

'Walk-in – Walk-on'

Max Bühlmann's art has always been visually accessible: first of all there were folded tile floors, inspired by the paintings of the early *Quattrocento* or Jan Vermeer, which formed visual corridors into the painted picture, then the pictures really started to come towards the viewer, by becoming three-dimensional and object-like and beginning to stand on their own feet as 'furniture objects'.¹ Beside the elaborated form, the use of colour always played an essential role in this process. Subsequently, these two components – pictures and objects – repeatedly influenced each other reciprocally, with specific experiences in one medium determining the respective next step in the other. The theme of the transition from a painterly to a real space can be regarded as one of the basic features of Max Bühlmann's oeuvre. Although these reduced spatial objects of the 1980s display a certain formal relation to Minimal Art, Bühlmann dispensed completely with this ideal superstructure, tending to continue the tradition of concrete art: colour and space are the central design elements of his art and he strives for clarity and reduction. The essential difference to the classical concrete and structural art of the 1960s is the fact that systematics and serially arranged investigation is not a theme in Bühlmann's work, objectivisation of a standpoint and an analytical approach do not interest him. On the contrary: a quite individual approach unites apparently divergent components: "Feeling meets severity, the narrative meets the abstract, the unequivocal meets ambivalence."² An immanent personal experience encounters a deliberately chosen severe and reduced formal language.

"The Exit from the Picture"³

As achieved in the art of the 1960s in a great variety of ways, this signifies, when focusing on Bühlmann's work, endless possibilities of extending the themes arranged on the painted surfaces. The pictorial spaces of painting were turned into a spatial relationship between the object and the white wall of the gallery, or consequently the real surroundings. However, what is typical in Bühlmann is the fact that this decision is not an absolute one in the sense of a linear development, but rather signifies that a permanent recoupling of the two media is taking place. Therefore it is only logical and less astonishing that the first of the large-scale walk-in spatial objects, *Der Mähdrescher* ('Combine Harvester'), which dates from 1992, has a chalk base surrounding it: all the surfaces, both outside and inside, have been treated according to this classical method of preparing a painting surface. Furthermore, the walk-on sculpture reminds one of the rear of a large panel painting, the structure of which is visible. The surfaces are divided into the individual compartments by means of strips of wood, thus serving at the same time to secure the stability of the space and the rhythm of the surface. The same arrangement of a visible construction of wooden strips is sometimes also seen in

Bühlmann's panel paintings, for example a wall object dating from 1990, although no structural necessity is given there. In *Malerkapelle* ('Painter's Chapel', Kunsthof Zürich, 1996) the strips of wood, which determine the construction, become determining painterly elements in the interior of the space: the sun that penetrates the cotton covering determines the effect of light and shadow in the walk-in picture and thereby the atmosphere of the work of art, in accordance with the state of the sun and the weather conditions. Although the body is enclosed like a container and can only be entered by means of small low opening, that transparent interactivity between the interior and exterior is achieved which characterises all of Max Bühlmann's walk-in sculptures. The two sculptures that were made in South Korea (*hothouse Y* in 2003 and *hothouse O* in 2005) display the same transparency, although the two found forms, with the exception of the entrances, seem to be hermetically closed from the outside.⁴

The Framed View of Nature.

In addition, *Hothouse Y* displays a further characteristic of the walk-in pictures: namely, the deliberately calculated view of the outside from the inside, which provides the external space with a definite frame. In this case, the viewer's gaze is directed from the central point of intersection of the three legs the Y to a view of three different landscape situations: to the mountain, the lake and the forest. The specifically chosen place for the respective sculptures forms part of the integrative component of this work of art. *Begehbare Bild* ('Walk-in Picture') which was executed in 1999 for the Gasteil Estate (Lower Austria), is a complex double-shell construction that provides multiple views upwards, outwards and inwards as a result of the chosen location on a slope. Through its yellow building material, industrially produced switchboards, this sculpture is not only a luminous body in itself, but also a container for a lively play of light and shadow as a result of its open construction both upwards and towards all four sides. Nature as an object of viewing and at the same time as an actor itself! This walk-in picture also clearly shows the inexhaustible number of pictorial opportunities that are incorporated and await discovery by the viewer.

Anlegestelle, ('Mooring'), which was erected in 2002 for the project *Artcanal* (the Zihl Canal running between Biel and Neuenburg, CH) is in a more elegiac mood, partly on account of the use of a dark, enigmatic building material but also due to its location beside the water. The orientation of the main view towards the river is what determines the transitory character of this sculpture, the opening upwards here tending to take on a more transcendental character, although basically it might well be compared to the yellow *Begehbare Bild*.

The Entrance into the Pictures.

