

Art is war, war is art – I am hungry!

An interview - questions: Bernhart Schwenk | answers: Karsten Neumann

Your central concern as an artist circles around „Bethang“. You call Bethang a city of art, but I see more in it than that. From my point of view, it encompasses your art in total (comparable to Schwitters' MERZ-Kosmos), a made-up (and - at the same time-real) topography, A political territory, which is fiction, and still related to everyday life. When did you start Bethang? Since when do you consider it as the focus of your artistic production?

The idea about Bethang emerged during my candidacy for city council election 2002 as a member of the anarcho-group Die Guten (The Good) in NürnBERg. My election campaign consisted of the suggestion of blowing up the old city wall and Bethang, the fusion of NürnBERg, FürTH und ErlANGen to Bethang.

Bethang – as an art concept – developed in 2004. I consider the article “News from Bethang” 2006 in the newspaper NürnBERger Abendzeitung to be the founding document. This was the first time Bethang was mentioned in public. Yes, and of course, Bethang has a tendency towards total art like MERZ from Schwitters. The major difference, however, lies in the fact that Bethang is embedded in a realistic geographic environment. In this context, I also find the English expression “state of mind” interesting where the topographical „state“ is transferred into a pure spiritual state. Bethang, therefore, exists spiritually in my artwork in exhibitions, for example in Munich and world-wide and as a concrete city solely in Franconia. The demarcation of a hiking distance of 131 km along the outer boundaries by the Franconian Alb Association, now establishes it as a public institution. By the way, I do not have the slightest chance to leave Bethang and move somewhere else, by doing so, I would undermine my own artistic credibility. I regret this often because the still existing NürnBERg is an incredibly provincial small city. But this unbearable provinciality and narrow-mindedness in these three cities NürnBERg, FürTH und ErlANGen, which have not yet merged, is especially the motor and drive for my work. In principle, I adhere to HA Schult's statement „art is life und life is art“, which serves as a reference to the title of our interview, or with the „Total Artist“ from Timm Ulrichs about himself, the reference here is the title of this catalogue „Totalspinner“ (Total Crackpot).. With this spirit of perceiving art and life in such a way, sometimes saves you to bear with the extremely cheap snobby attitude of Middle Franconians. Bethang poses the question of what identity really is! By the way, what we – nowadays call a village, a small town, a city a large city or a metropolitan area, was determined at the first world-wide statistics conference 1887 in the USA. 1887! At that time there were no megacities like Mexico City, Istanbul, Tokio, Lagos or Chongqing. I have just written a letter to Helen MacGillivray of the International Statistics Institute in the Netherlands and asked for a comment on whether she would consider to update this blunt definition from 1887. Let us say for example that a large city has at least one million inhabitants, a megacity 10 million this makes me chuckle because then Bethang would currently not even be a large city with is > 750.000 inhabitants but nevertheless after Cologne the fifth largest city in the republic which, by the way, would have only four large cities left..

Is Bethang a local research subject, an administrative paraphrase which explores mechanisms and structures in the sense of a vision - or is Bethang also an image for the complexity of global dependencies as a „Weltbild“ (Global Picture) to quote the title of one your exhibitions (1998)?

It is both! You can only paraphrase administration, when you have a different global perception about the current status, otherwise you would not have the idea to question something. The administrative structures are all the same everywhere. Your local cultural office is a good training ground to learn how the colossal EU bureaucracy is functioning. By the way, paraphrasing administration, throwing sand in the transmission, is toughest democratic work.

To demonstrate in the streets and make a mark on the ballot is not enough. But too many Germans are simply lazy!

The exhibition you mentioned took place in 1998 with the title “Global Pictures and Clear Perspectives“ in the NürnBERger kulturladen schloss Almoshof. NürnBERg, caused furor across the nation with its self-regulated cultural center KOMM and the introduction of the kulturläden (cultural workshops) in the 1970s and 1980s by the cultural official Hermann Glaser. Whether you still want it that way today is another topic but, nevertheless, it caused furor. Around this time, you also find Dietrich Mahlow, the founding director of the NürnBERger kunsthalle. The international collection he initiated was stopped in NürnBERg nowadays. Only regional art is collected. Lucky me, because that way, the kunstvilla has acquired one or the other work from me. By the way also the international graphics collection in ErlANGen, So, there are a few doublettes in the Bethang collection!

