

Andreas Fiedler

Art as a Characteristic and Indicator of Change

A conversation with George Steinmann

You work primarily in the visual arts, but you have always been a professional musician as well. What does music mean to you as a visual artist?

Music has always been part of my life—since I was a child—and it still is. I was already gigging as a guitarist in a rock ‘n’ roll band at the age of 14. But what really moves me is Black Blues, in fact, African-American music in general. It’s a constant source of inspiration. I think the blues is one of the most important art forms ever to come out of the USA.

Can you explain your relationship to the blues in a little more detail?

The blues: well, it’s more than just a musical form, more than just a Black twelve-bar song form, a Black call-and-response structure, more than just blue notes and dirty tones. The blues isn’t just about musical form; it’s about passion. It could really be called a way of life: the pessimism of feelings and the optimism of actions rooted in the here-and-now and in never. Blues is the language of the common people, the lament of the abandoned, the cry for freedom, the rage of the disillusioned, the laughter of the fatalist. There is only one defining criterion for real blues: the experience of life itself. That explains its timeless vitality and originality. In this respect, the blues, for me, is first and foremost a way for an individual’s personal emotions to find expression in music.

I take it you are also interested in the blues as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Absolutely. There is a social aspect to the blues that puts the collective consciousness to the fore. The history of the blues is the history of the Black American community. It is the product of artists from a marginalized community stretching from the deep rural South to the ghettos of the industrial cities. The blues is both an artistic expression and a symbol. I find that very interesting.

As a musician you have had a lot of hands-on experience with the blues.

Yes, for instance, I have worked for years with musicians like Eddie Boyd, Margie Evans, Mike Henderson and Grammy winner Johnny Copeland. But even as a student of African-American culture—I studied under civil rights activist Angela Davis in San Francisco—I had some profound experiences that had a real impact on my visual work. Though mainly on an emotional level, rather than in terms of a conceptual decision. Another important influence is Paul Robeson, an almost Renaissance figure, whose name hardly anyone knows these days. Paul Robeson was an incredible multimedia artist. In the 1920s, he became the first Black man to graduate in law from Columbia University. Not only that, he was also one of the country’s greatest gospel singers and film actors, several times named best American Football League player, and a political activist who worked with Martin Luther King. This open-mindedness, this broad range of interests and multimedia approach gave me a wider view of the blues.

So what you are saying is that your experience of the blues has also influenced your work as a visual artist. Can you expand on that a little?

Well, of course, the aesthetic aspect of the blues is something that has always interested me. Right now, I'm reading about the artists Bill Traylor and William Edmondson, who transposed the blues into visual art in the 1930s and 40s. The same is true of hip-hop, which has taken the blues into the present day. Once you have caught the blues bug, you can never shake it off. Even if that means expressing it in another medium and, as in my case, in another culture.

Which means, specifically?

In relation to my visual work, I am interested mainly in the call-and-response system—in the reciprocal effect of question and answer—as well as in the polyrhythms that are manifested in my installations. What is more, “instant composing” and the social cohesion of a band are of the essence. Without communicating and reining yourself in, there can be no magical moments in improvised music. Nor in the visual arts, for that matter.

Let us talk about your work as a visual artist. In your oeuvre as a whole, the work Ruumi naasmine—The Revival of Space is surely of particular importance. Instead of creating your own exhibition in the Tallinn Art Hall, you renovated the building. What made you decide to do that?

In all my projects, it is important for me to visit the site beforehand. It isn't just a question of determining formal criteria or spatial dimensions; it's also about the history of a place and the way things interact in general. The work has to fit in with the place, as it were. Only then do I make any decisions about the kind of artistic intervention I am going to do. On my first visit to Estonia in the autumn of 1992 the dilapidated state of the Tallinn Art Hall was patently obvious. Both architecturally and mentally. In a conversation with Anu Liivak, who was director of the Art Hall at the time, I quickly realized that the very existence of one of the most important venues for Estonian art was threatened. I started thinking about the basic structures, the very foundations of exhibiting art. What possibilities are there of combining art with a culture of responsibility? Given the extremely difficult process of transition towards independence in Estonia at the time, it seemed important to me to formulate an artistic approach in the spirit of universal responsibility that would actually make a difference. The idea came to me spontaneously in a purely intuitive, pre-intellectual way. *Ruumi naasmine—The Revival of Space*, a work in the form of the total renovation of the Tallinn Art Hall. I made this suggestion to Anu Liivak before I left—which is to say, within two days of being there.

