

## Conversation

### Participants:

IV Hans Ulrich Obrist

TS Thomas Scheibitz

IV I would like to begin with the question of how your work relates to architecture. How do you see the interface between art and architecture? Do you draw inspiration from architecture, or is it the other way round, that your work frequently provides architectural points of reference simply as a reflection of your innate artistic sensibilities?

TS I often get asked this, and I have to say that I am not really all that interested in architecture as such, but more in the... let's call it the architectural subheading of tectonics, the things that are undoubtedly very important for architects. As far as my work is concerned, when a viewer stands in front of a sculpture or other work of mine, seeing it in relation to his or her own physical size, it immediately becomes clear that it is not about architecture as such, because architecture is always related to human scale, to our size as individuals or as a group, to public spaces or ordinary things in the world around us that have been adapted, calculated and made to suit our needs. On the other hand, architecture is obviously a source of formal inspiration for me in terms of how I see and experience a lot of architecture from the 1920s, or also from the present day, where computers play a greater role in developing new inventions and possibilities.

IV Are there links to the 'Gläserne Kette' (Glass Chain) movement and the Alpine architectures of Bruno Taut, Finsterlin and the like? Could we perhaps talk about this? Has it been an influence?

TS No, except perhaps in a more general sense: the development of an architectural idea is influential, but I don't know whether the experience would be the same if I were to see the things actually built. For me, however, the stimulating aspect is the conception, the sketch, the mental exercise, so to speak, involved in developing the idea. My works are concepts and ideas, very few of which have actually been realised. And when Bruno Taut or other architects from that period put their designs into practice, what emerges is very close to... or between social housing and sports stadiums, for example, or maybe a crematorium or something like that, and what is curious is that it has been very realistically conceived; it is designed for use.

Nowadays - as seen for example in the work of an architect I greatly admire, Zaha Hadid - if you compare her designs with the architecture that is ultimately built, which can be perceived as an experience, as it were, or entered, then you see this aspect of social feasibility. A ski jump, for example, would be more appropriate from a formal point of view. Building a hospital would, I imagine, be a lot more difficult. That's the difference between an architect and an artist. The architect is ultimately obliged to address issues of practical application, to think about things like escape routes. In my sculptural work I don't have to do that at all. In fact it's the exact opposite situation.

IV So what you are saying is that your sculptures and paintings are not applicable models...

TS Yes.

IV Because the question of the model was also something I wanted to ask. Yve-Alain Bois talked about painting as model, and perhaps it could be said that art involves non-applicable models, whereas architecture rather involves applicable models. Is that correct?

TS Yes, I would say so. Yes.

IV And what about the model? Is painting or sculpture a model?

TS In my studio system, if I can call it that, the weakest point is reached if the sculpture merely illustrates the painting or vice versa. A model is related to the concept of scale, which in the first instance means a reduction in size. When I make a model out of board or Plexiglas, for example, before I give it to one of my assistants or a workshop to be made it into a sculpture or ,blank' object, then the primary purpose of the model, i.e., the reduction, is simply to provide clarity... it's a helpful tool. If I were to build models on a scale of 1 : 1, then the model itself would almost be a sculpture. The model is not a sculpture, or at least I would want to make a very clear distinction between the two. Increasingly I am keeping hold of the models, but visually they don't actually play much of a role once they have been used. Sometimes they are photographed in a kind of still-life arrangement and thus become photographic works, but that's a different matter.

IV I'm very interested in the term ,studio system'. Bruno Latour once described the studio or the laboratory – scientist's laboratory or the artist's studio in the 21st century - as a kind of art network or actor-network condition. What I am curious to know is - how does a 21st-century studio work? What is the studio system? Is there an actual system?

TS Yes. Well, in my case the studio system means that I have divided the space up relatively equally between sculpture and painting. The point is, however, that in my painting studio no one can really help me, or at least no one can directly assist me, because things are done differently there... I've tried, but it doesn't work. Given the particular way in which I construct a painting and the things that are related to it, it is actually almost impossible for someone to assist me. Within the realm of sculpture - where I make a distinction between sculpture, plastic art and objects - I do need someone to help me, someone who can actually take things off my hands or manufacture something in that sense, depending on how well I can explain it... it's what I always refer to as a ,blank' object. From there I can decide what direction it will take. With the sculptures, the ultimate aim is to create a painted sculpture or painted object, so at some point a particular surface has to be added, and again this can only be determined by me.

