

## SHIFTS

Felix Schramm in conversation with Stephan Berg

Stephan Berg:

How would you describe the relationship between space and sculpture in your work?

Felix Schramm: For me there is no autonomous sculpture, it is always dependent on the space. I came to my specific spatial concepts through the question of sculpture of spatial location.

B: To what extent does your work deal in a critical sense with architecture, for example in the tradition of somebody like Gordon Matta-Clark ?

S: In principle, I'm not all that concerned with architecture, but quite generally, with spaces, with the sculptural issue. I employ basic architectural structures only in order to, as it were, lever them out. I'm more concerned with the question of displacement. I would call it de-categorisation, a kind of dissolution of existing structures, reaching a point from where I may proceed with my work into other areas

B: Especially as you often construct your own walls and your own situations, so that you can then create the interventions.

S: Precisely. With my own construction I can simply work more freely. If I remove something that already exists, on the other hand, I must always leave at least a third standing, because of statics. If I construct this then I have the greatest scope for development. This turns it again into the sculptural setting in which practically everything has gone through my own hands, which is why every single element can be weighed up, controlled and influenced.

B: In the context of your work you once talked about a pneumatic visual space. To what extent is this associated with criticism of classical 'white cube' ideas?

S: This is not associated with any criticism of the white cube, I even need it. Pneumatic space is the right term, if we are talking about the spatial experience of the sculpture. It is like the surface tension with a glass of water that is too full, whereby the space is subject to a certain physical pressure. It is physically tangible as it were, and this interests me a great deal. It becomes something that is tangible, not just visually, but really sensually.

B: Could this be interpreted such that in a certain way, it is more about the processing of a potential than the actual current space? that it is about an activation of space as a form of possibility?

S: Yes of course, as a form of possibility, but then I immediately move out of the context, which is an architectural space. I always try and transform it then to other levels, for example with drywall material, which with its fibrous edges, where something breaks off, is relatively unarchitectural. So you quickly come back again to other areas, which by association can be reminiscent of landscapes or geological structures.

B: In nearly all works there can be found an interaction with positive-negative forms, with volume, but at the same time also with emptiness.

S: The negative form is just as important in sculpture as the positive, and when you have understood this you work consciously with empty spaces as well. I arrived at this work through an artistic process in which I worked in a manner related to the space, and then new and surprising openings were formed while I was dismantling the work. Through empty spaces, through taking away, through negative shapes, new lines of sight and new possibilities were created. In the new works, I really have reached the point where the negative in itself is again interwoven with the positive form.

B: When I spoke about the pneumatic visual space, you defined this more precisely and said that you are actually interested in the space. When encountering your works, however, I have the feeling that, on a certain level, they also have something to do with the visual, not least because through the colours alone, the connection can be made to some extent with the concept of an expanded concept of painting.

S: Of course a certain amount of visualness is also involved, and pictorial questions are processed automatically, simply by the fact that I use colour very deliberately.

B: What do you mean by 'using colour deliberately', how can this be visualised?

S: There are various levels. If I have a spatial body, a sculpture for example, in which one drywall element is white and is close to the ground, then because of the colour I would not define this element as the floor, but rather as a wall or ceiling. A black area is associated more with cellars, which are insulated on the outside against water. On the other hand an intense orange colour is probably not interpreted in an architectural context. This means that you can, through the use of specific colours, control the situation to the extent that it leaves the architectural sphere and drifts into other aspects.

B: What is your method of working when one of these large spatial sculptures is created? Do you work towards the actual work using sketches or collages?

S: I work mainly with models that I create, that is, with three-dimensional sketches. This has to do with the fact that my works never have one dominant perspective,

but always have very different viewpoints, which are interwoven with one another. In this respect my drawings are three-dimensional models, made with oddments that have been left over from the clearing away of old works. I began making these models so that - when the projects got larger - I could communicate visually to my assistants what I was looking for in the respective work. Because any normal technician would not do this if he could not visualise it in front of him. Another factor is that computer and 3D simulations are not really my thing. By working with models, I realised that you work with them in a very different way, and at the same time, you can also include randomness in the process. A large work that weighs 4 tons, for example, cannot simply be turned around. With models, you don't have all these problems that are inherent in sculptures from a certain size. And it is precisely such coincidences that I appreciate very much when I'm working.

