

## Helmut Federle in conversation with Christian Kerez

Christian Kerez: When we first met some fifteen years ago, you were very much interested in architecture, though without any specific intent. At the time, you were absorbed by the construction of a studio for yourself and, in particular, the question of where this building might be located. Your preoccupation with architecture was simultaneously an investigation of your own existential situation

Helmut Federle: In terms of background, I didn't grow up among the educated classes, so culture and, hence, architecture didn't have any historically defined relevance for me. My notions of culture were based on personal ideals, which included my expectations of redemption. These personal ideals were enmeshed in a highly charged dialogue or confrontation with what I was learning at the art school in Basel. For me, architecture, or rather housing, like other cultural disciplines, is subject to pure existentiality. Pure necessity.

I also had the impression that the typical priorities of many architects – the act of making something, of personally proving oneself – were of less importance to you. Looking and experiencing seem to take precedence. Following from this, the search for a studio or place to live seems to have more to do with travelling, with getting to know other cultures and countries than with the desire to present your own individuality to the world.

I think a key factor is that I grew up in the quarters of a former refugee camp. Not the ideal life that most people would choose for their upbringing. Nevertheless, I experienced an existential well-being there and found warmth in poverty. For me, well-being never depends on visible status. The shell is less important to me than the soul, with the former merely acting as the soul's reflection. On the other hand, well-being doesn't equate with security. It was probably the desire for security that set me off on this perpetual restless quest.

What's behind your yearning for other countries, for other places? You once said you'd love to have a collection of houses, a house in Thailand, a Shaker house. Simple houses, perhaps, but in all different corners of the earth.

This is based on scepticism toward my own culture, where a thing like poverty no longer has any advocates or any claim to beauty. For me, the longing for the foreign was fundamentally associated with hope, hope for physically and emotionally territory where my values wouldn't be victims of discrimination. It's never been about passing judgement. It was a desire for the unknown, and the hope of finding myself and my identity. A wish for fulfilment. For instance, when I studied Shaker houses – or rather, Shaker culture – in 1997, some of those longings were satisfied. During my stays in the Maghreb in the 1960s and later in traditional Japanese architecture, I felt a renewed sense of this well-being. After all these decades, my expectations are now defined from multiple sources. And undefined as well, in the best sense of the word.

All these buildings are anonymous to a certain degree, modest and simple structures, which begs the question: isn't the place perhaps more important than the building itself, the fact of owning, inhabiting or experiencing some part of Morocco? Isn't the house more of an access point to another world, creating a place to stay in another world?

The home is first and foremost a shelter, a place of retreat. Within this shelter, climatically speaking, one can certainly aim at more beautiful or more banal qualities. The structure of our surroundings helps determine the formation of our psyche. Seen in this way, one can certainly talk of an access point to another world. To a more personal world. Having grown

up in the former refugee camp, I learned that beauty doesn't depend on a high-culture context. Today I find an old building more fascinating than new architecture, not least because the idea of new architecture has become a bourgeois convention.

In the 1980s, architects frequently turned to the field of art, and many of the architects who currently number among the most influential, such as Herzog & de Meuron or Frank Gehry, pursued early collaborations with artists. Zaha Hadid found an important reference point in Russian avant-garde painting while Rem Koolhaas wrote a screenplay for a feature film. During this decade, contemporary architecture as a whole was highly engaged with art, where you might say its roots lie. Since you yourself have worked with a good number of architects, I'd be interested to hear your views on this tendency in architecture.

Since the 1980s, we've seen culture taking the offensive with incredible drive. In the wake of the '68 generation, culture has become more proletarian. It is no longer reserved for an elite, but has instead spread horizontally. It's done away with hierarchies. This laid the groundwork for an increasingly aggressive role and speculation with other disciplines. Now as a result, even the smallest village can boast so-called modern architecture, some kind of art gallery or museum, art activities or an art centre. For me, the creative impulse is an elite impulse – in the best sense of the word – that needn't be accessible or comprehensible to all. In this connection, I'd like to cite a line from the American poet Edward Estlin Cummings who wrote, 'the poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople.' I think this applies to painting as well.

There's been a shift from the model of masters and pupils to one that assigns the roles of star and disciple. Couldn't this model apply to an earlier period as well, with the Abstract Expressionists who pursued emancipation from European predecessors over a great many years? At nearly the same time, we see the emergence of Pop Art, which is a youth culture. It seems that youth culture or the culture of continuous novelty and continuous invention and sensation has now gained the upper hand. Perhaps it's also the degree that differentiates today from the past. Or would you identify a specific date, linking it to specific occurrences in the art world?