IV How many assistants work in your studio system?

TS Altogether there are three people working full-time on the sculptures and one lady who helps me organise my office.

IV I see. And nobody who works on the paintings.

TS No.

IV And what about the drawings, because I have your book here in front of me - *Spielfilm, Musik und Roman* (Film, Music and Novel), which was published by Damien Hirst in London. In fact it is more like an artist's book than a catalogue. Besides painting and sculpture, drawing clearly plays an extremely important part in your work. How would you describe the role of drawing? Does it connect the other two aspects?

TS Yes, drawing is an intermediary step, as it were, in the, let's call it the sketching process, the development of a roughly outlined idea. I always have to have a kind of sketchbook with me; on the one hand that means a digital camera, on the

other an actual sketchbook of the kind we all know, where I initially note down, draw or stick in ideas or things that inspire me, similar works I've seen or whatever, and sometime later a drawing will develop from this. In order to preserve a certain sense of visual order, these sketchbooks are always the same size, which is the standard A4 format or, when I'm in America, the standard US letter format. So first of all these ideas are brought to the same size in a formal sense; then they are laid out next to each other - more or less in terms of content - so as to create a filter or method of evaluating them.

Drawing is in fact almost the most important connecting link between the idea and its execution. Of course I also have to bear in mind the various options available in my studio, the possible ways of using metal, wood, plastics, MDF, etc., which allow me to work relatively independently.

IV And besides drawing, another link, if you will, between sculpture and painting is collage, which is also a distantly related form. This artist's book, therefore, contains drawings along with collaged elements, newspaper articles, notes, stuck-in pages of books, alphabets, holiday snaps, encyclopaedic fragments and so on... you get the impression that it is a kind of huge collection of images and...

TS Yes, it is.

IV ... so I am very curious to know more about this, because I wondered whether it perhaps has a similar function to Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*...

TS No, not really.

IV ... and whether it is systematically organised. How does your image archive work, and where is it located?

TS In the beginning it was very well organised, with images sorted into folders and plastic sleeves and so on, which meant that I was able, merely for my own purposes, to check what material I had from 1969, for example, or what I had collected or seen somewhere in 2000. But in the meantime it has accumulated in big boxes, large plan chests and drawing cabinets, and increasingly I find that the things I come across as illustrations or on torn-out pages can no longer be used in such a direct manner. I have to be able to transform or translate the source material in some way, in which case it doesn't necessarily have to be kept in the form of an organised archive. And more and more things are being added that I can capture with the electronic eye, so to speak. Occasionally I will note down actual measurements - if I see something with nice proportions like a stair, the crossbar of a window or a pattern on the street [laughs]. This is important, for example, if I am deciding whether to include the measurement 2.08 or 2.11 m - which for me is often a big difference - in a sculpture, where it is a question of whether the entire piece becomes a door or whether this is merely a hole in relation to the rest.

IV And what part does text play in your archive? There are pages here such as *Youth of America*, *Barfly* or *Heaven and Hell* where a large number of keywords fill lines or pages. There are also image/text relations: I am thinking here of the Arcimboldo-type collage that contains the terms 'Lieblingsstück', 'Einzelbild', 'Heimat' and 'Virtuosen Reservat'. How does it work with the text?

TS The text... [sighs]. With the text it's like this: the ideas for the text also come from my so-called studio system. The title of a work plays a crucial role, but that role... or at least I try to make it so that when I add the text, i.e., the title, to the work, picture or sculpture, the work controls the title and not the other way round, that the title determines a work. And of course the text also relates to me as a person - English is my second spoken language, and there are also phonetic phenomena or affinities which influence the text. In some cases I like the phonetic aspect of a word better than

what it expresses as language. Take for example the German word 'Himmel' - in English this can be 'sky' or 'heaven'. The visual appearance of 'sky' or 'heaven' as a word is then important to me, and I will use it accordingly in both the German and the English case. And in German I am very frequently interested in the relatively... I don't want to say wilful, but those somehow particular combinations of letters which recall something from our collective memory, or perhaps from some advertisement or other. Seen in conjunction with my painted or built objects, this generates a different meaning, where on its own it might not.

Ultimately this has to do with visual parallels - which are obviously perceived differently by every viewer - or images that most people are familiar with to a similar or equal extent, like our so-called collective memory.

