire for representation, for example with art at the new government buildings in the German capital, and aided in inscribing company identities onto the cityscape, such in the case of DaimlerChrysler and Sony at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. If artists, therefore, favour fleeting interventions over more long-term positioning of works, then this is also to withdraw their works from the clutches of the state and the economy and to insist on acting on their own mandate, even if the state or the economy provides the funding for it. Moreover, the aggressive spread of advertising in the urban environment actually competes with art there. Hardly any sculpture, hardly any mural can grab as much attention as the advertising banners that shroud the entire length of tower blocks. And the time for sound installations in the urban space may also be over if acoustic advertising actually comes to the streets, as has been debated at many a convention. It is, therefore, no surprise that sculpture and installations intended to stand in the open air have thus fled to state garden shows and other protected spaces.

There, they escape the questions currently being asked about the sense and purpose of “art in the public space”, and, accordingly, about what at this time can be considered as the public space and as the public sphere. The street, which has long not been the marketplace it was before the invention of the telephone, radio, and automobile? The

Internet with its confusing forums and newsrooms to which not everyone always has access? Media, such as television or newspapers, which only allow one-way communication and are mostly in private hands? These questions have gained urgency as it has become clear in recent years that societies are becoming fragmented, that milieus — separated according to education, income, and lifestyle — are distancing themselves from one another: in the metaphorical, discursive sense as well as on site in cities. Under such conditions, it is difficult to act publicly or even to participate in designing the public sphere, especially since the languages of the milieus are distancing themselves from one another, and especially since no equal access to the institutions of political participation prevails. Discourse in which a shared language is practised is, however, a possibility, a first step toward establishing a public sphere in fragmented society: in conversations of “citizens amongst citizens”, in encounters of actors in the urban environment in which individuals can grasp political subjects, as the sociologist Saskia Sassen hopes for the residents of global cities in her book *Losing control? Sovereignty in An Age of Globalization*.

In the small neighbourhood of Neubritz, the Werkstatt für Veränderung stimulates such conversation; it also stimulates it nonverbally through utilising creative elements such as deckchairs and lamps.

Thus, in Carl-Weder-Park in Neukölln, social action does not turn out to be sculptural action, as Beuys once defined it — instead, in the everyday life in the park, sculptural action expands to become social action.

Claudia Wahjudi, 11/04

The German text appeared in a shorter version in 2004 in the second workshop letter of the Werkstatt für Veränderung.