

Making Sculptures Walking

ELISABETH MADLENER

As soon as you enter Elisabeth Ballet sculpture *ZIP* at the Offenes Kulturhaus, you realize that the large hall has changed. How and why it has changed, however, is not immediately or easily definable. Her works are autonomous sculptures, and yet they react to a specific space. What is so fascinating about this is the way a place mired in normalcy becomes newly marked. The sculpture consciously relates to the space, following its architecture without merely tracing it. The floor, the walls, the door openings, the windows, the light are all both inspiring and integrative components of these works, which reorganize the elements of the space and thus direct a concentrated gaze to sculpture itself and to the other space – that which surrounds the sculpture. In this way, the space is defined by sculpture, defined also by the detour that the view takes – there is a barrier, an obstacle. “The first time I saw the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz, I saw the building as a construction site – except for the large hall. In order to reach this hall, you have to go through the whole construction site of what was once a Catholic nuns’ school. What most impressed me about the large hall was the transparency of the room with the two long, parallel rows of windows rounded at the top. And then the front and the back ends closing off the room – one is a partition wall and the other is pierced by two entrances...” (E.B., 27-2-1997)

For Elisabeth Ballet, the approach to an artwork, the way the space is neared, what the experience looks like “outside”, is not insignificant. Her sculptures integrate these moments and simultaneously define them as a separate, almost protected space in contrast to that which is “public”. From the left entrance to the large hall of the Offenes Kulturhaus, she draws a semi-transparent corridor along the southern window front, thus withdrawing the view to the outside and to the inside from the viewer. The corridor ends in a closure at the narrow side of the partition wall – it would be a total dead end, if there were not the opening into the interior of the hall at the beginning of the corridor. Now when you enter the hall, though, it seems to be like a school yard closed in from all sides, admitting daylight only from above and only indirectly, because there is a corridor along the windows on the right side, which displaces the light coming from that side. Yet this corridor on the right is “the only way out”, because unlike the corridor on the left, there is an opening here – and only here – at the partition wall. This corridor leads the viewer directly back outside to the staircase. It is also possible to walk through the sculpture the other way around, but the hall may not be crossed any other way than diagonally. The space, which the sculpture *ZIP* by its very volume occupies, begins and ends before and outside the hall. The corridors which are 14 m long and roughly as high and as wide as the entrances push out through these openings. In this way, the sculpture connects three architectonically given, separated spaces, closes off the usual, transparent view into and out from the hall – the particular view that has come to be known as its most prominent characteristic – and closes off the familiar public space, defining another, more intimate walk. The corridors are open at the top and the plastic building site sheet is folded over a steel construction. The floor consists of wooden planks over a foundation of sand so that the floor does not vibrate. The planks are covered with a sound dampening carpet like that which is commonly used in staircases. Walking through the sculpture is fundamentally different from walking across the wooden parquet floor of the hall: not only does the light change, but footsteps suddenly become soundless, inaudible.

Although both the sculpture and the space are entirely abstractly defined, they know very definitely why and how they relate to and in contrast with one another. The result is quite clearly an “espace sculpture” – a space sculpture. Yet the space already begins outside, with the construction site, with the staircase, with the little ticket counter and information room, with all the possible functional definitions that the large hall and its architecture cannot exclude. Two different openings after a long march up through two stories of the construction site: which is the entrance, which is the exit? Concentrating the view is only one part of the work, another involves retaining those heterogeneous moments in view and re-ordering them. The architecture of the large hall, formerly the main hall of a nuns’ school for girls, its impressive long-sided window front, its two entrances at one end and the partition wall at the other – these are the boundaries defined in the foundation, but for Elisabeth Ballet they are permeable and not blind to the outside. They are the starting points for the sketch, the

drawing, the model, the plan.

Elisabeth Ballet's space sculpture separates itself from the actual architecture, through it follows the lines of this architecture. Yet still it maintains its own existence in its mass and volume. The artist emphasizes that her works are always a belt around herself, a belt of that which surrounds her. She works from the outside to the inside, from the edges determining other, external factors, from the walls marking the boundaries of the sculpture, moving toward her own boundaries. She creates new boundaries and holds that which is redefined & something inviolable freely in view. But above all else, there is the space – limited and brought to awareness through the conceptual qualities of the sculptural intervention.

The outside of the architecture or the perception of an atmosphere, which inspires the artist, which she absorbs in her sculptures, redefines, maintaining her own ideas in contrast to it, this cannot be translated literally into the work. Rather, it is displaced in light of her artistic decisions, the definition of volume and the qualities of the chosen materials. Transparency and opaqueness are the factors that are at once concrete and abstract, which must be dealt with carefully, for example with regards to daylight in the space, when it is a question of that which is her "own" in what belongs to the "public". Each space is a specific space its own concrete, secretly intrinsical text, which the sculpture picks up and to which it responds. "I knew intuitively that I would have to change this hall (at the Offenes kulturhaus). That I would have to attempt to make it forget that it is obviously too beautiful." The two windows fronts – now screened off by the two corridors which follow their course at a narrow distance of 30 – 50 cm – are now only visible as a whole from a steep vertical perspective when one enters into the gap behind the building site sheets that are doubled over. The indication of the sun's position, which has always so impressively reflected the outside into the large wall, is now transposed into a skylight. Sculpture maintaining itself against space: it begins in front of the entrances, blocks these and thus opens up a whole new perspective of perception.

The singularity of this concept refers back to a particular uneasiness with the situation that a sculpture in the classical sense stands in space as a three-dimensional object, which can and must always be observed from all sides. The result is that there is no mystery about it. In addition, it is very matter-of-fact about the way that it claims space for itself, maintaining its own hidden interior as mass. It is always frontal, always to be viewed from all sides, but never to be looked into.

Elisabeth Ballet's works suggest another difference between artwork and the observation of art. The relationship is determined by a kind of multiple drawing of boundaries. The boundaries are the mass and volume of the sculpture, yet these also hint at what is closed up inside the sculpture at the same time... The viewer is intended to leave traces as well, traces of the presence of her/his time, insights and comprehension. But the viewer's path through the space is still precisely determined by the sculpture.