And then you set in motion an extensive process of networking and communication. Step by step, you established a multilayered network between Estonia and Switzerland, between art, politics and business.

Yes, an idea that had come to me in a split second sparked off an extremely complex process. First of all, a network had to be established in collaboration with the Tallinn Art Hall and the Estonian Artists' Association—on the one hand with the local authorities and tradespeople, and on the other hand with the relevant authorities in Switzerland. What then followed was not only the clearly visible outcome that still resonates today,

but above all a process of communication between Estonia and Switzerland, between art and business, between diplomacy and cultural policy. The negotiations and discussions over the course of two years with so many different individuals, institutions and official bodies, including negotiations on financing the project, formed an important part of my work as an artist. Construction finally began in the spring of 1994. The inauguration of the newly restored Art Hall—and, with that, of my exhibition, with all the usual rituals of the art world, such as invitations, posters, catalogue, and opening—then took place in February 1995. For the normal duration of a temporary exhibition, the completely empty Art Hall was “on view.”

What was the response?

The work was interpreted in a number of ways—as a performance, an installation, a cultural/political action. Others saw the emptiness of the building as a spiritual gesture or regarded the work process as conceptual art. But for me, it was more than that. It was an act of respect, by which Estonia’s most important exhibition venue was returned to the fold of art. Hence the title *The Revival of Space*.

You often speak of “sustainable sculpture” in this context. I’m not sure I quite understand the term. How do you see art as sustainable?

Sustainable development—in this particular context—means being able to integrate art into the quest for a cultural strategy that has a future. It completely undermines the conventional, traditional concept of Western art. For instance, a forward-looking aesthetic approach involves looking for forms of “lessness” and also explicitly involves a different notion of time. Both of these are aspects of enormous importance in the work *Ruumi naasmine*, as well as in all my other works. Sustainability or “future viability” as I prefer to call it, also has to do with the network inherent in the working process. I am convinced that cultural development and the basic criteria for the future viability of society are mutually interdependent. Which means that there simply has to be a discourse between the various agents involved. The decisive issue here is the question as to whether, and to what extent, art is integrated as a shaping force. In my opinion, the real task of art lies not only in imparting knowledge, but also in producing knowledge. Last but not least, the sustainability of the sculpture also involves the choice of materials and techniques used for the renovation. Art in this context is oriented towards long-term results.

Looking back over your work of the last twenty years, the forest is another important theme.

The forest has certainly been a place of great inspiration for a long time. But the *Blue Notes* exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich is the first time I actually present my reflections on this highly complex entity to the public.

Just what is it that interests you about this theme?

There are three aspects that fascinate me and keep drawing me back to the forest. One is the aesthetic aspect of the forest, especially the primal forest. Another is the mythological aspect of the forest, and finally the scientific aspect—for instance the research into its biodiversity and the issue of sustainable forestry. The forest is a primary indicator of so many things that interest me as an artist. I want to understand the

processes that come into play in forests. There are so many things that we just sense—ancient feelings. We've become too alienated. And yet the forest has always been influenced to a large degree by humankind, and still is, which is why it is ultimately part of our cultural heritage. I am interested in the aesthetics of a forest—all those structures, the chaos of lines, planes and visual layers, the strong contrasts, the changing light conditions. It's a constant visual struggle. Then there is the dynamics of the forest—things emerging, living, and dying all at the same time. Nowhere is there such an omnipresence of the quick and the dead as there is in the wilderness of the forest. And it's so impenetrable, so inscrutable—the forest is the very opposite of the familiar, the civilized. It's also so tactile, craggy. Not to mention the smells—the forest is pure sensuality.

So, the forest is an interesting field for your artistic work on several very different levels.

Absolutely. And the related mythologies are as multilayered as the forests themselves. They are teeming with traditional stories and narratives onto which urban society can project. In this respect, I am particularly interested in the concept of the “primal forest” and in the symbolism associated with the term. On the one hand, the primal forest has always been a menacing place that stands for the unknown, the uncontrollable—either in the sense of civilization unbound, or in respect of “wild” animals like wolves or bears. The generally unreflected notion that there is a natural dynamism involved in chaotic primal forces also fits into this pattern of thought. On the other hand, the wilderness of the forest suggests unregimented spaces, where there is no dominion—a cipher of freedom. It is seen as an alternative to an increasingly controlled and fragmented nature. For example, more than half the people of Switzerland would like to see more wilderness instead of Alpine development. I think that these two scenarios reflect society's highly ambivalent attitude to nature. And, of course, the scientific aspect has to do with my interest in transdisciplinary research. For me, primal forests are places for searching and testing and acquiring insight. When you are working in the forest, there is always a moment when you meld completely with the place, its history and its energy.