B: And you allow this to happen?

S: Yes.

B: Although the need for control in the work is also quite clearly visible.

S: Yes, I allow it to happen. A work can, through random factors, end up quite differently to how it was first conceived. This happens unexpectedly of course, and is built into the conventional work steps. Chance must offer a meaning to the project, but the moment of the interpretation is not determined in advance.

B: Do you see yourself as a classical sculptor, who operates in the field of tension of material addition or subtraction?

S: Some things are quite simply joined together layer by layer, but things can also go very quickly back to a modelling aspect, in which I also deform things and bend and distort them. In this respect, there is both something constructive with me as well as the sculpturally additive and subtractive. Quite different strategies are interwoven here. One consists of taking away, in creating openings. The other is aimed at distortion, that is, at the border where two things break out. And then there is also a method of integration, directly using an element from another sphere, which has been left over from a previous work, and which is now deployed again or simply applied. And the overall effect is for this either to function as a parenthesis, or as an assimilation and merging, depending on the situation. These are all basic structures that I handle, although originally I come from the sphere of the sculptural, of modelling.

B: I find a number of works to be almost theatrical, in a certain way stage-like. Are you interested in this aspect?

S: This is not my prime interest, but I think it doesn't work without the theatrical.

B: Why not?

S: This lies in the nature of the matter. If you bring various levels into your work like I do, then a staging takes place. "mettere in scena", staging, is actually the right term to describe this, and then you land automatically at the concept of the stage. These are always spatial stagings which produce a spatial experience.

B: Could you say that your work plays with a productive paradox of creating a situation which on the one hand invokes an emotional involvement in the viewer, but which is then simultaneously cooled down, because the entire situation is to a high degree artificial and fabricated? And is it not possibly the case that for the viewer the layer of the stage-like, of the theatrical, is created precisely because of this ambivalence?

S: Yes, I can subscribe to that. Although this procedure is not subject to any conscious calculation, it is, however, accepted as a process. If I went about things differently and absolutely wanted to reject this form of theatricality, I would presumably drift off very quickly into redundancy.

B: Your works are, notwithstanding, or perhaps even because of, their abrasive, fragmentary character, completely well-balanced, composed and highly aesthetic. Are you ultimately interested in harmony and beauty?

S: If you set a thing very precisely, whether it be to let it to have a light effect, or be hovering or particularly cumbersome and inflexible, you automatically reach a point where something is found to be aesthetic. In this respect, I also include this in my deliberations. I think that beauty is always created if you reach the crux of the matter.

B. Do you oppose the term beauty?

S: No, I don't oppose it at all. Art implies beauty. However, there are always aspects in my work with which I deliberately attempt to undermine the moment of beauty. This is the case in the first version of "Ringelringelreih", which initially didn't actually function at all. It first had to be destabilised. With this I mean that from one perspective, the work seemed as if its individual elements would develop no connection to each other. What was previously seen to be harmonious seemed from this perspective to "fall apart". But this was precisely the reason why the work was coherent in the end. I am fascinated by such moments. But things don't work entirely without beauty, for the simple reason that the human dimension is a very important factor. Everything is attuned to the human size, and then you are immediately within an aesthetic discourse which has to do with proportion, harmony and also with beauty.

B: Your works could be referred to as perfectly formed fragments. Which for me raises the question as to whether you exclude right from the start the idea of the whole as a possibility with your specific aesthetics of the fragment?

S: There is a need for the whole. However, I believe that the whole, the idea of wholeness today has become unachievable. But it is not the case that I am against wholeness. Rather, I compensate for it through certain fragmentary structures.

B: In what form does this happen in concrete terms?