IV And what do you think about Douglas Fogle's statement, which appears as a text extract in your book, referring to the linguist De Saussure: 'As the modern Saussurian linguistics has taught us, however, meaning is not inherent in the words themselves but is a product of the combination with and difference from other words.' Is this the kind of combination...?

TS Yes, yes. It's... for instance, I once held a lecture at an art academy and opened with this example from the world of music: in the early 1980s, Malcolm McLaren is walking through the streets of New York and sees this relatively tall Afro-American guy wearing a punk T-shirt. So Malcolm McLaren asks the guy if he knows what the T-shirt, what punk represents. It was, I think, a Sex Pistols' T-shirt with the slogan 'Never Mind the Bollocks'. And so the guy says, 'Yeah, it's great', and 'I love punk music', and so on, and then he says, 'Why don't you come to our party to hear what we're doing?' - the CD is put together like a kind of audio play. McLaren is taken aback, so he goes along, and it turns out that this was the first concert by Zulu Nation, and the guy on the street with the punk T-shirt was Afrika Bambaataa. That is - as I see it - the instinctive perception you can have of things, even if they are presented clearly in the form of writing, or as a slogan or in combination - you somehow feel instinctively drawn to them.

The only thing that surprised Malcolm McLaren at that moment was that an Afro-American was interested in punk. Was that a helpful example?

IV Definitely, yes. What also occurs to me in connection with De Saussure is the question of whether Lévi-Strauss was ever an inspiration for you. I visited him a few weeks ago - he's a hundred years old now. He has spatialised his book *The Origin of Table Manners*, meaning that in his office there is this wonderful object, cut out of silk to create an almost tree-like structure, whereby the structure is primary. I wanted to ask you whether your work has a connection to structuralism. Is structure primary for you?

TS You could say so, although I am not very familiar with his work, but I do feel very committed to structure as such... maybe without sticking an 'ism' on the end of it.

IV Are there other authors, books or theories, other things that have been like toolboxes for you in your work?

TS Yes, well, in my case the toolboxes are perhaps those things which are exactly opposite my own field, i.e., the genres of painting and sculpture. I am more likely to draw inspiration from books, films or music than to be examining some painter's late Renaissance work, or for my table to be constantly loaded with art-historical books. That's not the case. Greater experiences actually occur outside the museum [laughs] or art gallery. My work does of course have a classical aspect; I greatly admire classicism - or what is currently termed classicism - and have also explored this from

an academic perspective. Ultimately, however, it doesn't matter whether it's a Michelangelo drawing of an elbow or the label from my bottle of mineral water I have here on the table in front of me - these are first of all compared on the same level. They both play the same role in this visual experience. Then, later, I think about what I might be able to use. I make no clear distinction between high culture and pop or low culture, or whatever you're meant to call it. And there are always... there is a changing list of the top... [laughs] the top three or top five films or tracks, which can lie anywhere between the so-called high and low.

IV So what are the...? Right now it's August 2006...

TS [laughs]

IV So what's on your list at the moment?

TS Well... there was one list, it had to do with... it's pretty kitschy, of course, but it had to do with age - the age at which artists achieved some particular thing. It was 26. I had Jimi Hendrix's album *Electric Ladyland* on the same reel as *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. So these are three things I think are really good, things you can engage with. My examples from the world of music mainly come from the area you could call extreme music, which is close to the genre of heavy metal. Anyway, I look for things that are trying to break away from genre conventions... but not obsessively, of course.

IV In a more playful manner, then.

TS Yes, definitely. It's not like... a great track can also be three minutes long. That doesn't bother me [laughs], but then it's about achieving a different effect. Staying on the subject of music, one band I've followed since the very beginning is Fantômas, for example, or Melvins.

IV Fantômas? What makes them so interesting from your point of view?

TS Well, it has to do with what I was trying to describe before. It's a, a... you know... well, you wouldn't know right away which basket to put them in, whether they're a rock band or a heavy metal band. And a band like Fantômas will play quasi-heavy metal or jazz versions of film music or music from animated films. And they're pretty successful in what they're trying to do, I think.

IV A lot of unexpected connections are also made in your book *Spielfilm, Musik und Roman*. Taking the title as a starting point, under the heading , 'Spielfilm' (movie) we find above all - and rather surprisingly - painting, under 'Musik' (music) we find drawing through to sculpture, and under 'Roman' (novel) it's back to painting again. Can we maybe talk a bit more about the book, and how these different classifications came about? In this respect it really does seem to fit the definition of an artist's book...