You speak about primal forests—how do you narrow yourself down within such a huge field? For instance, there are no tropical rainforests in your work.

Primal forests—forests that have grown naturally since time immemorial under completely natural conditions, practically untouched by human hand—don't exist only in the tropics. There are also such forests in the northern hemisphere. Even Switzerland has some small patches of primal forest. The places I have visited are carefully selected ecosystems, mostly boreal coniferous forests. I'm not looking for anything exotic. My interest should certainly not be misconstrued as some kind of misty-eyed romanticism. Rather, I'm looking for categories that point towards the future. Forests provide a wealth of information relating to the future viability of society.

You have been photographing forests all over the world for more than two decades and have amassed a considerable picture archive. Is there a conceptual framework to this?

The images I have selected are of places that no longer have any clear visual, spatial or social coding. With only a few exceptions, there is no perspectival orientation. I am in the midst of things. Hence the title *Mittendrin, am Rande* [In the Midst, on the Margins]. The

inscription on the picture—the place and date—gives an indication of where the forest is. It was important to me to reveal these facts.

Let us now turn to a recent work from the summer of 2006 which clearly illustrates your approach and your artistic direction. The project began with a commission from the Canton of Bern, which you won through a competition at the end of 2002. You call this artistic intervention in the Bernese Oberland region Saxeten, a growing sculpture. One very special aspect is the site itself.

Saxeten, a growing sculpture is a research project about the extended potential of art for buildings that has a viable future, rather like the Tallinn Art Hall project—it is about overcoming barriers in art. It all began with the Canton of Bern deciding to convert the former Women's Hospital in Bern to accommodate the entire Cantonal Department of Revenue but, after renovations had begun, those plans were scrapped. Since 2003, the building has been part of the University of Bern. After closely examining the core elements of the Department, I decided not to do the work in Bern but rather in Saxeten, one of the Canton's financially weakest communities.

What exactly did you do?

The work consists of three parts—a bridge for pedestrians, a cabin, and photographs. The bridge has two functions: it is a bridge that restores the hiking trail across the Saxetbach that was interrupted by the floods of summer 2005. It is also a symbolic act of crossing a boundary and a symbol of the dialogue between town and country, between center and periphery. The second part, the cabin, is accessed by the hiking trail; it's a place where you can rest, think, or meditate and is available to everyone, irrespective of their background or views. This lends the space another, higher significance. It embraces the world symbolically and invites visitors to the mountain valley of Saxeten. From the cabin there are sweeping views to the north, beyond the valley, to the south into the valley, and towards the Alps. It is a motif from landscape painting, a quote, and yet tangibly real at the same time. The third part is the location of the work in photographs at the University of Bern.

In this project, too, you seem to place great importance on the process-oriented approach and what you describe as "future viability." Your premise is the creation of an artwork that is socially relevant. How do you define this social relevance?

The work defines art as a socially related practice whose potential lies primarily in the development and provision of specific ways of thinking and working: it encourages certain capabilities. This implies a transdisciplinary engagement on the boundary between the world of art and other lifeworlds. The process-oriented aspect and the networking are of key importance here, as is the approach to complexity and uncertainty. All my works are basic research. Typically, they involve synthesis, pointing towards ways of thinking and ways of acting that do not operate according to the categories of division and polarization, but seek systemic connections instead. Disciplinary boundaries are crossed. Creating something of future viability involves a massive searching and learning process. In doing so, the key question for me is this: is art just meant to react, or should its design competence actually contribute to problem-solving strategies? I am convinced that a paradigmatic change towards an enduringly viable society is impossible without the knowledge that can be imparted by art, with all its aesthetic and cultural dimensions.

Transdisciplinarity is the buzzword in this context. Nobody would deny that a transdisciplinary approach is a must in a research-based quest for solutions to complex environmental and developmental issues. But transdisciplinarity has so far been more of a general approach than a methodical one. Where does art fit in here, and what, if anything, can it contribute?

Transdisciplinarity in general is a means of addressing complexity. It is a participatory research practice that offers an alternative to the segregation, fragmentation, and inflexibility of established paradigms. It requires an understanding of the way systems connect, or what scientists would call “system knowledge.” As an artist, I am interested in transdisciplinarity primarily as a principle of research. Findings accumulate within an interactive, communicative and recursive perceptual process. This fundamental principle seems to me to be more important than ever today. Not least of all because social reality at the start of the twenty-first century has quite frankly become far too complex for us to allow ourselves the luxury of over-simplifying it in individual disciplines. The same goes for art, which was, after all, still defined by self-imposed constraints in the twentieth century.