Whereas paintings impose a certain frontal perspective upon their viewers, in sculptural pictures the latter become collaborators, they are required to participate actively in creating the form of the artistic work, to a certain extent they become actors on the stage of art. *Propyläen* ('Propylaea', 1998, Galerie Change in Rome) displaying severity, conceptual clarity and mobile wings which demand this interactivity, is directly connected to the sculptural spatial situations of the 1970s, which we know from the work of Dan Graham, for instance, or still earlier that of Charlotte Posenenske, whose *Tripterous Sculpture* of 1967/68 is a bafflingly close initiative although made for differently located circumstances.⁵ Posenenske's sculpture is a 2x2x2 metre large cube made of wooden panels, the side walls of which can be swivelled and therefore can (and should) be moved to different positions in the room. The five wings of Bühlmann's *Propyläen* (240x240x40 cm) can also be revolved on their own axes and are intended to be moved by the viewer. The alterable positions of the individual wings create a walk-in structure of architectural proportions, which demands activity on the part of the viewer.

This status of the viewer, which departs from the level of pure perception and moves towards a level of action is likewise to be found in the Minimalism of the 1960s. The basic difference which should once again be noted here is that Max Bühlmann's walk-in sculptures repeatedly seek a link back to painting, or alternatively their principles are to be found in painting. *Pentagon* (Zeughaus Innsbruck, 2003) demonstrates this correspondence: its body, which towards the outside has an extremely bulky and severe effect, proves to be painterly and light on the inside, with the apparently heavy form dissolving completely in its core in a play of light and shadow. A painting dating from the same year with the matching title *Pentagon*, elucidates this symbolic relationship: the spatiality of the picture is composed of five surfaces that are sharply distinguished by colour, thereby constructing the space; the space of the sculpture on the other hand is dissolved by the refined arrangement of the construction on the inside.

A further walk-in sculpture, this time located inside (*Begehbare Skulptur 04*, ('Walk-On Sculpture 04', 2004 at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne) combines sculptural and painterly qualities even more emphatically: the colourful surfaces of the sculpture are unequivocally arranged for their painterly effect, solely serving the purpose of pictorial expression. Through the views into and through the box, the sculpture enters into a playful dialogue with the white space of the museum, reacting to the rational architecture by opposing it with subtle

diagonals and bringing its pop-art coloured surfaces into the relationship, only to then withdraw them the next moment as the puritanical whiteness of the external walls define themselves as allies of the white cube. A further component is added to the permeation of space and surface through the figure of the viewer, who can appear either framed or fragmented, as a puppet on the stage or even as the beholder of a spectacle.

Max Bühlmann's latest sculpture, *Gelbe Skulptur*, ('Yellow Sculpture', 2006 at the Kunstpanorama Lucerne) accords the viewer yet another role: that of space researcher! Upon entering a walk-in structure comprising yellowish switchboards immediately behind the entrance to the exhibition space, the visitor is suggestively guided into the dark interior of the sculpture, although there would actually also be a short-cut into the white space of the gallery!⁶ Inside the sculpture one is faced with the decision to walk into the white space of the gallery on one side, or into the black space of the black box on the other side: the viewer is standing at a parting of the ways and is asked to choose between media. However, the walk-in sculpture is deliberately given central position.

In a similar way to Constructivism, Bauhaus or De Stijl, Max Bühlmann follows a route from the panel painting to sculpture, to the border of architecture, without ever really transcending that border.

Elisabeth Friedl

¹ In the 1980s a series of cardboard objects were made which were placed against the walls and displayed a furniture-like character. A series of wall objects, painted "little wooden boxes", is an appropriate example of how the interplay between the body and the colour became a central artistic theme.

² As formulated by Dorothea Strauss in the programmatic text on the current exhibition *Ordnung und Verführung* ('Order and Seduction') showing from 6 April to 1 August 2006 at the *haus konstruktiv* in Zürich. According to her, the severe and absolute nature of the classical concrete and structural art of a younger generation of artists is broken up in favour of a new balance between reason and feeling, between distance and nearness, between a diffuse atmosphere and precise clarity.

³ The notion was famously coined by Laszlo Glozer on the occasion of the exhibition *Westkunst*, which was shown in Cologne in 1981.

⁴ The form of *hothouse* Y derives from one of the characters of the Korean alphabet (Hangul) and the closed circular form of *hothouse* O can also be found in Hangul.

⁵ Exhibition catalogue, *Charlotte Posenenske*, Galerie im Taxispalais and Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen, 2005, illustration p. 89)

⁶ The exhibition is entitled: *Weißer Galerie, Gelbe Skulptur, Black Box und Rotes Büro* ('White Gallery, Yellow Sculpture, Black Box and Red Office'). Through the yellow sculpture the visitor either ends up in the White Gallery, or in the Black Box, where videos by Susanne Wallimann can be watched. The Red Office, which borders on the White Gallery, is defined as a political communication space. Oil paintings are shown in the gallery as the second pole in Max Bühlmann's work.