

## Poetics of Liberation

Dr. Rachel Mader

Discussions were an important part of the work on *Kunst ohne Werk aber mit Wirkung* (2009–2011). Equally essential, however, was the research, spanning more than a decade on the numerous springs in Lower Engadine, which have already artistically been processed in the form of variously coloured substances in monochrome paintings, or as part of a comprehensive collection of natural materials (*The World and the Mind*, 1989–2012). The central component of the exclusively process-oriented work is the profoundly informed involvement in the precarious situation concerning the element of water. Negotiating skills and enthusiasm are also necessary ingredients of such a comprehensive project, competencies which George Steinmann was obviously able to use skilfully, as demonstrated by the successful implementation and the results of this long-term project. The artist was able to enthuse all parties involved - and this included the large number of workers involved in the construction along with the director of the area region Bern and the architects responsible for the site management - for his project over the entire period of time. Due to early discussions with the latter, a so-called water forum, which subsequently will be available for discussions on the future of the resource of water, could be established with architectural measures on the ground floor of the new building. The workers, in turn, had to be informed of the artistic intention in such a manner that they accept the additional effort of adding water from the aforementioned healing springs to all building materials interspersed with water. Furthermore, Steinmann formed an interdisciplinary water advisory board that repeatedly met during the two years of construction and project period and discussed current water-related issues from various perspectives such as gender, sustainability or even aesthetics. All these activities were accompanied by a discursive resonating space, where the artist and invited authors not only connected the concerns of this complex thematic discussion to existing disciplines, but were also able to highlight the productive potential of such an approach. Steinmann himself, for instance, speaks of “informing a material” when spring water is added to building materials, a term from biophysics, which within the scope of this artistic revaluation also becomes a future-oriented intellectual space. For, in the water and thus also in the walls, there is a biological memory capable of liberating earlier and possibly forgotten knowledge in due time.

In a way *Kunst ohne Werk aber mit Wirkung* is a retrospective as well as a condensed synthetic work. Many interests, methods and even creative procedures of this process can already be found in the earlier works of George Steinmann. They are brought together in this project in a congenial manner that conveys the artistic approach and the related aspiration of the artist in an almost ideal-typical fashion. Steinmann himself summarises the quintessence of his intervention in the area region Bern as being about an “aesthetics of responsibility”. And this responsibility refers not only to the current environment and social interactions, but also to the future, which we help shape with every gesture in the present.

How serious Steinmann is in assuming this attitude became also apparent in the dissolution of the work *Sätze zur Zeit der Steine* (1989–2010) made necessary by traffic planning measures. It is, or rather was a sculptural intervention in public space in the Bernese district of Bethlehem, in which a geological cross-section through Switzerland had been traced with individual boulders. Positioned in an elongated green strip that separated a residential area from the main road, the stones not only served as a geographical lesson for passers-by, but were also used for seating and even as climbing stones by children. In view of the forthcoming redevelopment, Steinmann prevailed against the considerable political resistance of Bern’s city council that the work would not simply be removed and the stones disposed of somewhere, but that each individual stone would be brought back to its original site. Defying the logic and power of the factual, in his elaborate repatriation operation Steinmann responded with a poetic force that granted these stones a home as well as a right to it. The explosive political force contained in this action lies precisely in this assertion and thus in the act, to behave responsibly even when it is neither obviously worthwhile, nor demanded by those affected.

Following the same logic, in the framework of an art and construction contract by the University of Bern, Steinmann did not carry out the main part of his project on or in the building itself. Instead, he built a new footbridge in Saxeten, the municipality with the lowest income in the canton of Bern, and then developed a hermitage for the same section of the path, also made of wood, which has been used since as a space of retreat and concentration. Today one can see photographs of the work today one can see photographs of the work *Das Werk Saxeten. Eine wachsende Skulptur* (2002–2006) in the university building, which serve to communicate the intervention in Saxeten vis-à-vis the urban context, from where it had its beginning.

Being essentially committed to the modern idea of artistic synthesis, Steinmann's work has the intention to advance beyond the work context into the social fabric. More than in a conventional effort, however, the artist endeavours to create receptacles and situations that open up a space beyond the work through a poetic setting, which is possibly located in everyday life but in its potentiality refers to larger intellectual spaces.

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