Transdisciplinarity involves participants in a threefold system of reference: their own discipline, the interdisciplinary research environment and the social environment in question. As an artist, you have to come to terms with this situation as well.

An artist embarking on a transdisciplinary process has to accept first and foremost that it means entering an extremely complex epistemological realm in which the vocabulary of the artist’s own discipline and even the image of the artist as such has to be radically reconsidered. Transdisciplinary art cannot be the hermetically self-contained work of a loner. It has to involve networking. I am interested in seeing how things relate to one another, which also means participation and exchange. Not only in the sense of collaboration between the various disciplines of art, but also in the sense of crossing a boundary—and that includes working with those involved in other fields of knowledge, such as independent NGOs, the local populace, and practitioners.

But how do you see yourself as an artist within such a process?

As an artist, I see myself as someone who perceives things, as a specialist in awareness. Transdisciplinarity is a suitable vehicle for the kind of art that not only transports knowledge, but—as mentioned—also produces knowledge.

What kind of knowledge do you mean? Isn’t it a kind of knowledge that cannot be acquired through information and which is therefore not at home in our knowledge-based society?

Knowledge is not just something that can only be grasped intellectually or verbally articulated. Research that relies solely on word-based discourse is of little interest to me. Rather, it is about relating intuitively to reality. Practically all my working processes start with intuitive knowledge. I increasingly trust in this energy, because it is the sum of all my lifetime experience. And, interestingly enough, what you grasp intuitively is never unclear. On the contrary: that wonderful moment between first seeing something and

subsequently thinking about it is enormously transparent—a space capable of creating art.

What about the outcome, the actual artwork? Is it not aimed primarily at an aesthetic experience? Or is one of your goals as an artist to shift public perception from an aesthetic experience to an “ethical” awareness?

The two are not mutually exclusive. Aesthetic experience is still important and will always be important within the subjective space between the work and the viewer. Nevertheless, for me, an artwork is never just an aesthetic object. There are other levels that are of importance in the way works of art are perceived. They fall into the category of phenomena that have neither form, nor mass, nor color, and which cannot be explored by external means. However, this does not mean that these phenomena do not exist—only that they cannot be pinned down. If you consider art as an epistemological medium, it does contain an immaterial ethical dimension and, with that, a universal culture of responsibility, which is to say, actions based on an ethos for posterity.

What do you mean by an “ethos for posterity”?

An ethos for posterity would focus, for instance, on the question of why Western civilization as a whole has ended up in a situation in which—more than in any civilization that has gone before—a steady stream of toxic waste is being produced that places an unreasonable burden on future generations. Or why the one-sided pursuit of consumerism and the acquisition of external, material property has led to an erosion of the inner values of many people. What is more, we are experiencing an increasing escalation of structural violence, with political and economic components. Geopolitical, sociocultural and economic power strategies, the unfettered expansion of a global economy that is spawning equally unfettered production processes, all threaten the limited resources of space and material on our planet. One of the most serious threats of all is the accelerating destruction of biodiversity. It is happening on a scale unprecedented in the history of the earth. Cultural diversity is similarly suffering irreversible erosion, substantially decreasing the range of possible lifestyles and potential future developments. We have no choice but to pose some fundamental questions.

I understand this in principle. These are undoubtedly issues of great importance and urgency. But in what way do they affect you specifically in your capacity as an artist?

The more intensely we reflect on these problems, the more we come to realize that they cannot be treated as individual problems. They are systemic. In other words, they are linked with one another and are mutually interdependent. These problems can only be explained as different aspects of one and the same crisis, which is, first and foremost, a crisis of perception. Perception is also part and parcel of artistic praxis. So much for the professional side of things. These questions also interest me primarily as an individual. Because, art or no art, sooner or later we are going to have to face up to these things.

But that raises the question of where you place art in all of this. What would you say is the purpose of art? Can you outline that briefly?

Where art is concerned, it means asking the following questions: What is the role of the artist in our times? What can art do in the twenty-first century against suppression, arbitrariness, and indifference? I think the days of nonchalance are long gone. Once art addresses the challenges of our own times and the challenges of the future in an appropriate way, it will have overcome the self-imposed isolation of modernism. That means creating art that is based on an awareness of the way things interact, and therefore possesses a new earnestness, respect—perhaps even sets its own boundaries. Generally speaking, I would say that art is a form of knowledge on a par with science and economy. And it gives a culture of sustainability a chance.

