

ACKERMANN Meuser, in 1982 Adorno wrote for your exhibition in the Kunstraum that it became natural that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, neither in art itself nor in its relation to its entirety, not even its right to exist is now self-evident. What happened since?

MEUSER It was not Adorno who wrote this, because he was already dead at that time. I said it!

ACKERMANN You did?

MEUSER Yes, me, but I am obviously citing Adorno.

ACKERMANN Back to my question: How do you think about it thirty years later? Has art entered new dubious territories in regards to its right to exist? In comparison to the 1980's, has anything changed or has it remained the same? Or has only the world changed?

MEUSER Let's put it this way: My level of reflectiveness has changed. Clearly I look at things differently today, knowledge and experience have totalized while my way of perception, the way I understand the world around me, has sharpened simultaneously. I am able to figure out processes quicker and more precisely and I understand them for what they are. Adorno has willingly exaggerated his thesis: He doesn't want the socialist hero. The fact that he has seen and lived through the mania in the fascist naturalism with its hero worship is what makes him want the nonsense that arises in highly capitalistic art more than the socialist realism. In every case, Adorno is in favour of modernism, but he does say, that there is no redemption with or by art and that art has no right to exist. Sartre takes this even one step further by saying that everything artistic is of no value given the suffering of the people. I think, that Adorno has provocatively exaggerated to offend the social opinion. He himself did not share this opinion, well I, however, never understood him in this sense and his whole thinking process. He never negates the new reality, no he never does ...

ACKERMANN When and how did you realise that you no longer unconditionally trust the materialistic auratic idea of modernism? Now the titles of your works come into play ...

MEUSER Yes, it's a game! But why auratic?

ACKERMANN Well, when I think of your American colleague David Smith for example ...

MEUSER Yes, ok, I know him. (laughs) Yes, I know his works ...

ACKERMANN In Smith's works we can still find an undisturbed relation to the work itself and the work's aura, whereas with you I had the feeling and was right away under the

impression that you were one of the first to render this chronology of the modernism as unreliable per se.

MEUSER Yes, I don't think there is an easy way to translate it. It might well be, that there is a development within modernism itself: if a sculptor like Beuys, who does not believe in pedestals, protests and fights against them, then he does not do this out of sheer fun or out of the blue, no he has a reason for it ... this is also a continuation of Marcel Duchamps' reflections and other representatives of the early modernism. Even Brancusi has overturned this by pointing out that the pedestal itself is already a three-dimensional form. These changing processes are happening all the time in modernism and they are playing a role when I simplify them. I don't work like David Smith in this respect, who, let's say, works more restrictively than I do. I rather play with the banalities of perception, than coquet with them. You own a piece of work from me – Rubelkurs (Rubel currency exchange rate). What has this work in common with the Rubel? Nothing! The title is a synonym for nonsense really. I read in the newspaper that Russia's economy was thriving and suddenly for no apparent reason – I think the demand for oil or gas decreased – the Rubel currency exchange rate plummeted. So I thought to myself, if something like this can happen, I should be able to depict it ... Surely that is nonsense! It is not meant in a literally sense, not like a graphic, not really anything. I simply take some random thing, put it in a box and then the rate goes up or down ...

ACKERMANN When I expand this, go back in time even further – until I reach the Baroque – am I right to say that the sculpture has been definitely freed by you from the sacralization as well as the fetishism? Would you consider this to be biographic and link this to your homeland, the Ruhr area?

MEUSER Yes, absolutely, because I think it has to do with the banalities of language. In the Ruhr area, Germany, people tend to be rather modest than pompous. What sounds like a dialect, is a proper language really, which developed amongst the blue collar workers. They were practically underprivileged – in the widest sense of the word – and they came from all over the world. Around 1900 many people from Poland and from other parts of Eastern Europe came to the Ruhr area during the industrialisation. Krupp, coal and steel were thriving ... people from all quarters of the world came to "sweat away" and live there. From this special situation a solidarity gradually developed that expressed itself in language. You know: "It's alright Karl-Heinz. I come over to yours and help you." That used to be the tenor. Blatant people were not welcome.

who thought that he or she was better than others and acted like a showoff was brought back down to earth. People in the Ruhr area called showoffs: "Lord Muck from the gas factory". If you were on the edge of becoming a showoff, someone brought you down to earth – using this mundane language.

ACKERMANN If this is all so entangled, is one right to say, that your works are present to the viewer, even when they cannot be seen or in other words are not present? Presence in absence etc. What I mean is: Do you have to have a sculpture by Meuser present to realise Meuser as a sculptural moment?