This (or next?) year you can look back at incredible 40 years of artistic work if I counted it right. What was the most decisive point of time or the most important step on this way?

Holy Karma, I would say as a Buddhist, what a question. My initiation into art was definitely my appearance in the dog-show illustrated by my father as captain of the police dog association in Nürnberg. I had to adlib a Christmas prayer. That happened in the early seventies. So, this was my first performance! In 1980, I had an exhibition with my colleague Claus Foettinger at the community center St. Jobst, there is no documentation about this event existing. In the same year I made my first performance „Machu Pichhu“ in a forest. The only spectator was a school buddy who made photos. The first really big activity happened in 1982, a year before my application for the academy with the exhibition „group 13th floor“, cooperating – amongst others – with my colleague Harri Schemm. One night long, we showed our paintings in a pedestrian tunnel between the main railway station and the opera. Illegally with getthoblaster, a case of beer, liquor, and some heavier stuff. In my archives, I still have a few slides and the last existing invitation card. So, it is hard to say when I should celebrate my 40-year anniversary. All of these – mentioned above - are first, decisive steps.

You call yourself a political artist which – in my opinion - limits you somewhat because I think that all artists are considering themselves and act politically in the sense that all art is a political statement – directly or indirectly. You also state that art stands above politics. Therefore, I would call you an artist who enters into political processes, who starts these processes, who forms them, and overperforms them. In this regard you come very close to Beuys' Social Sculpture. When did you encounter Beuys for the first time, and which work of him do you relate to most in your own creative process?

First of all, I am a political artist because Bethang is - amongst others – a communal project. The artistic concept of Bethang will only become reality when Nürnberg, Fürth und Erlangen decide to make a fusion. Maybe, the Bavarian parliament also has a say in respect to area reforms. All this is independently from all the other activities around Bethang a concrete and necessary political process.

By the way, Joseph Beuys was already present in my school years. Against my father's will, I had asserted myself to get a high school degree, because I wanted to study archeology. I attended a humanistic high school and felt totally out of place. What saved me were three teachers who held their classes with the 1968 esprit and spirit, and -of course – in that context you would encounter Joseph Beuys at a certain class level. I visited the documenta7 together with a few classmates in 1982 and saw his 7000 Oak Trees. This made a deep impression on me. I have a strong relation to many others of Beuys works, especially „Show Me Your Wounds“. I was quite impressed about arguing the around the acquisition of this work.

I have a certain affinity towards arguing. Arguing to come to a point. There is a big taboo about arguing, conflict and confrontation in our post-nazi republic because we German started one of the biggest quarrels of all times some time ago. For a matter of fact, arguing is a basic prerequisite for a functioning democracy by involving oneself into debates and disputes over different opinions „Rivoluzione siamo noi“, „Democracy Is Funny“ or the multiple „Felt Suit“ „The Pack“ from Beuys are important for me. These are the pieces I relate to most.

Let us talk about an important work group where you predominantly use plastic junk that you find and collect. I perceive this activity as a contemporary form of the 1960's "Arte Povera" which often consciously used valueless (poor) material from the natural environment. In your work these natural materials are replaced by environment-unfriendly materials. However, by creating timeless ornaments they obtain an upcycling effect which touches me as being friendly and peaceful. Do we understand these works as an ecological contribution?

I started working with plastic junk in 2004. Somehow, I started collecting plastic junk from the streets. Initially, I was just inspired by the multiple color spectrum. The ecological aspect developed later. This was a time with little awareness about plastic junk and its' influence on the environment, there were no documentations about the pollution in the oceans. And the spiritual and ecological aspect that I was doing something worthwhile and clean up the mess in my immediate environment. So, two flies struck with one stroke. The big ecological aspect ranging from the ocean to the microplastic we consume with our food, topics which are discussed in many ways today was not so present at that time. So, the first intention was color and not ecology. I was in Ludwig Scharl's painting class at the academy in Nürnberg until he threw me out because I started with steel sculpture, steel furniture and concentrated on performances again. I ended up in Georg Karl Pfahler's class who gave me the decisive backing by saying „I do not care what do as long as you are doing something“.

