

Interview: Folke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser

Folke Köbberling

interviewed by Susanne Hauser

Editors' note: In the following interview, Folke Köbberling, Professor of Artistic Design and Director of the Institute for Architecture-Related Art at the Technical University of Braunschweig, outlines the concepts and working methods that she developed with Martin Kaltwasser († 2022) between 2002 and 2015. Their extensive joint work centered on site-specific interventions in public spaces in cities, primarily in Europe, but also in Canada, the USA, and Mexico. The boundaries between artistic, architectural, and urbanistic working methods were always at stake – with consumerism, economy, and, above all, the urban public sphere up for debate.

Susanne Hauser | *How would you describe your's and Martin's common work and intervention in urban space?*

Folke Köbberling | Our work from 2002 until 2015 dealt with mundane urban public space and its transitory nature as a reflection on more general social processes. In spatial and sculptural site-specific interventions, we tackled issues around the public domain, grass-roots participation, and self-organization, market economics, mobility, shelter, sustainability, and the scarcity of resources. The potential for social conflict was inherent in all of these. We got involved and presented a range of possible, practical, low-level interventions that could be implemented with very few resources. We introduced temporary buildings, structures, and subtle changes into the public sphere as examples of empowerment and also the temporary appropriation of urban space by means of »unofficial« strategies and the privatization of public space. The sparing use of resources was a central concern of our work. One example is our Bulldozer. We used construction

waste, rejected and surplus material from industrial production, as well as donated goods that consumer society disposes of. We hoarded and sorted these materials for subsequent sustainable reuse. Beyond creating art and design objects and architecture, we initiated actions. Our work was almost always site-specific and evolved from forging local research and locally sourced materials into spatial, object-like architectural constructions that are characterized by their apparently imperfect finish. Many of the constructions were executed in a collective DIY effort with support from local helpers, as anyone is capable of tinkering about with their hands. Simply finding and assembling material relies on collective input and support. Therefore, all of our efforts are imbued with a participatory spirit and open-minded inspiration.

How would you describe the interaction between art, architecture, and urban society in your practices?

Art, architecture, and society are inseparable. Art reacts to society, architecture reacts to social changes. Martin was an architect and studied art for three years. I am an artist and also studied architecture for a few semesters. Throughout this time, we didn't ask ourselves whether we were making art or architecture, but rather crossed the traditional boundaries between art and architecture with our art practice. By integrating artistic concepts into architectural structures, we created spaces that were both aesthetically pleasing and functional. Martin has often spoken of our work as social sculpture – with reference to Joseph Beuys.

Where do you see the potential of initiating collective forms of work to intervene in urban environments and in political and economic forces that shape contemporary cities?

In our work, we saw the potential of collective forms of work, primarily in the active participation of the community in the design and use of urban spaces. We believed that by involving residents and local interest groups in the design process, the needs and perspectives of residents could be better taken into account. By creating these spaces of opportunity, we created an environment where people can come together, participate and, in the best case scenario, use this DIY technique to develop creative solutions together that are both functional and aesthetically pleasing. In



1.-5.

The bulldozer (18 x 6 meters) was built out of thousands of straw boards that were to be thrown away at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, which slowly disintegrated with the first rains. Today, it has become a habitat for flora and fauna.

Bulldozer, Vancouver, 2010-ongoing. © Folke Köbberling & Martin Kaltwasser.

urban environments, these collective approaches can lead to the residents' increased identification with their living space and thus strengthen the sense of community. They also open up opportunities to respond to local problems and promote sustainable, innovative approaches to improving the quality of life in cities.

To what extent did, and does, working at different places, in different cities shape and influence your practice in particular?