MEUSER Yes, of course! But I think, that this train of thought is unfortunate after all. Sometimes with my works, well every time when the title suddenly develops a life of its own, this might work as an eidetic event in the mind of the viewer. But this doesn't lead anywhere and does not make any sense, because sometimes I want such a mundane sensuality. There are works that work better than others, but that is not different to other artists. I do think that the image of the auratic sculpture only works to a limited extent anyway. It has been deteriorating for a while now, but that is not my fault, it has been attacked for a very long time now or you could say devoured. The very crucial question is now, how it is done now? That is the big question.

ACKERMANN Yes, how is it done now, 30 years after the exhibition in the Kunstraum Munich? ... What does this mean for our actual creative work? We have the banality and we have the irony where you can attack the auratic. Is there progress for you?

MEUSER There is no progress for me, neither in the conventional nor in the basic meaning. The reason for this is probably that progress is not a simple matter. In the art world, specific topics, phenomena or characteristics are being looked at, well always just a little part, a segment of the world or society gets dealt with. I don't know to what extent art is reacting to this ... In my opinion it would be much better, if the artist commented on it, because art that tries to solve problems mostly fails ... If one tries to make art functional, to assign a function to it, then it goes wrong – and that is exactly Adorno's argument against socialist realism. This doesn't mean on the other hand that as an artist you cannot reflect on social contradictions or problems. That is possible and should reflect in the works – but not obvious or superficial, but more hidden in the background or as a subtext. Beuys' use of forms is not really the non-plus-ultra anyway ...

and content-wise is he dealing with the improvement of society. For Jupp [Joseph Beuys] it developed in a different context, in a different situation and under the influence of another Zeitgeist ... You have to consider that he was a soldier in the Second World War, as far as I know he was flying a dive bomber. He was experiencing this whole shit and knows first-hand what he is talking about ... then he was thrown directly into the revolution of 1968, student's revolution and so on ... this was reason enough for him to try and bring society into the art world as a topic. He tried to put an emphasis on it and promoted it. As a sculptor he tried to oppose classic and traditional ways of expression, he wanted to overcome them and show, that a sculpture can be a way of expressing thoughts, too. I do not know, if it is possible to make it functional and visible that a sculpture can be a form of thinking. Or was it overreager, what he did there? I claim that he was a wonderful sculptor and that he sometimes used over-conscientious elements as a basis for his works – just for fun – and he laughed himself silly about it. Funnily enough – and I am really offended by this – did Beuys often relate to Rudolf Steiner and he, as everyone knows, was not really the sharpest knife in the drawer, but more of an intellectual weirdo. Anyway, Beuys sometimes said highly amusing and odd things ... In a nutshell: I find his sculptural work to be magnificent, his reasoning, so I think, except as a transformer for himself is sometimes a bit odd.

ACKERMANN Yes, and he was dead certain when handling both media and the public.

MEUSER Yes, towards the end. After a rough start ... at the age of forty probably, earlier in his life he was not.

ACKERMANN Straight forward question: Would Beuys be able to help Ai Weiwei in his current situation?

MEUSER I think he would at least give it a try, yes for sure. Well the question is: what does one have to do to help? If you want to negotiate with the state oligarchy – or what are those high-ranking people called – you have to become “friends” with them first, so they would listen to you. You want something from them, so you have to talk to them nicely, honestly and good and try to understand how they are thinking and acting. You have to immerse into their culture, instead of confronting them with our way of thinking and the demands deriving thereof, that leads to nothing. This can only lead to confrontation. It is quite obvious, that we think absolutely differently about this than the Chinese. Ai Weiwei has certainly voiced criticism – criticised the system, but if he wants to get to the really influential people, if he wants to

achieve something positive, then he surely has to do the exact opposite. To mouth off is a very Western way of doing things and in terms of criticising the Chinese government highly counterproductive! ... No one knows how hard the Chinese are reacting and if there is torture in Chinese prisons. There is clearly a risk that they will harm Ai Weiwei.

ACKERMANN Back to Germany: In Düsseldorf you were a very small and manageable group, weren't you?

MEUSER Do you mean the 1986 revolution or the academy in Düsseldorf?

ACKERMANN I mean the art academy and the years after your graduation.

MEUSER Yes, those were times of many disputes. Well actually we were arguing and debating fiercely all the time. You could say, that it was like an elite training centre for arguments. This wouldn't be possible nowadays, you would embarrass yourself completely and it wouldn't fit. Düsseldorf has changed, too! That was a phenomenon of this period, a temporary training centre of disagreement.

ACKERMANN Nevertheless, what are system and organisation for you?