If I understand you correctly, you would like your work, the creation of a work of art, to be seen as an act of responsibility. Does that mean that you regard the act of reception—in other words the work of the viewer—as an act of accepting responsibility? Would you agree that many of your works offer an aesthetic experience while at the same time providing information and demanding a reaction?

Yes. At least, that would be the intention. I take that as given. But these are big questions, and there are no simple answers. It takes a long time to come up with appropriate solutions, and for a freelance artist it takes an enormous amount of backbone—especially since the art world does nothing to support this research work. The necessary infrastructure simply isn't there. Even so, I think it is right to make the connection between aesthetic experience and questions of responsibility. And the connection will work if it is regarded as a culture-changing, creative task. This view of things is ultimately about hope. If that can be communicated through art, then all the better.

In this context, I would like to talk about another set of works that you have grouped together under the title *From-To-Beyond*. It includes a series of photographs taken in Russia in 1995. These relatively small pictures give a sobering view of huge industrial complexes. As documents, these photographs are oddly unspectacular, but the ecological catastrophe is obvious. What prompted you to go there?

The entire *From-To-Beyond* cycle owes its existence to an invitation from the Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, FRAME. Twelve artists from all over the world were invited to take part in the exhibition *Strangers in the Arctic*, which toured Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Toronto in 1996. We were sent to the Arctic to develop a project on the basis of expeditions. I was allocated the land of the Sami, which stretches from the Norwegian part of Lapland to the Kola Peninsula in Russia.

That's a huge area—which regions did you visit?

In the autumn of 1995, after thorough preparation, and having contacted scientists in Norway, Finland, and Russia, I headed for Murmansk to travel the Kola Peninsula with a Russian guide. The itinerary included a visit to Severomorsk and the nuclear submarine base there, as well as excursions to the nickel smelting works in Montsegorsk, Apatity, and Nikel, and a trip to Teriberka on the Barents Sea. I have never traveled in a region so scarred. It is one huge pathogenic zone caught between primal nature and industrial exploitation. This vast region is fatally polluted and damaged by the huge amounts of nuclear waste in the Barents Sea and on the island of Novaya Zemlya, and by the

gigantic sulfur-dioxide output of the smelting works. To me, this is a *zona* like the zone that plays a role in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*. After the Kola expedition, I spent a week at the Kevo Subarctic Research Institute in Finnish Lapland, where they study the impact of air pollution on the tundra. This experience has also been incorporated into my work.

Under what conditions did you take the photographs of the Kola smelting works?

Conditions were difficult—not only the climate, but also emotionally. Most of the time we were inside a restricted military area where there is actually a ban on photography. So the pictures were taken under pressure of time.

So the starting point for this group of works was on-site research.

Yes, and because of the impression the expedition made on me, I wanted to create a work that would not only highlight the incredible pollution, but also the problem of waste disposal. Where the derelict smelting works and the Cold War nuclear waste are concerned, there really is only one issue: disposal. But how do you dispose of such gigantic amounts of waste? Some of it has a half-life of thousands of years.

Another part of From-To-Beyond is an installation comprising twelve containers filled with plasma slag. The concrete-clad barrels contain anorganic components of toxic waste. How was it possible to create such an installation?

After the expedition to Russia, I was doing some research for my work, which drew my attention to a company in Muttensz, Switzerland. They specialize in the disposal of toxic waste, contaminated soil, and pollution from abandoned hazardous sites. The company engineers were very helpful. They actually made it possible to produce the plasma slag and fill it into the containers that were specially constructed for my installation. The thermal plasma process this company employs involves using ultra-high temperatures to dispose of toxic waste in the form of solids, pastes, and liquids. The waste is put into a plasma reactor and destroyed by a high-powered plasma furnace. Depending on the plasma gas used, this can reach temperatures of 20,000 degrees Celsius or more. The anorganic components of the waste smelt to form a liquefied material that solidifies into an inert material with a strangely beautiful, glassy structure.

Isn't it rather odd for you, as an artist, to be in possession of such containers?

Being in possession of them is not the problem. What is interesting, though, is the fact that these containers no longer had to be declared as toxic waste once they had been exhibited as art. As sculptures, it was no problem to transport them to Denmark, Finland, and Canada. That is a very interesting aspect for me, for it raises questions about the system of waste disposal and, at the same time, about the freedom of art.

It is striking that you use such a wide range of different and sometimes highly unusual natural materials for many of your works. Can you say something about the process of choosing materials? How are these decisions made?