The multitude of colors in the plastic production has developed tremendously in the last years and decades. Of course, the basic junk theme was also present. In 2009, I have made a homage to the „Democracy is Funny“ work of Joseph Beuys and collected junk at the Berlin Holocaust memorial. The collected junk as well as a documentary photo have been integrated into a work. This went into a postcard. It is also quite interesting to place the junk – so to say – directly under the viewer's nose to carry it in his /her living room. For some this is disgusting. This is quite a different approach than Dirk Krüll's glossy photographs of junk. They do look nice. But to face garbage face-to-face is yet another quality. It is rather difficult to relate this to Arte Povera. Plastic junk is – on one hand – not a cheap and poor material, is a resource with high demand which has its' prize on the market. On the other hand, the collection also costs time, and time is money as you know. Let me share an experience: Since I am not in a position - like a Jonathan Meese or an Imi Knoebel to buy my material simply at an art material

discounter or a wholesale market, I called the local recycling center and asked whether they would give me some material for free. The answer was “no!” because we are talking about a valuable resource. My work with plastic junk is an ecological statement. When I see joggers in functional plastic fiber sportswear or when I look at the fire-resistant plastic seats in public transportation, I do ask myself where this plastic paranoia will lead us to. As we all know, the plastic is already via nutrition inherent in the bodies of mankind and animals. Still, I do not want to be reduced to the merely ecological aspect and also not to “poor art“, Arte Povera. You have described the esthetic phenomena behind it very well. Maybe it was not only the colors that inspired me at that time but maybe also because it was still an unrecognized material in art – with the exception of Tony Cragg’s early work.

You store mail that you receive from public and other institutions in response to your demands, and you publish them sometimes. What role does this initiation process play for your work? Is it an integral part which needs to be made visible, especially when the work takes an unplanned turn or is not even finalized at all?

These are good questions on which I also ponder quite often. First of all, there is a social, political or esthetic reason which inspires me to ask for something from official institutions or public persons. I have no influence whatsoever on the emerging process regarding these answers which I stamp, sign and store. Sometimes, the answers have a certain humorous note, sometimes, they are revealing, in the sense of uncovering institutional power structures, sometimes they are simply dumb and un-reflected or reduce social problems solely to cost aspects. My questions which like to call interventions generally provoke answers where I do not know a priori how they will express themselves. Maybe this is similar to the automatic writing of the surrealists on a different level. I am aware that you need to know about my question before you can really understand the answer. With my roundabout 200 letters-to-the-editor, I have the same problem in the sense that without knowledge about the initial article they are not always clear to the reader or that certain verbal gigs get lost. Ai Weiwei also said in a interview with taz on August 31 that he would like to exhibit the response letter which he received from the Chinese authorities in New York. Let us see how he manages this. I, personally think that the direct confrontation via letters-to-the-editor are a basic democratic activity may even be a democratic duty. Last not least it is not enough to mark a ballot every few years or to hit the streets for demonstrations. This is not my thing and, all-in-all, a bit weak.

However, when a work does not realize itself at all because there is not even an answer coming, it could also be documented because it is also a statement when someone remains silent. For example, I am still waiting for a comment from Ursula von der Leyen why she has erased the term culture completely from the EU resorts. If there is no reaction, I follow up sometimes. But to document the non-reply again, is going a bit too far, I mean too far away from esthetic processes. A letter of reply is an esthetic product. It is quite interesting to note that the cultural officer in Nürnberg, Julia Lehner is using heavier paper for her letters than the mayor. By the way it rarely happens that I do not receive an answer. You can sometimes find the circumstances around the topic that I address in my work. For instance, in my Bethang retouches that circle around topics like conservation of city monuments and street names. Sketches and suggestions how things could be. These are always available in limited-edition prints

You use a unique wording in your formulations. Language absolutely plays a central role for you. Can you comment on that?