S: Through all the questions that I can ask of sculpture, space and human dimension. What interests me most is undermining and dismantling an area. It's more like a strategy of decomposition, in which I question and analyse all fundamental components. In doing so, I use architecture as a basic premise, so that I can move from there to another direction. Robert Smithson once coined the term de-architecturisation, which also describes my problem very well. Structurally I'm interested in creating a shift, and then looking to see what comes about, what happens there. To enter uncharted territory, as it were...

B: Through moments of destabilisation

S: Yes

B: In this process of destabilisation, in this contemplation of the dissolution of specific certainties, do social or socio-political considerations play a role?

S: Fundamentally my work exists more on a work- and form-immanent level, at least it is not directly politically oriented, although I am also aware that there is no unpolitical art. In this respect my work always contains a socio-political aspect, and one which I do not reject, but I also do not explicitly draw attention to it.

B: What was the catalyst for the new works, which in certain aspects demonstrate a proximity to your works so far, for example, with respect to the relationship between gap and volume, or fragment and space, but which in other aspects are also very different?

S: One of the catalysts was the work "Savage Salvage" in Holland. The front area of the work was connected by a corridor to a room situated behind this, the floor of which was compacted with clay. This room section with an interconnecting function consisted for the first time of vaulted surfaces, that is, volumes, which were formed using wall elements made from rib lath. Previously I had always worked with surfaces. Now, I was interested in what happens when concave and convex shapes occur next to surfaces, forming different type of volume. In addition, I also wanted to create works that due to their size create a different physical presence. And

finally it is always interesting for a sculptor to include the human figure or something organic. These three factors were what drove me in this direction. I went to live in Rome for a year, working only on these issues.

B: I believe you also worked with an Italian props manager or theatre director there, who also made sculptures?

S: Yes, he makes many models for the theatre. I looked at the negatives that were made to create his shapes, and I used a number of them. That is, I moulded found objects and included them in other existing forms. The rest was modelled.

S: To a large extent these are silicon negatives, some of them also of your own body.

S: Yes, when something was missing, I took parts of myself, but also of guests who visited me. Some objects underwent a four- or five-fold moulding, and because of this there is always a different grain in the material and an alienation in the shape.

B: Whereby pigments are frequently taken up into the sculpture. The use of colour is indeed something that connects these new works to the others.

S: That's right. One of the first works was a torso. Actually, I just moulded an eight-year-old boy who, from his stature, seemed like a small but fully grown man. I cast him in two different positions, from the front and from behind, and joined the two together into one form. The material for moulding was pigmented in three different colours. Seen in this light, colour is material and penetrates the entire form. The material was then pressed into the negative, whereby the sculpture was given a camouflage-like surface. The coloured areas created by this fragmented, so to speak, the shapes of the sculpture. But there also works in which the colour is applied later on, as is the case in the works with drywall elements, for example.

B: In the exhibition "Head and Holes" in Thomas Flor's gallery in 2009, the impression was also given of a spatial composition logic, as if the individual fragmentary sculptures were placed such that the viewer could put them together in his mind, that he could practically pull together the individual fragments in his thoughts. Whereby at the same time, in turn, this relationship between gap and volume, between presence and absence, again plays an essential role as well, one which is very similar to the large sculptures. Is this observation correct?

S: Yes, that is spot on, above all because there was a very special situation with the exhibition. I had three or four weeks set-up time, which I really didn't want, but it was the summer holidays for the gallery and Thomas gave me the key and said: take a look. I thought I would just come with my things and with my luggage and simply leave them there, a new and liberating feeling, I thought, but then I spent

three weeks working on location, some of the works then became spatially connected and integrated. It was also very interesting to see what had been created in the studio in the exhibition rooms, but then the autonomy of the individual works immediately disappeared.

B: But really they are already intended as autonomous works.

S: Precisely.

B: Which in this context, however, are then handled in an almost modular manner, like the individual elements of a larger whole?