The decision to use natural materials such as essence of mineral water, mineral pigments, lichens, and juice of plants as raw materials for art is a fundamental thing. I call it primary work. By that, I mean: these materials are the starting point for my

research and the active ingredient as well. On the one hand, I undertake research work into physical materials, and in doing so, I enter explicitly scientific territory. But then I also explore the spiritual aspect that is immanent to these materials. I look at how their energy can be channeled and transmitted through the manifestation of art. What I want to do is to place the knowledge of art at the service of a new form of communication between man and nature. The process of finding, collecting, hands-on inspection, researching, and processing—which I have been doing now for 25 years—is just as important to me as the end result. The method is a kind of “anti-technique”; a rejection of the materials and processes with which I am familiar and which, because of my training, I would be most adept at using. My working processes are not routine. They are always questioning; an open territory, an experiment, a process of becoming. It is about trying to redefine the relevance of art.

Let's stay with the materials for a while. I am struck by how much you use blueberry juice in your work.

It was living in Finland for many years that got me interested in blueberries; it almost came naturally because the woods there are full of them. And I've always used blueberries to keep me going on my forest excursions—I love the slightly tart taste. But, of course, there are other aspects that interest me as well. The blueberry has been used as a vegetable dye for centuries. I've been experimenting with the plant for years, applying specific chemical processes to produce tinctures ranging in color from reddish-violet to blue. Chemically speaking, the compounds that produce the color are called anthocyanins. In the berries themselves, the pigments occur as glycosides, which means that they are sugar compounds. The sugar molecules affect the actual color, besides which the pigment also depends a lot on the pH value. These chemical characteristics are given, and I have always taken them into account. But apart from the chemical constitution of the blueberry, I am primarily interested in the fact that the blueberry is a medicinal plant. It has enormous pharmacological potential.

Which would mean that, for you, the blueberry as a medicinal plant is something akin to a metaphor—is that right?

Yes, these correlations are important to me. In recent times, for instance, the main anthocyanoside in the blueberry—myrtillin—has been attracting a lot of attention. Scientists are of the opinion that it has vision-enhancing and antiseptic properties. Blueberries are particularly effective in treating the eyes' sensitivity to light. Myrtillin stabilizes the walls of the small blood vessels, improves the stability of the retinal capillaries and stimulates the activity of the retinal enzymes. These contribute to faster regeneration of the chemical rhodopsin, also known as “visual purple,” which, in turn, improves night vision, reduces sensitivity to light, and prevents the eyes from tiring so quickly. Blueberry-based products are used to help combat shortsightedness and to treat what they call diabetic retinopathy—a disease of the retina caused by diabetes. I find all these aspects extremely interesting. They all have to do with seeing. For me, the fact that blueberry juice improves eyesight is profoundly significant. Working with it as an artist means nothing less than making art with medicine. What a wonderful significance.

Many of your works on paper are treated with blueberry juice—for instance, the photographs mentioned earlier in the From-To-Beyond series. Are there specific reasons for this?

It seemed only logical to use blueberry juice in these works because the blueberry is such a common plant in that region. But for me, it was above all the aspects that I have just mentioned that made it more or less imperative. I had never traveled in such an ecological disaster area before. The region urgently needs “better vision.” This is, after all, the home of the Sami, or Lapps. My expedition also made me realize that the exploitation of nature and the blind faith in unlimited technical feasibility scar all of us. Realizing that touched me so deeply—and prompted me to use blueberry tincture in my photography for the first time. The use of this tincture, which, of course, I produce myself, has always been and still is a symbolic act of therapy in my photographs and in my other works on paper.

Another plant that seems to play an important role in your work is lichen. Are there also metaphorical references here?

My interest in lichens is an interest in a cosmos that has fascinated me for more than 20 years in all its sparseness and extreme slowness. Take, for instance, the so-called map lichen, *rhizocarpon geographicum*, which is also native to Switzerland. It grows at a rate of only four millimeters a century—just think of that! Above all, though, I am fascinated by the fact that lichens are symbiotic organisms. Outwardly, there is no sign of their double nature, but that is what enables the organism as a whole to survive. Lichens are a perfect social compound. And that, for me, makes them a metaphor for a paradigm of networking, mutual dependence, and dialogue.

This obviously relates to your work—these are aspects of elementary importance to your art.

Absolutely. In a time of total individualization, these aspects are vital to my art because it is so important to me to be aware of connections and processes of communication in my work, to a degree that goes beyond mere self-reference. The fact that these remarkable living things—lichens—are highly sensitive indicators of our intensively exploited world also has a lot to do with it. Many lichens react very sensitively to any changes in their habitat. Here, too, I see parallels with art.

