

## Deviation

Daniel Kurjakovic in conversation with Ilona Ruegg, Frankfurt, 14 June 2006

*From the mid-1990s Ilona Ruegg became known to a wider public with exhibitions in the Helmhaus in Zurich and the Kunsthalle Bern. If she was initially regarded above all as someone who produced paintings and drawings, she has, in the last eight years, branched out in her artistic practice. With her examination of time structures – whether they manifest themselves in the physical urban space, the acoustic space of the media, or in the immaterial space of data and information streams – Ruegg occupies a distinct and at the same time elusive position within the current world of art production.*

DK: Let us begin with your last work, *Ex Box/Time Construction 3*. What in particular does the term “Time Construction” refer to?

IR: Yes, well how do you give a name to something that you’re doing? Am I naming what is seen or what I’m doing? Those were the questions I was asking myself. *Ex Box/Time Construction 3* refers to the lorry which was carrying the heavy components of an entire façade. And *Time Construction* perhaps describes the construction I was thus making. I didn’t use a new façade, but one which had been dismantled. It was stored on the low-loader truck, on a series of lights. And what I was organising – at least this is how it seemed to me – was time rather than the material.

DK: Time Construction in the sense of building time.

IR: Time is something which comes to the fore, can become concrete, in a construction. I added the term “Time Construction” to this work and retrospectively to two previous works: *Volume/Unpublished* from 2002 in the Kunsthalle in Bern became *Time Construction 2*; in this work I displaced a future ceiling. *Exposure of a Show Case* from 1998 became *Time Construction 1*; there I shifted a wall. I shift heavy material, e.g. the dismantled façade components of the Info Box, also the lamps which were present in this building, a series of these lamps, in fact. I made a translation and multiplication of them. The number of the lamps was determined by the number of missing panels in the facade, because these missing parts provided the window openings. Beside these material elements the transportation itself, for example, counts as a medium of the work, a transportation which I briefly diverted and interrupted. The events surrounding the sale and/or disposal of the Info Box count, too. Initially it was supposed to be reassembled, but no buyers were found. Then there was a buyer for half of the internal framework; he wanted to use it as an external staircase for a bunker. All these threads of activity were externally determined, I only interrupted something. Of course, diverse factors come to the fore simultaneously.

DK: This relationship of partly uncontrollable planning and events is the medium?

IR: Yes, these events in the broadest sense.

DK: Then I have to ask you again, why “Time Construction”? I haven’t understood that exactly.

IR: Because I work with material elements which are caught up in processes, and produce a structure in which time appears. Time is always present, everywhere. It’s there with those responsible for the planning of the Info Box and also with those who dismantled it. It’s present with me and with the observer. I only make an incision into this time.

DK: In *Ex Box/Time Construction 3* a video work documents the delayed lorry. There are other media: the publication, the symposium with experts etc. There is another important question regarding the public, since the diversion doesn’t take place in the context of an institution. I mean, who saw this work? When was it seen? Who observed it if it wasn’t already encoded as an artistic intervention? In short, with this concept of “time” are we dealing with a metaphor or an experience?

IR: You’ve touched on a lot there. The work took place in a context outside the institution and was attached to the Frankfurter Kunstverein. That’s why there was an audience, which had come specially to see the low-loader which was parked next to a multi-lane one-way street in the city centre for 12 hours. Many had experienced the façade of the Info Box intact over a period of five years. But there were also passers-by, car drivers who came across this

somewhat strange situation. They, too, were part of the situation which was changing constantly. The low-loader was practically removed from the traffic and at the same time placed within it, in traffic which flowed past or got stuck, as there was a set of traffic lights nearby. The low-loader stood out against the different speeds, the different strands of activity. That is all experience of time, but this time is so self-evident that I can only catch it in these differences.

DK: Can we say that the interruption of the strand of activity plays out in an anonymous sphere?

IR: It plays out in an extremely public sphere, not in the protective confines of the institution. As the low-loader drove off after the lights had been offloaded and so returned to its planned context, it was important that the work could continue as a reflection. At this point, other media come into play. Since the work itself moves an object but the object is not the focal point, I thought that a potentially fluid form of documentation would be appropriate, one which could define the edges of an event.

DK: Everything you describe as strands of activity, the transportations, the movement of material and immaterial goods, etc. is something very characteristic of today's society. We are actually surrounded by a constant flow of goods and information. That means you could intervene at different places with this tool of interruption.

IR: Everything is movement. Even your own body, which perhaps when you sit still can appear a little static. There is nothing which isn't moving. What is worth stopping for? What happens if I stop something? In the case of *Ex Box/Time Construction 3* it was the façade of the Info Box, which served in effect as an information carrier for the Westhafen development in Frankfurt, as a place of information for the history and web of investments. I was already interested in the Info Box in Berlin, whose façade sections were auctioned off, as other economies grew in influence. It was then that I first heard that another Info Box was to be built in Frankfurt. But only at the time of its dismantling was it clear whether an intervention was possible. I was struck by the fragmented surface, which really could be broken up into individual sections. They were able to form a completely different volume. Diverse, urban and even formal relationships were important. How do I show these relationships so that something becomes visible, something that we know but which is actually too complicated to be captured directly in an image? Let's say, we can't produce a photograph of this situation. Andreas Gursky can take a photograph of the stock exchange, which refers to very complex relationships. I am also doing a kind of exposure.

