

“I imagine the surfaces wrestling for their real potential.”

A conversation between Julia Kröpelin and Ludwig Seyfarth

Ludwig Seyfarth: Objects play a central role in your work. You draw them or process them in your objects and installations. First of all, there is the question of what criteria you use to select these things.

Julia Kröpelin: I'm interested in simple objects on the sidelines of an event.

I remove them from their context or wrest them from their scenery. I use film props, that I crop from their filmic environment. Often they are ornamental forms, vessels or furniture fragments. For spatial installation works I look for simple elementary objects that I chose for their textures, colors, and shapes. These are, for example, furniture and furnishings like chairs and beds, vessels, wooden boards, textiles or clothing.

L.S. : And what about the drawings that show folded objects? Do you start from concrete templates? Do you find them exactly the way that you draw them?

J. K.: For this series of drawings I folded the templates out of paper. I shape the form just enough so that one would no longer speak about a pleated structure, but of a pleated object. Then, I photograph the shapes and work from the photos. I draw what I see, and an illusionism of real surfaces develops.

L. S.: Apparently you are interested in the preservation of an ephemeral form, which you endow with almost sculptural qualities. At the same time, what we see is removed from clear definition and naming. So on the one hand there is a form of presence, on the other hand what is shown is removed at the same time.

J. K.: Yes, in the end I care less about the object itself than about the moment of a presence—a shape that is limited in time. I imagine that there is only a short time in which these objects are in the currently visible state before they find a different manifestation. With the paper-shapes it's the idea of yet another folded state. I deliberately work against a terminological recording of the objects. It's more that terms graze them. They come close to language, but ultimately remain non-linguistic. It's about nameless things.

L. S.: On one hand you play with detaching what is depicted from its context, and with that removing it from linguistic comprehension. On the other hand, you always emphasize a material, substantial presence.

J. K.: I investigate the meaning and the nameability of things in the moment of showing. While the medium of representation, the drawing, emphasizes and explores the illusion of representational materiality, it is as if the object, without a relationship to an environment, were removed from its definition in terms of content.

Through the process of showing, of emphasizing, objects seem to step into a conflict with reality. This is also true for the vitrine-works, in which drawings are integrated and in which I framed the drawings with fabric, like a passe-partout. Something like a seam emerges between the different surfaces. For example, the framing fabric texture in *Vase* (2022), has a very different feel than the very realistically rendered surface of the folded paper object. There is a break between the parts of the picture. The fabric highlights the drawing, emphasizes it, and at the same time seems to push in front of it because of the more real texture. I imagine the surfaces wrestling for their real potential.

L. S.: Doesn't this “conflict” also continue on the level of naming, or rather identification? Is it really a vase, as the title suggests? Is the naming in the end an invitation to the viewers to repel it, as it were?

J. K.: At first you get the impression that it's about a vessel, a vase. But an actual vase would never be folded out of paper. And the form that's reminiscent of a vase could develop into a new form just a short time later. For me, the folding itself transports a temporary state and stands in contrast to a closed, autonomous body. Paper is in itself a light and malleable material. An object developed from paper will not remain stable for long if external force is applied. The paper objects convey a state of the just so tangible—the ephemeral moment.

L. S.: Your spatial installations are not themselves in motion, but imply it. There are forms that seem to capture a brief moment, as in the drawings, as if thrown into it and captured by a snapshot, like in BIG BUZZ at the Huguenot House in Kassel. How do you develop such arrangements, including those between different objects or states of form?

J. K.: With the work BIG BUZZ at the Huguenot House in Kassel I was inspired by the half-ruined kitchenette, that was left over from the installation 12 Ballads for Huguenot House which Theaster Gates realized for Documenta 13. Gates had inserted fragments of an old Chicago building into the architecture of the Huguenot House. I attached BIG BUZZ directly to this kitchen counter. The sculpture incorporates many elements of the space in color and texture by repeating them and bringing them into a cycle of movement. Thus, they refer on the one hand to the surfaces in the room, and at the same time to the interaction that took place there in the past. The form seems to float almost weightlessly in space, fixed only by its attachment to the kitchen furniture. BIG BUZZ connects to a transformation that has already taken place at the site and continues a movement that began in the past. All installation works are about states of suspension, which are fed by visible, spatial/plastic elements, or image fragments present in the space - for example from films and other contexts - and at the same time by ideas of time and movement. I start with inner visions and imagine how forms and structures remove themselves from their content based relationships and float weightlessly through space.