I think you have to tell me more about that: art as an indicator? As an indicator of what?

As a characteristic and indicator of change.

Time and again, your works aim to provide insights that supplement scientific knowledge. What capacity for shaping the world would you attribute to art?

Art is transformational energy. It seems to me that it is a matter of increasing urgency to question our dyed-in-the-wool value systems, to rethink the boundaries of various disciplines, even to emancipate ourselves from the hegemony of Cartesian logic which has so starkly shaped our world in the past century, with all the consequences that has had. I am increasingly convinced that a balance has to be achieved between the development of both mind and matter.

And in which direction do you think art ought to develop?

The important question here, for me, is how artistic knowledge can interact with other

forms of knowledge, especially with the life sciences. I would want to see a transdisciplinary discourse, even though that usually involves enormous difficulties. I would also want to see bold and different ways of thinking. I have long been interested in the relationship between Eastern philosophy and Western science, for instance. It seems to me that there is an incredibly fertile potential in the combination of these two models of knowledge. It is only when individual freedom and empathy, thought and creativity, myth and enlightenment merge that the deadlocked paradigms of our time can be overcome. I tend to believe that art also has to push through into these dimensions.

This is also the direction taken by your three-part video installation Metalog, which explores the tension between scientific and aesthetic knowledge in three chapters—Form, Substance and Difference.

Metalog was created for the new Max Planck Institute for Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden. I filmed there throughout the entire planning and construction phase, from 1998 to 2001, and then collated the whole work from the raw footage on the cutting table. The film begins by exploring the contrast between different forms of knowledge, and, as time goes on, it morphs more and more into mutual feedback and the coexistence of the disciplines architecture, science and art. But making connections between the disciplines is not an end in itself. On the contrary, it conveys a sense of unexpected affinities and similarities: plumbing the unknown, striving for new insights. That also involves a special approach to dealing with ambivalence and ambiguity.

What do you mean by that? Was your approach based on a certain premise?

Knowing that views and opinions are relative, I approached the project with as little focus as possible. In the course of my work in the laboratories, I realized that even genes are not cut-and-dried entities; they are actually archetypal primal images. And that a lack of focus, a certain unclarity, is perfectly legitimate in living phenomena in general. This insight was a crucial factor in developing what is now the work *Metalog*.

Projects such as Ruumi naasmine—The Revival of Space and Saxeten, a growing sculpture clearly reveal the extent to which you see art as a socially related practice. You set processes of networking and communication in motion that have a direct impact on social circumstances. But you also exhibit your work in the context of the art world. How do you solve that dilemma? Or, to put it another way: how does the concept of art as a socially related practice fit into the white cube?

You could argue that artistic strategies aimed at achieving long-term results don't need to be in a white cube at all. On the one hand, in order to escape the hegemonic maelstrom of established cultural centers, and on the other hand, in order to question the hermetic structure of the specialized, market-oriented art world. Art should have no need to be shown only in specially allocated spaces. But then again, you could also argue that the act of displacement involved in transposing the "absent" work to the white cube is of particular importance precisely because it provides a forum for the marginalized and is generally a place where transformational energies can unfold. What interests me most is working out a strategy for dialogue in which the confrontation between the different laws that govern these two places and their myths plays a central role. It is not the "either-or" that is decisive here; it is the "not-only-but-also." All my works contain this notion of *And*, which Kandinsky already addressed in his groundbreaking

essay of 1927, although it actually goes much further back—all the way to the fundamental principles of Eastern philosophy.

Can you give a specific example?

Yes, the work *Lofty Dryness*, created in 2003 for Kunsthalle Bern. The starting point was water as a resource in the Alps. The “not-only-but-also” was manifested not only geographically, in the Alps, at source, as it were, and at the Kunsthalle Bern—a classic white cube—but also in the cyclical nature of the water itself, which is not tied to any one place. I did a lot of research, from the hydroelectric power plants of Oberhasli to the water circulation in the Kunsthalle, from the springs of the Aare to the underground aqueducts and the groundwater system of the Bern region.

Your research findings are not published in a scientific periodical, but are manifested in a specific way, as paintings, sculptures, or installations in an exhibition space. Can you tell us something about this process of transposition, about the way the artwork actually materializes?