For the most part, our joint works have always been site-specific. Defects, such as traffic, consumption or, at the beginning of our work, the criticism of the Planwerk Innenstadt (i.e. urban masterplan for the city centre of Berlin, adopted by the Berlin Senate in 1999), have contributed to reacting to them with artistic means. Every place has its own specifics and by intervening we were able to react specifically to local conditions and challenges with our artistic practice. For example, the search for materials on site, which is now called »urban mining«, is different in Berlin than in Munich. It is different in London than in Cambridge, in Zurich than in Warsaw. By using recycled materials, we were always dependent on finding them in the various cities. We were the archaeologists of these found objects and at the beginning of our research and our projects we traveled through the city with this in mind: Where and how much is thrown away here? In England, our temporary houses had a very earthy colour scheme, whereas in Munich, the signal colors of the cladding boards made them very colorful. In Zurich, the material was not to be found on the street as it was in Berlin. It was much more hidden, but all the more opulent for that. For example, we could have worked with the remains of an entire demolished social housing estate there, from roof trusses to bathtubs, which was demolished during our stay due to insufficient returns. The different situations on site had a considerable influence on our practice.

Can you tell us about some of the results of your interventions?

The reaction to the »White Trash« work from 2008 was very different to what we had expected. We placed the white-painted and 20 percent larger wooden replica of a luxury SUV (Audi Q7) on the central reservation of Karl-Marx-Straße in Berlin-Neukölln. These »sport utility vehicles« (SUVs) have been extremely popular in German city centers since 2005 and are getting



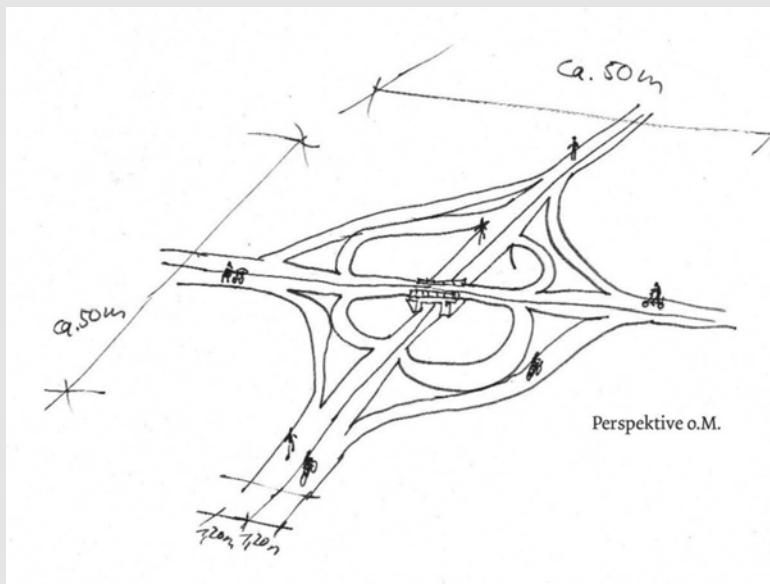
6.-7.

White Trash. Wooden replica of SUV, Karl-Marx-Straße, Berlin. Below: Exhibition at an art space in Prague. © Folke Köbberling & Martin Kaltwasser.

bigger all the time. They are characterized by extreme fuel consumption, their armor-like, martial appearance, luxurious interiors and four-wheel drive. The huge vehicle occupied several car parks for four weeks. Exposed to the elements, the white dream car was supposed to swell up in the middle of the passing traffic, warp, gradually mutate into rubbish, and provoke reactions from the public, possibly arousing aggression, or being sprayed or destroyed.

But nothing of the sort happened. The wooden SUV was so well built that it withstood the weather unchanged. Many passers-by came to inspect the huge wooden car, took souvenir photos, and some people even stroked the vehicle, apparently assuming that someone had erected a monument to the real-life model. In an art space in Prague, we then presented the vehicle pierced by a concrete pillar. In a Berlin gallery, we finally drove it full throttle into the wall.