L. S.: I don't quite understand how you get from the vision to the installation realized in space.

J. K.: Sometimes the properties of one or two things become the starting point for the development of a sculptural work in space. I reproduce, potentiate, and change things, in part or whole. The idea, the moment of "movement" is the impulse of slight changes and shifts in the surfaces of the things, as if the skin on an object or body were slipping or the substance of the individual parts were passing through different states of aggregation. I change the objects by implying to them an imagined action of force.

With other objects, which I detach from a narrative context, the context of the content is shifted. The original connections, set in vibration, open up and allow for new contact. In the overall context there are recognizable things, others are unrecognizable, slip away, open up, become unreliable and thus elude the nameable. Deformed, copied, and exponentiated in many variations, a moving fabric permeated by narrative structures stretches into space.

L. S.: On the one hand, you emphasize that you choose the objects independently of their meaning. On the other hand, you keep making references, as you did with the space and the remnants of the Theaster Gates installation at the Huguenot House. I see a certain contradiction in that. And at the same time you speak of the narrative. Are you perhaps concerned with the question that I engage in with when curating exhibitions: the choreographing or "curating" of the movement of the viewers in and through the space? Is it a kind of stage for you, too? And how do you bring viewers into a confrontation with the "event" that takes place on it?

J. K.: Yes, I work on a field of motion sequences, in which I place latent narrative structures, that affect the direction of movement—the dramaturgy of the overall picture. The narrative structures, however, are subordinate to the idea of textures flowing through space. They create causal chains of connections and they dissolve them at the same time. Often, there are several

circling narrative strands that bind the moving fabric, and give the emerging place a kind of temporary durability. Their inner plot and inner logic flashes only for a brief moment. I like the idea of the stage very much. I work a lot with my idea of the perception of the viewers. The change between the surfaces is my offer to experience oneself in sensing through the eyes. My sculptural works develop a stagelike model place. The movement, frozen in the works, turned into an image, reinforces the stagelike quality because it emphasizes the difference to the real space. The wandering of image surfaces over changing image supports/objects guides the viewer's gaze. For me this is an important choreographic element.

For the installation piece 4.120 second - A., which I realized in 2019 in the Copper Hall of the former Stasi building OTS/IDStudios in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, a living person was part of the work and brought the relationship between sculpture and audience into an interactive flow. A kind of transfer between objects, space, person, presence and absence took place. The starting point for the installation is a string of glass beads, a prop of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (German title *Liebe*, 1962). Its drawn image is located on a large box, which—in terms of its dimensions like a closet—stands in the room directly next to the protagonist A. This releases the idea that the image of the necklace detaches itself from the surface of the box in order to wrap itself shrinking as a necklace around A.'s neck. When I follow this idea the determination of the place in which A. is located opens up—A. could now also be sitting in the film.

L. S.: But does it need a living person for the play of presence and absence? A puppet could have been sitting there, which the visitors might have taken for a living person at first, as in the photorealistic figures of Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea?

J. K.: I find the idea of putting a photorealistic puppet in a relatable context very fascinating too, but it is something else. When I was a kid, I actually stood in front of Duane Hanson's bricklayer at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, and thought he was real. I often think back to this experience and the suspense that the sculpture triggered in me. With 4.120 second-A. on the other hand, it is the presence and the tension that an actual, living person elicits in the exhibition space. The real person opens a far more heterogeneous and open scenery within the sculpture than a photorealistic doll can, where the level of reception is predefined. A. is, on the one hand, part of the sculpture, on the other hand, through her presence, part of the group of people present. I am interested in the possibility of a fluid relationship between the viewers and the exhibited object.

L. S.: Are then both the living actress and the visitors ultimately part of a kind of "social sculpture," as with Beuys?

J. K.: No, with this I'm not interested in the extension of the concept of art, the removal of boundaries in the social or political space that Beuys was striving for. My investigations are rather immanent to art and remain close to the relationship between artwork and viewer. I try to create and maintain a fragile relationship to reality. With this the alternation between the pictorial forms and also the motif of movement play an important role. Sculpture seems to me particularly well suited, because of its intermedial possibilities of extension. It can be solid and motionless, resistant and fluid, translucent and moving.