The research starts with the place. I seek out a dialogue with it, get a feeling for what it is about, just look and wonder; I try to conjure up an understanding of the raw surface of reality on the one hand and the underlying phenomena on the other hand. You have to immerse yourself in a place, absorb it, before you decide on any specific form of intervention. The shape of a work emerges in response to the place. It is never about formal-aesthetic issues for me, but about looking at the materials available and their symbolic value, including the context of the *quinta essentia*. The quintessence is the “raw material.” Putting this into a physical, material form in the work is, ultimately, the sum of my research, acquired knowledge, and practical experience. At this stage in the creative process, the language of the material is extraordinarily important—which is probably due to my training as a painter.

And how does that apply specifically to your work *Lofty Dryness* at Kunsthalle Bern?

In that particular case, at Kunsthalle Bern, it was all about water, as I said. That was manifested in the work, on the one hand, by a 24-track stereo installation featuring sounds of water recorded in the Alps and in the Kunsthalle Bern’s own in-house water system, and, on the other hand, by the visual portrayal of “invisible” mineral-based substances, like calcium, magnesium, and potassium, which were applied directly to the wall. In addition to this, I had the rainwater channeled from the roof in copper pipes running right through the walls of the Kunsthalle and throughout the exhibition spaces—in other words, flowing through the art itself. So there was a physical connection between the art and the outside world. And also, I believe, an extremely sensual, tactile experience of water within an art context.

So the results of your research—in some cases research that you have been pursuing intensely for several years—flow directly into your art. Admittedly, transdisciplinary research findings, in particular, tend to be very strongly tied in to highly specific contexts and so, as often as not, they cannot be generalized—or only to some degree. But what do the insights you gain from these processes mean to you as an artist in a very general sense?

We have to try to find out what, if anything, can still be achieved today through the formal potential of creative, aesthetic and artistic knowledge. Whether art, in combination with other knowledge-based disciplines, can achieve something in spite of all the interferences and isolation. Some time ago, I read an article by Adolf Muschg. He wrote about “seeing oneself as the shadow of the other side, instead of standing in each other’s light.” To think of yourself as the shadow of the other side—that really made me sit up and take note. It is a statement of central importance in an increasingly harsh world. What it tells us, among other things, is that in an age in which individualism is valued higher than solidarity, there is still another dimension: the dimension of symbiosis—a system of mutual dependence that is extremely effective in nature and of existential magnitude.

Which means?

For me as an artist it means asking how you can create art whose highest priority and focal point is the networking of communicative relationships. One approach that seems plausible to me is this: art is not just an instrument by which the world can be perceived and portrayed, but also changed. It is an indispensable component of human existence.

We have already touched on the fact that many of your works were created over a period of several years; some are still unfinished. While this bears witness to the research aspect of your work, it surely also underscores the central importance of time and processuality in your work.

My art develops its own “culture of time.” It is also a method that calls for a new approach to the notion of time. That includes the aspect of patience. Experience has taught me that there are levels of perception and awareness that we can only tap into beyond the bounds of today’s breathlessly frenetic pace. Which means, in purely practical terms, that works develop on a whole different temporal axis. In fact, I can imagine works of art developing over the course of several generations. Or works of art that are cyclical, in much the same way as nature is. In that respect, it is, of course, an approach that emphasizes the processual aspect. My installations are always a kind of experiment, a snapshot of the laboratory, which may change again at some later point. A constant questioning. But it can also happen that the work itself lets you know when it is finished. It is a sudden, unanticipated realization, and that’s a feeling I thoroughly relish.

Certain processes cannot be speeded up or shortened—as, for instance, when you extract minerals from mineral water and use them as pigments for your painting.

That is a working process that is specifically about the “culture of time,” about a voluntary deceleration. Deciding to find and process pigments yourself, rather than buying them in a store, is undoubtedly something of a paradox in these fast-moving times. It is an enormously time-consuming task to produce just a few teaspoonfuls of material.

In the end, what you are left with are the trace elements, the essence of the water, which would not normally be visible.

Exactly. And that’s the whole point: it’s a question of essence. It is also the quest for a measure of time that is compatible with the inner and outer rhythms of nature. I believe

that it is imperative to let things take their own time. We must not try to mold them to the dictates of our own short-term and mostly economically motivated interests, which are governed by a very different time frame. That is what underpins the aesthetics of sustainability.

Translation: Ishbel Flett/ Catherine Schelbert

Published in the book "Blue Notes" by George Steinmann. 2007

Published in conjunction with the exhibition "Blue Notes" by George Steinmann at Helmhaus Zurich. (2 February through 1 April 2007)

Publisher: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg ISBN 978-3-939738-23-7