TS Yes.

IV ... and so I wondered how you came to this title and these surprising and extremely interesting classifications.

TS Yes, well, I am of course very grateful to Damien Hirst and his publishing house for giving me free reign over this project; it was such a generous invitation that allowed me to devote myself to a project in this way. The title... well, there are a few... I think one is also illustrated here... there are a few A4 sheets filled with closely written text - titles I've accumulated from all sorts of different sources, for example when I've come across an unusual name, a particular piece of technical information or some kind of detail from the end credits of a film. This all gets collected and then combined on a sheet of paper to form visual, textual and phonetic cross-references. It's difficult, because it's always on the verge of becoming too fanciful, but then on the other... how should I describe it? [sighs] Anyway, these are almost surreal means,

or methods we know from Surrealism, how things were combined there - in that we form a connection which is not directly legible on the surface. The three terms I chose - film, music and novel - describe forms of expression for which I have great respect or which give me a lot of input, and of course they represent things I myself haven't mastered and will probably never produce. That is the actual idea behind it: to choose such a title for a book that depicts my entire creative world, but no films, music and novels.

IV So could it be said perhaps that it is about understanding one's own practice better by looking at it from fields that are opposed to it?

TS Yes, exactly. The greatest... as I said before, the greatest stimulation really comes from things opposite my field. When, for example, I have the opportunity to talk to a film director about how he organises his material or puts things together, how he might have to bring forward some bits of night shots which in the film actually come after the scene on the beach, or whatever. I find that really interesting, how you can combine or organise, as it were, everything you need - this ability to abstract. I have a kind of storyboard for every exhibition and every project I do. That is perhaps in turn a cross-reference to a structure you have to have as an artist. Otherwise I would probably lose track of things, also in terms of how I run my studio. I certainly have great respect for writers who spend three or four years working on huge manuscripts and heaps of text.

IV Do you have direct dialogue with writers?

TS No, not really in a direct way. I read a lot about writers - biographies and so on. But that would be... it would be an interesting other connection.

IV Yes, another interface. We talked about music already. It might be interesting to talk a bit more about the references to film in your work. There is a fantastic excerpt here in the book: 'This is Orson Welles.'

TS Yes, that's one of my favourite pages in the book.

IV That gave me the idea that it might be good to talk a little about film. I saw this work of yours which was, I think, shown in a group exhibition; it was a video piece about the end credits of films...

TS Yes.

IV ... a little-known work that Maurizio Cattelan, one of the curators of the Berlin Biennale, showed at...

TS ... Gagosian Gallery, on Auguststrasse.

IV Can you tell me some more about that piece?

TS It started with the fact that I was interested in formal design and certain typefaces. There was also a small... as a kind of initial prompt, a small reference, a short newspaper article that I seem to have mislaid in the meantime. It was about - that was the headline - the uprising of writing. Meaning that nowadays many things are turned on their heads or reworked which stonemasons or typecutters once tried to establish as ideal proportions in order to set standards, and that things also have a structure, or a reduced and fundamental standard. The way we deal with writing today means that it can be pushed to the very brink of legibility, that something can be recognised as a logo or that altogether things are almost being used in a sculptural way again. If I take something and transform or decode it and use it in a different way, that is almost a sculptural process, and as a sign the writing or script is of course... How should I put it? It's a quasi-reinvention of script in a distinct new form. Another important aspect of the end credits of films is that the text and image are moving. I find that very stimulating... but more in an intuitive sense... I don't know. Perhaps I can give you an example: I once spent some time in Tokyo, in the early

1990s. I lived there for two months, and of course I was barely able to make sense of the language and the symbols. What is interesting, however, is that you don't actually confuse all that many things when you're shopping in a supermarket, or when you use the underground rail network, which provides a kind of guide system through the city. There seems to be something visual or intuitive that ultimately regulates how our world works, something that has also been internationalised, so we can more or less find our bearings wherever we are.

IV The idea of orienting oneself is interesting, also in connection with the very insightful text by Dieter Schwarz from 2001, entitled 'View and Plan of Toledo', which makes repeated reference to the idea of a map. Can we perhaps discuss this? I mean, the notion of a map and the geographical reference.