DK: Exposure would be, as it were, a displaced place. It would be what "occurs" if representation in the form of an image is no longer possible? So exposure instead of image?

IR: Yes, exactly. But also exposure as the time of exposure. The transportation was postponed by 12 hours. For 12 hours these lamps burned, powered by a generator. The lamps were loaded underneath; the first load consisted of lamps, the second of façade sections. The light only shone on the bottom of the first layer of façade sections, as well as the façade of the neighbouring building and on the road. The lamps didn't light up the sections, only somehow irritated the heaviness of the second load.

DK: Can we return to the term strands of activity. As an artist you seem to be interested in the way society is structured, how it is organised, in its logic and in its irrationality, if you like. You don't create new objects but rather observe processes already underway. Is it important to keep the degree of medial translation as small as possible in order to get as close as possible to these processes?

IR: That is basically an economic question. A storage space is unnecessary. The sections are indeed considerable and heavy, but at the same time they are quite light because their materiality is only borrowed. What I am moving is not these weights in particular, they are already being displaced, I am just adding a delay. Here I think of the safe that my father, as a bank employee, had to close every evening. As a child I had the strong feeling of something of great order being shut away which nevertheless could fit in the safe. Today things of great scale are moved, it's more about the movement than the objects. Between Zurich and Bern milk is transported in both directions. That produces wages with which to buy milk. I am concerned with how these movements are organised so that they provoke questions in art.

DK: In that anecdotal image from your childhood it strikes me too that something was being shut away for possibly a very long time. Does this idea of permanence play a role, in contrast with your work which wants to be anything but permanent?

IR: Basically, nothing is fixed, and nevertheless every piece of work, every activity which wants to leave something behind, would like to thus make something permanent. Culture is created only through the tension between the durable and the transitory. Of course, as I am interested in mobility, I could keep as much as possible in motion. But I think I can better bring mobility to the fore by interrupting it. At the moment when the low-loader is standing still I am interrupting the promise which lies within the strand of activity, i.e. where the lorry is going to with its load. That is already planned: one half will become a flight of stairs; the other will be disposed with. Through the interruption of the promise, every other kind of possibility suddenly becomes apparent for a short while.

DK: It strikes me that the kinds of materials you work with can be in some cases quite solid and voluminous: façade sections, metals, etc. Is there a connection between this safe you anecdotically mentioned and the anonymous industrial standardised materials you're working with today?

IR: It is not about specific spaces, but rather potential spaces. It's always about possible space, extra space, "espaces auxiliaires" as I used to call them. The safe is of course only permanent in its having been constructed, not with regard to its contents. The value could rise or fall by the hour. You could perhaps draw a connection between the façade, which once separated an exterior from an interior, and the experience of a seven-year-old child standing in front of the safe door not knowing what was actually inside, what was really inside. Of course I somehow knew that it was money. I had already had some experience of that. I had my own piggy bank, and that had a certain weight. But what was behind this door was difficult to grasp. This real safe room which I had never seen existed in my imagination and its borders were very elastic.

DK: So would you say the imaginary element in space is an important point of reference in your work?

IR: It was certainly true as a child, but now a certain intangibility drives me to work with clear facts. So actually the concrete built nature of the space, which simultaneously has something intangible about it...

DK:... especially if we try to focus on what you call the strands of activity and when we see how, in the present experience of the world around us, different systems such as geography, urban space and information data are all linked together. If we also then try to understand how and by whom these are all manipulated... Then it all seems like the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. I can see there a much larger area where the adjective intangible could be used.

IR: Yes, I agree. How do you deal with the intangible, if you don't want to fall apart? It's possible that the intangible would make you fall apart. Then you would rather try to touch it. You could compile obsessive lists, write novels, such as Georges Perec, for example. What is fascinating about it is that you never will touch it. These many complex simultaneities inspire me. It is certainly an area in which I can move and in which I know that I will nevertheless never quite know my way around.

DK: I am reminded of many other works which dealt with strands of activity or circulations, e.g. Haacke's Real Time Systems or the so-called *Irruptions into Ideological Circuits* by Cildo Meireles. Meireles had the slogan "Yankees go home" printed on Coca-Cola bottles. I'm not interested in the anti-Americanism here, but rather in the concept of circulation. You talk of strands of activity...

IR: I don't work so programmatically. I'm not interested in making a certain statement or evaluation of the question of economies. I would like to see them all emerge in all their contradictions. I interrupt the circulation, which is striving towards disposal and re-use. A material has served its time. By making the transportation late, it becomes more expensive. On the one hand, time is lost, yet artistically, value is added provisionally to a ware which is already in circulation. The displacement of the ceiling in Bern used a kind of future material; a ceiling for a burnt-down sports hall, it needed a new ceiling – an element which defines space, which was already designed for that location. I was interested in storing this ceiling in the Kunsthalle in Bern, in creating another volume and thus cut across the spatial references of the Kunsthalle itself and transform them into another mass. It was mainly concerned with placing this

ceiling component in a new context, in another economy; so that you didn't have to stretch up to the ceiling or wouldn't dangle from the ceiling, but could walk through the ceiling of a future place, as it were. – I am actually more interested in the operational relationships which arise when I turn things which are already caught up in an operation and introduce them to a new operation.