L. S.: Is the stagelike presence of both the objects and the living persons, including the viewers, about the imaginary superimposition of real and imagined spaces?

J. K.: In *Der Moment in dem sie Wind davon bekommen*, 2002 (The moment they catch wind of it, 2022) there was a reclining person in a house who could be identified as a part of the overall work by the colors of their clothes and by their physical position within the installation. Between the audience and the artwork an open relationship between distance and closeness

emerged, which was similar to the one in 4.120 second - A. and which could not be clarified for me in a fruitful way.

L. S.: Let's come back to the glass bead necklace. In spite of the narration or imaginary doubling that you develop here, like other objects that you find in films and detach from them, it plays only a subordinate or even no role at all for the plot of the film. On the one hand, you enter into a narration, on the other hand, you move past it, as it were....

J. K.: Yes, it's primarily the props that appear at the periphery of a narrative that furnish the film and are simply there, like the lamp in the opening scene of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*. The film objects are sometimes only lightly touched by the actors—the props are close to them. I'm interested when objects become perceptible only by being cut out of the film narrative. This lamp also formed the source material for the piece *strobeabove*, which I realized in collaboration with the artist Bea Otto, who lives in Aachen, in 2014 for the Bove space in Düsseldorf. There, I drew the image of the lamp as a low relief a centimeter deep into the wall. A light silhouette was projected through a hole in the opposite wall. For a fraction of a second this silhouette rested congruently with the drawing on the wall. Similar to a searchlight, it then moved on, pausing at other spots on the wall, and then resettled on the drawing. So I choreographed the static and movement, drawing and light together. Together with Bea Otto's camera bag that was embedded in the floor, a web of mysterious relations emerged between the empty vessels in the room.

L. S.: Here you have, as it were, transformed the motif taken from the film into a new, abstract film. But first you have to find such motifs, which escape most viewers of the film...

J. K.: I systematically watched *L'Eclisse* in single frames and discovered shots that are not at all recognizable in the cinematic flow of the images. This is also true for an image where the protagonist's head is covered by a balloon.

L. S.: The context of the film seems to be important after all, otherwise you could just take any things you see or find somewhere. And what interests you in particular about *L'Eclisse*? You could have also taken another film and "dissected" it into individual frames. And just now a question comes to my mind that I had wanted to ask you about the installation at the Kupferhalle: How do you explain the title 4.120 second – A. Is *L'Eclisse* 4120 seconds long?

J. K.: The title 4.120 second - A. refers to the 4.120th second in which the glass bead necklace appears in the picture, and A. stands for the first name of the living protagonist in my installation. The cinematic context is important to me in that things come from a structure that takes place between fluid movements and frames. There are different movies that I've watched frame by frame. In *L'Eclisse* I'm interested in the seemingly futile relationship between Monica Vitti and Alain Delon, a perpetual passing of each other. On the other hand, there is a lot of mysterious touching of objects in this film. Viewed in single frames, the couple's touches seem to be transferred to the objects. The objects in the film appear strangely charged by the way they're touched.

L. S.: But the question remains why, with your strong interest in movement, also in the relationship between the static and movement, you don't create moving images or objects yourself. Has that never appealed to you?

J. K.: Yes, I thought about it a lot, if for example dance or performance would be a more suitable medium for me. But when I imagine performing in front of an audience, I immediately lose interest in the realization of a piece, because I then feel that the assignment of roles between the audience and spectators has been clarified in advance. That bores me.

I love theater, but I don't like it when the theater situation takes place in a museum or art space, because in such situations I feel purposefully pushed into a distinct viewing position that makes me feel unfree. In the image, in the installations, I like the theatrical and dramatic or also tragic moment, sometimes tipping over into the humorous.

L. S.: So in the end the "fruitful moment", with which Lessing distinguished the arts of space from the arts of time in his famous Laokoon essay in the middle of the 18th century...

J. K.: Is that so? Yes, I like the image that doesn't move itself, but tells of movement. I'm interested in the ambivalence between movement and stillness. I feel a vacuum that is right in between, and then a jolt, a sudden stop sets in, sometimes it's just a slowing down, that releases something that is not in the picture—a wide, free boundless space.