All classical works of art are a form of visual language. If you would take away the vase in Van Gogh’s sunflower pictures, you would have a different picture with a different expression and meaning. The same thing would happen if you would mend buttons on Beuys’ Felt Suit it would also change the expression. So, there is something like a visual language, and I find it apparent to approach art also from the angle of language because these are forms of expressing oneself. However, I approach language different from Kurt Schwitters whom you have mentioned, and different than Lawrence Weiner or Jenny Holzer. Before you hold your first pencil in your hand and scribble something, you have already made your trials in speaking, starting with the birth scream, la-la-sounds, up to your first words. Both, visual language and verbal language are subjected to change like everything else in the world. Beuys’ Felt Suit was unthinkable in the times of Van Gogh. Therefore, I want to demonstrate that culture or integration are not one-way streets but are subjected to change. Therefore, I refer to a writing that is common in English, Spanish and Turkish. That means, I start sentences with capital letters and the same with Names, also citations, titles of art and the rest is in small letters. I am also using the Swiss ss instead of ß. Bethang as a neologism, so-to-say a picture of language that materializes itself via different works of art like paintings, light objects from plastic junk, digital retouches, performances letters and so on. Bethang as an artificial city which will probably exist as a reality in our next life, is so-to-say a local anchoring point for a global phenomenon. It reflects esthetically and with intellectual content topics like junk, ecology, climate and cultural change in a world-wide society which is a consistent state of migration. It becomes obvious that when someone hears the word Bethang it rings a bell because he/she has heard about it or knows the name. Language also plays a central role for me because language also includes silence. Thomas Macho has written in his wonderful book “Metaphors of Death“ what touches us most with dead bodies is the fact that they are silent. This is

exactly what we cannot bear. Silence is often regarded as something innocent. But that is not the case. Silence is a communicative contribution which makes a statement and for which you carry responsibility as long as you are not a corpse. Especially after John Cage's piece 4'33, everyone should be aware that there is nothing like absolute tranquility and also silence. That is the reason why language is so important to me which does not mean that I always have to have the last word.

You state that the spiritual is an energy that is above art. Is it not so that art is part of the spiritual dimension?

I have read sometime somewhere that the most decisive step in 20th century art was taken by Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades. At the latest this was an attempt – in a Christian sense – to represent god not explicitly as him/herself as in the medieval gold-ground paintings where god sat in heaven and looked at the world and conducted the activities. A work like "Fountain" is a reference to the existence of god. Art is so-to-say a reference to something that is on a higher level than god. Being a Buddhist, I do not believe in god, of course. Therefore, I would formulate it in such a way that art is not able to represent a picture of enlightenment but it can represent the existence of enlightenment. When I refer to something, I am required to submit to this, arrange myself with it. In the past, no painter would have been so pretentious to declare him/herself as god and, then expose oneself as god. God stood above everything. Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait in the fur-coat does not expose him as god but- with the gesture of Christ - only as god's son, And, a little random notice: this act by Dürer to declare himself as Jesus is in total agreement with the ideas about redemption in the alchemist world as C.G.Jung describes it. To become Christ himself and to see him as imitable idol comes close to the alchemistic idea to free the mind through personal experimentation in order to be redeemed. That indicates that we should not rely on Christ for redemption. This, again relates – in my opinion – to Buddhism, where you follow the idea that, in the end, those will obtain a release from sorrow who train their mind and, thereby direct one's words and acts in a good channel. Karma, as a result of own actions. First, you avoid bad actions, then you promote good ones until you finally obtain enlightenment.

At last, nobody can just come and say "I am enlightened". That does not make any sense and would be a contradiction within itself, because there is no I in the enlightened condition. But as an artist, you can refer to enlightenment whether you are enlightened or not, just as not every medieval artist had a vision of and with god. This spiritual dimension of art becomes evident also in statements like „Everyone is an Artist“ by Beuys, art is life from HA Schult or the „total artist“ from Timm Ulrichs. I play with this statement with my "Total Crackpot" allegory for this publication. Because art is an essential part of life, it is also an essential part of spiritual dimensions. So, when I say art is above politics but below the spiritual, I would like to also show a certain humbleness in this regard.

(The interview took place from mid September to mid October 2019)