TS Well, I was very keen on the painting *Ansicht und Plan von Toledo*, a late work (from c. 1609) by El Greco, in terms of its structure. Rather than fulfil the conventional documentary task of the panoramic city view, El Greco developed his own pictorial composition. The palace, for example, which in reality is located somewhere else in the city, is here placed in the centre of the painting. Then, however - almost like an apology - the scene as a whole is obstructed by the inclusion of a two-dimensional plan, as a form of documentation within the three-dimensional landscape.

IV I see what you mean, yes.

TS My painting, *Ansicht und Plan von Toledo*, on the other hand, draws its formal inspiration from the relatively structured cover of a Japanese comic. Of course the original image looked pretty much like the typical front cover of any comic, but there was a very curious formal reference that I used for my own purposes.

IV That's interesting, because it's a black-and-white comic and... you can see how it expresses its freedom in black and white; it's a matter of translation and... it's not about appropriation. A lot of artists have appropriated images from mangas and comics.

TS Yes.

IV Can we perhaps talk a little more about this freedom of translation, and whether computers play a part in this or not? Has the computer changed the way you work?

TS No, computers really don't play a big part in what I call my studio system. In fact I myself don't use a computer at all; if I have a question I'll pass it on to someone else who then does what is necessary with the computer. In my work, the most important thing really is finding a forum that enables me to perform such 'translations'. A virtually 1 : 1 computer-based rendering or imitation is not something I am very familiar with, nor does it possess sufficient value for me.

IV I see.

TS For me, the concept of translation is - even if it sounds quite generalised here - the most appropriate term; in my case, it's important to work in a field where I couldn't make the things I make with any other means or tool. The medium of drawing, sketching or painting means so much to me if only because all of the things that occur to me, or which I try to put into practice, actually possess the greatest possible independence in that particular medium. That's the most important thing for me - being independent and having a forum that enables me to translate it all.

IV That would make a very nice closing statement about the value of independence, particularly given that your book *Spielfilm, Musik und Roman* so powerfully demonstrates such independence, but perhaps I can throw in a few more questions before we finish.

TS Sure.

IV Earlier in our discussion there was a latent question we didn't take any further, also with regard to the 'Gläserne Kette' movement: namely, the issue of utopia. On this subject Ernst Bloch once stated that, 'Something is missing'. How do you see it?

TS Yes, well, utopia is of course... I think it could almost be said that the field of utopia has diminished somewhat, perhaps because more and more can now be achieved with technology. A computer can process an idea almost like a magic wand. Today there are so many possible ways of realising every structure, including the most intangible or non-static, of materialising it in some form or other. This becomes increasingly appealing the further you look into and seek forms. From a socio-political perspective, on the other hand, it is perhaps more the case that utopia is on the retreat. Already everything has become very realistic, fewer risks are being taken, and it seems to me that there is much less enthusiasm for that sort of thing.

IV Are there unrealised projects in your work to date - projects that were too large or too small-scale to be implemented, things that were censored or considered too expensive, proposals for competitions that were unsuccessful?

TS No, not really. Well, within my studio system I've been unsuccessful so far in the 'competition' to make an outdoor piece, but that's the next step I'll be working on in the coming year. Generally speaking, I think it's important to establish a healthy balance in relation to your work.

IV Can you maybe give me an example of an unrealised piece of public art?

TS No, not yet.

IV That's something for the future.

TS Yes.

IV Before we conclude, it would be really interesting to learn more about your studio system. Earlier on you gave a very good description of how the system operates. But what does your studio actually look like? How does it look like right now, for example, in August 2006?

TS Well, the sculpture side of the studio system is full of things, but, as I tried to explain before, these are all in a raw or 'blank' state, as it were. It's relatively easy for me to bring the work to this stage, with the help of others of course, my assistants. These blank objects then exist as an idea within the space and can also be combined with each other or stacked together, etc. Ultimately I have to - as could be seen in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale - add the surfaces and the colours to the form, to the basic idea. I have to put a finish on it. Each individual piece has to be able to assert itself in the combination of things, and vice versa. In this respect the studio can sometimes be the better form of presentation, as coincidence also plays a part in these spatial conditions. Then the point is reached where a photograph is taken as a kind of official documentation, clearing the way once more for the next detail or the next idea.

As far as the paintings are concerned, it has always been the case that I prefer to work in parallel. This means that maybe ten or fifteen relatively large-format paintings are always visually available; they stand side by side in preparation for a specific project. And between them there is always space for new questions and considerations...

IV Wonderful! Thank you very much.