S: Exactly, I also think that this is the most exciting way for me. In Nuremberg I had also put together elements from the various work cycles, and certain parts were then inserted elsewhere. One part here is again from Nuremberg, but now in an entirely different complex, the audio component is missing, but I always try to create a clear spatial effect on various levels through the interaction of heterogeneous elements.

B: You alluded to the Nuremberg work and beforehand as well to the inclusion of sound, for example via record player. Is sound for you an additional level of processing the space?

S: Yes, I think that all the senses play a role with three-dimensional things. In my studies I focused at the beginning on smell. I have always been fascinated with including other components in the work process, and this idea with audio came about in terms of content in relation to verbal articulation. The starting point was records of children's songs, sung by a children's choir, and a second hole was drilled into the record next to the existing central hole. If you now place the record on the record player off-centre, it will wobble, causing the language to shift, and at some places to disintegrate entirely. But as the listener you can still understand this, at least in part. The moment of the basic and very banal shift turns up again: a slight decentration from the centre, and immediately you're in a totally different cosmos. The fact that by chance the German language fitted better, rather than English, I didn't know beforehand. But ultimately, this was quite crucial. German in this way sounds like a really wicked fairy tale, but does not have the grotesque qualities that the other language would immediately have, that is, English or American. But these are all factors that only became apparent during the process, as it were.

B: This just about brings us back to the concept of shifting, which you used yourself before to talk about the sculptures and about a specific form of viewer experience that you want to create through this. This works in a very similar way to the example with the record. Here there is also a starting point, which certainly lies in everyday experience, for example in an everyday spatial or physical experience, but which,

because of a specific shift, suddenly creates a perfectly new reality. Could the various threads of your work possibly be summarised through the concept of shifting?

S: Yes. I would even go as far to say that the shift that I use is usually expressed in the form of a warp. This idea of the warp is for me a very nice visual concept, to outline more clearly the point I'm trying to make.

B: The warp, almost as a possibility of escaping the usual three-dimensional structure of our normal spatial logic, to reach another dimension?

S: I don't know if this would get you to another dimension, but I can certainly use this to question connections and take them to another level. Perhaps everything is a warp, in the sense that the warp at some point is seen as normality. These are all issues that are very exciting.

B: In my eyes the subject of the model, and the model-like space, plays a large role in your works. This is seen in the large drywall sculptures as an elaborate construction, which embraces not only the concrete sculpture, of course, but also the surrounding space. You develop your own space, as it were, for your de-architecturisations. This results in a kind of deictic level of reflection and distancing. I also see this model-like component in the new works, especially as you create a separate space for each of these, with their own references, so to speak, so ultimately you always have to first keep on creating your own situation, without which the work cannot even begin to prosper.

S: That is exactly right.

B: Actually, you always precisely construct the space that you want to have for your work, which is, I think, where the idea of theatrical logic in your work comes from.

S: This may well be the case, because right from the beginning there were always works that I couldn't properly categorise and integrate. Ultimately, I then took the complicated path, by constructing the space for them. With the new sculptures I put fragments together which are so porous that they actually no longer function at all in spatial terms. You could now say that in terms of sculpting I have actually failed, because in a fundamental sense this displays too little stability. But it is precisely this porous fragility which seems impermanent, unstable in the space, that I want to position in such a way that it is preserved in a fragile manner. To this extent a precise spatial setting, creating a specific spatial atmosphere, is a crucial requirement for these works to function. To me this is like a machinery with which I can build up a structure to link all possible things together. In this context the Merzbau by Kurt Schwitters comes to mind. An incredible idea, all the things that are involved. It is a system, so to speak, that you cannot really imagine in its

entirety, you simply always forget many things, because it has such a huge complexity, but nevertheless it is a unit. And in exactly the same way I can connect things to one another in my system through this building together, perhaps even spacious objects with small-scale ones, or building material and these iron reinforcement rods, which seem a bit like a cage. I can integrate traces of material, remains of other processes and all these things, and use them to create a tableau that I find totally fascinating.