MEUSER Alright, system and organisation, how you are putting it, I do have it already. I always work according to the principle: PLAIN AND SIMPLE. I can work with far less material than most of my colleagues, as you know. I am not really fond of this exuberant baroque pomp and I like to take the mickey out of it ... I did say to you before: "Franz, it would be much nicer, if it was a bit less!" Your canoe is totally fine, but I think you used three t-shirts and it would have been perfectly fine, if you used only one. It would have served as a metaphor for (all) the others. That I work with less material than most artists, is maybe due to the fact that I come from a generation, that was used to work with less material: Minimal Art, Concept Art, etc. – whereas, when the pure Concept Art gets too brainy for me, then I get ironic again. (Meuser and Ackermann laugh)

ACKERMANN Your unique ...

MEUSER ... you know, minimal ways of expression are the basis. Like I said, American artists mostly worked like this. Obviously, there were also European examples, but they had more of a, let's say, emotional basis. We are not talking about "die Wilden", although I was friends with one of them: I liked him mostly for his jokes, not for his art. His art was perfectly fine, but I think it was not really important. I particularly liked the thoughts and jokes he

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into his work. The mixture of what he said and what he painted and how he did both. It was all done with a lot of charm and I enjoyed it a lot. I saw a certain meaning, because according to my opinion Kippenberger was a moralist in petto, he was more of a philanthropist than a cynical misanthropist ...

ACKERMANN Would a character like him survive nowadays? Or does he really belong in another world and another time?

MEUSER Characters like him always have a comeback and no one can determine when this will be. Where you come from, nobody would have thought that you will be a popular artist one day. It is practically impossible to know where he or she comes from, how they are thinking or what they will become one day. Or would you have thought that a man from your neighbouring village will be Pope one day? ... You know, this question is a bit pointless really.

ACKERMANN Do you think that a big Meuser exhibition in Hong Kong, Delhi or even in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow would make sense?

MEUSER In Moscow, I would definitely see myself in a European line, so this would fit. But I would ascribe this to my interest in the Russian avant-garde and to my general interest in the Russian art. Being able to feel the Russian mentality, was a great experience. The enthusiasm used to be real, even I felt it. It is not the American middlemen alone ... it is above all the Russian avant-garde that incited me. Artists like Ivan Puni or Vladimir Tatlin ... and of course (Blinky) Palermo, who was concentrating himself firmly on Barnett Newman ... He was particularly concentrating on those Indian colours, on Barnett Newman and on Mondrian. By doing so, he had a very small, well circumscribed, but very noble example. And of course, there was Edvard Munch ... I admired him, although he was sometimes a bit heavy for me, but I knew him since I was a little boy. I was looking at his work from an early age on: I was in Oslo at the age of fourteen in the Munch Museum. I never thought about painting like him, or worse, like Ferdinand Hodler ... Not for all the money in the world!

ACKERMANN And what about Delhi?

MEUSER If I really had to, but I am so not interested in Hong Kong. I am sure, that it is a very interesting city, but not as a place for an exhibition. This vague modernistic obsession, the hustle and bustle ... Tokyo as well, too exhausting for me. I know what is going on in their minds, or at least I think I do – you can never know for sure, but you think you do. Would you like to exhibit in Tokyo? You have had an exhibition there already, hadn't you?

ACKERMANN Yes I had. That is because I am asking, because I have made my own experiences there.

MEUSER Moscow, yes. Delhi, too – albeit for another reason, which I cannot explain to you further, because I cannot find any words ...

ACKERMANN That sounds like you are somehow criticising all those transfers, the globalisation, the Biennials, etc. I believe, that to some extent we get to see very weak art. With the question I asked I wanted to turn the tables, I want to tell everyone, if they want to think globally, they have to show Meuser in Hong Kong – and not just anywhere, but right in the city centre. That would be smashing and would trigger a boost of consciousness ...

MEUSER Do you really think?

ACKERMANN Yes, because at first they would be totally overwhelmed.

MEUSER You may be right, let alone, because I avoid any kind of literalism and I am full of saucy cynical maxims and ironies.

ACKERMANN ... you have used the given material perfectly!?

MEUSER Yes I have!

ACKERMANN A reference to reality – is this still a relevant view or is it true that we are all trying to escape to abstraction, to being able to survive or in other words ...

MEUSER ... well I asked myself the same question. You are asking a lot of crucial questions, if I may say so, questions of crucial substance. My answer is this: Give it a try! See for yourself, if this form of abstraction is a trick or not. We cannot avoid naming parts of your work, too: your work is full of hints, that you want to reflect reality is quite obvious, right?

ACKERMANN Yes, Meuser ...

MEUSER Finally, you do want to know if the abstraction is somehow a hidden model for the big fail and flop: you are hiding behind the abstraction, because you cannot express yourself any differently or better. The Russian avant-garde had a definite wish to change society, to uncover it, to disentangle it and to free it from this gingerbread style. They partially managed to do so, but the whole movement collapsed ... It was suppressed and kept small. Even Lenin who really should have helped to establish this movement, has not put any effort in it ... Stalin has smothered this movement immediately.