In the same year, we created an intervention in urban space that almost didn't survive the opening. In a park in Wiener Neustadt, we erected a miniature model of a cloverleaf motorway junction as a walk-in sculpture. The existing park paths led to the motorway junction and were supplemented in an unusual way. With the motorway junction sculpture, a space that had previously been spared from car traffic was filled with a symbol that is clearly associated with the automotive world. Pedestrians and cyclists have no place at motorway junctions. Motorway junctions are the perfect intersection structures for highly efficient mobility. The fact that this motorway junction was installed in a park meant that pedestrians and cyclists were able to enter this otherwise inaccessible space in the model of the highway intersection – in contrast, the motorway junction invaded an area that was previously closed to cars. The sculpture, on which many young people had initially worked, was destroyed two hours after the opening. The broken slats read: »This is our space.« We thought it was great and wanted the motorway junction to remain standing as a monument in its destroyed state. City marketing, who considered it bankrupt, disposed of our destroyed work the next day.



8.-9.

Autobahnkreuz [highway intersection] in Esperantopark, Wiener Neustadt (AT). © Folke Köbberling & Martin Kaltwasser.

What role do artistic techniques, architectural knowledge, and design play in your practice and interventions? Which techniques and instruments were and are important for your work?

The concept of bricolage, i.e. only working with what is available, has had a significant influence on our work. Our works are often experimental and performative and involve the use of installations, sculptures, and site-specific interventions. They often use recycled materials or materials found on site. By applying artistic methods, we manage to redefine the function and aesthetics of architecture and initiate a critical examination of the built space. Our design approach is strongly characterized by the idea of »do-it-yourself« architecture and the appropriation of public spaces. An applied technique can be seen as a combination of artistic practice and architectural knowledge to address social, urbanistic, and ecological issues. Our work was, and is, characterized by the use of alternative materials, participatory processes, and the creation of temporary, experimental architectures that are both functional and critical of existing structures.

Where do you see the possibilities for transferring your ideas of intervention to everyday architectural practice, the building professions? What are the difficulties of transfer? What should change in the profession?

The topic of the circular economy has finally arrived in architectural theory. Our topic of the city as a resource, which we also published in 2007, has now become urban mining. It is very good that this practice of using what is available, and also seeing and utilizing the city as a storehouse of materials is being incorporated into the designs of almost every architecture school. Our temporary building from 2008, »Amphis« in England, which was only supposed to stand for two years but is still standing today, shows that we underestimate the material found without standardization. Amphis is a 1,200 x 1,200 x 600 cm two-story, octagonal multi-functional building on the grounds of the Wysing Arts Centre, which we built in six weeks, with a total of 40 volunteers, entirely from found materials on the central square of the *Wysing Arts Centre* in Bourn/Cambridgeshire. The octagonal mezzanine building serves the Arts Centre as an event building and a showcase for extremely resource-efficient freestyle construction. We organized the materials from local building sites or they were donated by neighbors and friends.



10.-11.

Amphis, Bourn/Cambridgeshire, 2008. © Folke Köbberling & Martin Kaltwasser.

The entire cost of the building was £5,000. The building is now used for festivals because of its good acoustics. Amphis shows that we should not be afraid to build with these materials. At the moment, it's still difficult to scale the whole thing, but digitalization has contributed to the fact that used materials can be scanned and then offered directly in an app. The logistics are still difficult. It still counts: Time is money, so a new value system, that puts the material and therefore the grey energy to the fore, is needed.

How do you work today?

Today, my solo works are very material-based. I no longer use waste material from the street, but renewable raw materials, mainly raw wool, for my architecture-related artistic works. Raw wool has also been a waste product for a long time, mainly in Germany, but also in many European countries, as there is no way to process it further. I have been interested for a long time in bio-based materials because they also decompose when they come into contact with soil. I am currently working on three large sculptures made from a wool-cardboard-clay-wheat composite. These will stand in public spaces in Munich for a year from September 2024 and will look different every day as they decompose. A sculptural process similar to the work: *The Games Are Open*.