I think one of the crucial moments is the end of painting as an act of creation and the beginning of Pop Art, which is a culture of reference. In this regard, I think the philosophy of Andy Warhol is disastrous. It essentially ushered in the shift from meaning to fame. The master principle represents meaning; meaning relates to responsibility. Meaning results from historical integration with its inevitable limitation, which should be seen positively. Fame does not relate to responsibility; fame results from its own offensive behavioural pattern. This is also a consequence of the mutation of youth music from rebellion to broad social acceptance. In a certain sense, this is a sign of decadence and a manifestation of affluence, resulting in the fact that we have more artists today than farmers.

I also believe that the spectacle makes the form of communication more important than the content, the way something is exhibited. The exhibition has more significance than the works themselves. This is surely one of the reasons why new media are so widespread in art. They're ideal for imbuing the content of exhibitions with character, albeit often a very fleeting character. Perhaps art has taken on more of a performative character in the aftermath of Pop Art. Could that be a reason why you no longer install your own exhibitions or even attend their openings?

Yes, that's certainly a factor. Our media society is ideal for propagating externals, but incapable of conveying the structure of inner affects. In the past, such affects were often processed and communicated by scholars. Classical Modernism was a period in which trained

art historians and art theorists had a say in determining the quality of the work. Today the significance of artists, their fame, no longer depends on art historians or art theorists, but on the media-based dissemination of their activities in which the masses provide a form of justification – presumably a result of our highly liberalised democratic form of society – and become a measure of quality. Something that's consumed and communicated by thousands of people must be more important than something that is debated as significant by serious art historians. It's a result of propaganda by financially powerful, publicity-seeking manipulators who in many cases have replaced the art theorists.

In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord writes that the information society is the logical consequence of capitalism in which information becomes a commodity and loses its critical, reflective character. This applied initially to the media, but now affects art and I believe architecture as well, which has gained unprecedented relevance.

You might recall a talk I gave some years ago in which I said that architects who are unknown, who aren't famous, fall under the category of applied arts. Architects who are famous are called artists. That is extremely telling and confirms my theory that the attention paid to a work determines whether it is art or simply a craft or an applied discipline. This also explains why everyone is obsessed with being an artist. It's reached the point that even cooks want to become artists, and hairdressers too, because if they're not artists, they're nothing. The key criterion is whether or not they're famous. If they're popular, they're famous, and then they're artists.

There are tendencies for architecture to fall either into one category that's perhaps more akin to entertainment or another, which is ceded to the interests of investors. The concept of craftsmanship or a good coherent work is increasingly caught between these extremes. Plus there's the phenomenon of architecture being subject to standards and regulations like never before. At the same time, artist-architects take on the role of a redeemer, as the only ones who've still got the power to transcend all the legal preordinations, something they manage to achieve by being on the receiving end of a certain trust and publicity. It's a very complicated and multifaceted situation.

Successful artists or architects can certainly be exploited for political purposes, being useful to society insofar as they justify the investment that politics makes in society. After all, unlike art, architecture has always been a negotiable dimension. By contrast, artists who disavow the public sector, which is no longer negotiable today, have no usefulness from a political point of view, as such individuals could never serve to justify expenditure. In this way, art too has become a negotiable quantity. The political world is a calculating world, as opposed to a world in flux, which I would hope for and in which inconsistencies and injustices equate to an organic truthfulness. To me, it's about the truthfulness of feeling, which brings to mind the declaration by Malevich that art is materialised feeling. Today culture is unfortunately a calculating political world to the core, in the process having renounced the fluidity of truthfulness.

You've said one of the things that links you to Modernism is belief in a high culture. But I also think Modernism is a kind of transitional period, adopting new production conditions of building as its basis while embracing squarely contradictory ideals from the nineteenth century, from the Arts and Crafts movement. It did not simply constitute a new beginning, but a period of transition. In their search for new building forms, many architects make reference to the Middle Ages as well as to the early cultures of Japan or India. Many of the pieces you've collected are over 2,000 years old. Do you see this more as a denial of the present or perhaps also as a link to Modernism?

Something that's always preoccupied me is the question of the meaning of being – why are we here and where are we going. Regarding this concern, I placed hope in cultures. I suppose that's why I began collecting. The validation of being achieved via ancient relics of meaningfulness, though this would be inconceivable without metaphysics. Into the 1960s, Modernism was still grappling with these largely spiritual questions of meaning. From this perspective, I'd count myself as part of Modernism, even if, as you say, Modernism likely bore inherent contradictions that can't be easily resolved on closer inspection. With Mondrian, for instance, formal developments in painting were obviously not the crucial factor, although this is basically the only way his work is now interpreted, making it useful for purposes of propaganda.

I suppose Modernism ultimately cannot be detached from the atrocities of the First and Second World Wars. And such existential threats in the course of history inevitably invest questions of meaning with even greater importance.

