

GREGOR JANSEN Living in a Box // Isa Melsheimer

Life is a construction site. Who doesn't agree that this metaphor aptly describes the ruinous, incomplete, or procedural state we sometimes find ourselves in? And every state of completion merely describes a momentary letting go, a temporary sense of satisfaction, whose model character has already been preprogrammed for modification or the possibility of improvement. This is precisely the existential orientation described by Isa Melsheimer's works. In her sculptures, the model of the world has been reduced via the artificial, very surreally built aspect of a miniature landscape to the most elemental forms of living, and consequently of life: to a bed, shelf, table, chair, curtain, or to pure, empty, constructed space.

Her titles support this too: "Behausung" (dwelling), "Weltmodell" (model of the world), "new Heimat" (new home), "Siedlung" (settlement). Even the materiality of her objects is simple – unpretentious doll houses, but not made for children. Sober descriptions of the urban landscape whose reduction provides clear insights and lets us experience our presence from the perspective of a giant. Without moralizing, her work criticizes the system, addressing mass media and apartment building relevant themes, sociopolitics, and the psycho-social issues of a life without scale. Her model of the world is more like a turning her back upon the world. It is this which gives rise to the incongruity of perspectives and proportions. With a touch of awkwardness, she combines her sample material taken from our everyday lives – whether it be television, Internet, or print media – with the intricate environments of her domestic landscapes, patchwork-like, in poor-man's style, yet with a clear sense of the most unusual pattern, of an off-the-wall style, of a crude will to design. Her art draws its inspiration from the contradiction between innocent form and its political dimension. Do we individually choose a style or design as a simulation of our selves?

Does our design define our consciousness? To be or to design? Form determines function, or is this design dictate an ideology within an aestheticized society? Certainly a subtle stance that can, one might assume, at the same time be interpreted as a feminist one, for is it not the female will to design that has defined what is beautiful, material, and domestic?

The awkwardness turns out to be a critique. Melsheimer's stages have no actors and thus give space to our ideas, hopes, dreams, and fears. Like in the surreal models of life, the viewer is at once inside on the outside or on the outside of the inside. This becomes particularly and most naturally clear in her installations, but also in her embroidery and gouaches, which deal with architecture only superficially. Her Lilliputian "Städte" (cities) less built than transplanted into their funnels are miniature models of real buildings in Berlin which Isa Melsheimer has constructed out of cardboard, plastic, or Perler Beads. The funnel form causes the buildings to slide together, establishing relationships that conjure up wondrous fantasies. On the topos of house, living, life, city, etc. wild scenarios can be built but also imagined, and for this, plenty of material is provided. At times jumping from one model to the next, between the associative borrowed fragments of constructive spatial perception, at times stretching out to rest on the mattresses.

Cushioned, a brief letting go, relaxation, we lie down, submit, view the world as a model of our own experience and from this vantage point as a model of our own submission and defeat too. Melsheimer describes it beautifully and with a touch of melancholy, "moments of lost days." Only fleetingly, the urban zeitgeist sweeps through the corridor, while in the basement dwells the cultural historical pragmatism of lifestyle – an appalling elegy to failed interior design, which still remains in the living machines as design for the masses and a wedge for widening the generation gap. Marseille survived a utopia too. Italy was at war – ladybird, fly away home.

Corridors, if you will, are built like real cities, but more importantly, they are our psyche: passages, gashes between different areas of functionality and absurdity. In Melsheimer's individual environments people only apparently come together, converse, live together, revolve around themselves and in their groups. But it is wonderful to see how, logically constructed, the world of real things can furnish the just as logically constructed world of artificial things with its autonomy and its surreal, sick, and fascinating (because free) creativity of a formidable but at the same time fructifying world view. It is about identity, about the miracle of self-recognition and all the suffering associated with a soulless (identity-less) mass society. The mattress is a canvas, an allegory. Convenient for us, the flat world of images when it comes to describing a never finished global cosmos reverberating with the models or spaces, a world that continues to be a thorn in the already irritated eye, though perhaps originating user-unfriendly in the repertoire of our cultural consumer hedonism, always ending in alternative abysses of the soul - a gaping chasm of the nomadism, ongoing quest, and restless mentality of the zeitgeist.

“Abgegolten” (amends) is the title of the work with the folding box, cushion, and hut. This forgotten old word describes guilt and honor, validity and its temporality, and is thus also a concept embedded in the German mind, contributing to the existential orientation of both the East and the West Germans somewhere between kitsch, horror, myths, fashion, power, and plain meaninglessness. Because now the glorious Indians, wiped out, defeated, and as primitives, native inhabitants, disempowered, relocated, murdered, or deprived of their rights, have reappeared as a fabric motif for the skateboard industry. This is not heroism and it is a far cry from making amends – the landscape of this sculpture takes on a chilling note through the stitched-on eyes of cuddly teddy bears. Interior design can be detrimental to our health when it touches the psyche. Feng shui for those who seek enlightenment. At the same time such simple symbols and their patterns of reference give rise to highly individual characters with subtle sensibilities, which, as opposed to the yearning of painterly romanticism, are not a marketing gag at all but represent seriously intended alternative worlds built from hackneyed, close-by, and all too human dream worlds.

Copyright by Gregor Jansen (written in 2005, published in part (in German) in frame 16, Feb./March 2006)