That's absolutely correct. Of course, it's fatal when someone can go unchallenged today in saying that externals are more important than internal feelings or anxieties, and that inner concerns are associated with kitsch or with pathos and therefore considered ridiculous. Today we are victims of our own arrogance. And it may well be the case that this arrogance began in Modernism. To what extent can a creation breach certain standards without bearing the resultant consequences? Take the value of breaking taboos that once inspired Modernism, 'To art, its freedom', a slogan that has acquired such infantile scope today! People fail to realise that this no longer has anything whatsoever to do with freedom, but in fact has become just the opposite.

A certain suppression is at work whereby we continue to have and cause many wars today, but we aren't directly affected by them. Provocation tends to have more of an affirming element to it. Sexuality and licentious behaviour may have been a means of provocation back in the 1960s. Today, however, you'll find it on every commercial TV station. There's absolutely nothing exclusionary about it anymore, but rather something that signals affirmation and validation.

That's correct. I believe the individual creative personality no longer bears any intrinsic tragedy, resulting in a tendency toward arrogance and the fact that the entire product, be it in architecture or art, in many cases depends solely on reference. And I agree with you that we remain untouched, unaffected, by all the world's tragedies. Wars are like pop music, quotidian events without any further relevance or impact. Attempting to use 9/11 in a piece of art seems easier than trying to imagine being dead. Mark Rothko, Yasunari Kawabata and others had to kill themselves to satisfy their own creative impulse.

This has very different consequences as well: youth culture cannot grow old. Many artists who grow old remain young, so to speak. You're as old as you feel, they say, still feeling like a thirty-year-old. Along these lines, architecture could be seen as the expression of a youthful energy. Yet your work appears to develop in a completely different direction, encompassing aging and existential lows. How do you see your development as a painter over the decades, the way you pursue your work quite unexpectedly and sometimes with interruptions?

That's a difficult question. Actually, I don't see myself as having developed. The restlessness and hope in the 1970s found just as few universal answers as the restlessness and hope of today. Perhaps I've got a different sort of restlessness and hope in me today because a lot of time has been used up. But it's clearly still about existential feeling. So I haven't really made much progress in that respect. Nor do I have the satisfaction of looking back on

consolidation. The only consolation is the realisation that my actions have always followed from organic conditions. Is the young leaf more important than the old, or is the morning more beautiful than the evening? I couldn't say, nor have I any desire to.

At the same time, that's certainly a programmatic intention you've followed from the very beginning, at least to my mind.

I would disagree that it was something programmatic. If so, I'd have to admit that I'd failed because I couldn't have positioned such a programme in society. In that light, I haven't failed, but am perhaps simply an anachronism in today's world. No, the mode of invention has never interested me. I didn't grow into this behavioural pattern out of social autism. For me, painting a picture is like petting a cat or trimming a tree. Many things are based on expectations of beauty. Many things happen due to passivity in the moment. The fact that I've sometimes been penalised with ignorance for this pattern of behaviour is another chapter.

What I find so extraordinary in your work is the fact that it contains an emotionality, something that's been called into question in art time and again. Works that can be expressed conceptually, through reason, are obviously easier to communicate than works that are emotional and shaped by personal experience.

In this connection, I'm interested in the fact that in literature, for instance, this emotionalisation is no problem whatsoever, but actually something expected. It's about content and feeling. Art itself has distanced itself from this existential dimension in favour of the strategy of marketing as a formal event. These days, I find myself turning away from culture in favour of a cultivation of the self, with the idea of cultivation as a humanistic necessity.

Do you see this emotionality, the biographic determination of certain works, the love of ancient cultures and your strong connection to an even older form of culture, to animals, as a way of repudiating the current presentation and communication of art?

I can only say that these ancient cultures or, in particular, the animal world satisfy me to a much greater degree than today's cultural commodities. When I look at architecture and see a cat next to it, the cat gives me a much greater sense of well-being than the architecture. In contemporary culture, I always first see the strategic intentions, based on seeking an effect and geared toward the necessary strategies of networking. The target is clear. Everything is referential and in most cases only serves the maxim of attracting attention, fulfilling purely economic criteria. Creative impulses are subject to political conventions and global interests, calling for unconditional solidarity and incestuous tolerance that levels everything. A culture of consensus as a grassroots movement. It has nothing to do with being cultivated. We have long been victims of an information dictatorship that sires its own offspring. This is then called democracy. In response, I praise the beauty and the truthfulness of the animal world, not least as a metaphor of a fateful archaism.

First published in German in fair. Zeitung für Kunst und Ästhetik, Vienna, No. 8, I, 2010, pp. 22–24. The interview was slightly modified and expanded for the present publication.

In: Exhibition catalog EXAMPLE: SWITZERLAND. Unbounding and Crossing Over as Art, ed. by Roman Kurzmeyer and Friedemann Malsch, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, HatjeCantz Verlag, Ostfildern/Germany, 2011