DK: With the Meireles example I meant something else: a bottle is just one of millions. I thought I detected a similarity between Meireles' circulations and your strands of activity, in which the latter, these circulations for industrialised countries are fundamental. The medium is the net of distribution, the multiplication. It seems to me that you regard your work as something rather sculptural, or don't you?

IR: The classical concept of sculpture refers to the place in which the sculpture is taking place. Beuys, for example, went beyond that with his basalt steles, which lay at the time in front of the Fridericianum and anticipated the location of the planted oak trees. That was also 'of another place'. The Volume in the Kunsthalle in Bern referred not only to the Kunsthalle but also to the future destination. In this case the decision was not an artistic one but an economic one.

DK: I'm surprised that you don't describe at all the semantics of these ceiling components – or even the semantics of the place, a sports hall. I see possible interferences there.

IR: It could have been the ceiling of a shopping centre, that would have produced different connections which could be referred to. I'm interested less in the meaning than in the quite concrete operational relationships which can be produced. And then there is always a mad element in the work which I don't quite understand myself.

DK: Ah, the mad element!

IR: After the opening of the exhibition in Bern, I drove back on the motorway from Bern to Zurich, and there was a lorry in front of me carrying the unfinished raw forms of cable cars. That was an incredibly beautiful moment, seeing these unfinished cable cars on the lorry. Of course, you forget about it, but it never leaves you all the same. Anyway, I wanted to show something in its entirety but split up into parts or in an unfinished state. Out of that came my project *out of house and home*, which has so far not come to fruition. I would like to show a house which hasn't yet been built, i.e. its prefabricated parts, in order to form another entity. Later it became possible to move the façade of the Info Box. It was the moment on the motorway – I'm seeing significant strands of activity, which appear on the way to somewhere and are incomplete, and in such moments I think: "There! I'd like to do something with that, I can do something with that!"

DK: I find the element of fabrication very striking. The everyday objects, the consumer objects, the built environment in which we live, it all appears to obey the necessity of being put together. We are *homo faber*, we live in this context of fabrication: from the clothes that are sewn together, to the kitchen walls in which we prepare our food or store our crockery to the buildings in which we work and hang around. Fabrication as a social condition.

IR: To want to put something in a space presupposes the awareness that things have already been manufactured. What can I do that is not simply selecting one object out of this sea of fabricated things and put it on a plinth? How can I go beyond the model of the ready made? I think there's an opportunity in not taking ownership of the object. So I don't just take on the role of placing the object in the new context but leave it in its production context and just borrow it for a while and then give it back. Duchamp didn't give it back – I don't think I have to remove it permanently and exhibit it.

DK: You raised another question earlier: What is it worth stopping for or temporarily pausing for? What are the criteria? Are we back at these "mad moments"?

IR: There are always things to consider. It has to be something which is within people's experience: a house, something that has mass and can lose its mass. It's about an old plane of experience and at the same time, the current one, which has something to do with this incredible movement, with the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

DK: You mean the digitalisation and networks...

IR: Yes, a world in which information can apparently arrive before it is dispatched, as I recently read in the FAZ. A world in which you have to look very closely to know where the stuff that we eat comes from, from distant continents or from the surrounding region. – Then again, an old area of experience in which things like counting, 1, 2, 3, 4 etc., play a role, which I took up in the work *two or three things*, in the use of counting sequences. Or a house. Everyone would like a house. A collector – as, for example in my unrealised project - would like a house and gets an artwork before the house is really built. And then he loses the artwork, it disappears into the house which is being built. And yet he still somehow has both.

DK: You describe this human scale as unfixed.

IR: I don't think it is ever fixed or certain. It can change from one day to the next. The house which is big today can seem small tomorrow.

DK: And how is that related to the radio piece *Two or Three Things*?

IR: When I was invited, I was working with fragments of speech. It was obvious to me that the situation of the listener was important – with regard to the channel and the studio in which I was producing the piece, with a boy who was counting. I wanted to link it all together. The boy was at the place of production, a room with a sofa, a lamp, a light-switch etc. I told him he should cast his eye over these things and count them aloud. I told him to name an object if he came across it twice so that the chain of numbers – this continuity – would be briefly interrupted. And then there was a second part in which he counted the objects backwards. Then he set quite a different rhythm. I later placed both counting series on top of each other; I made a structure into which I introduced my own time. The boy had his time, he shot out into a visible world, which was similarly present in the world of the listener, too, and I produced a quite artificial time in the overlapping of the two systems. It was a form in which time arose on the basis of shifts, you could perhaps say. No size was separated in itself any more. Each order became something only in its difference from another order. And it was different for each listener in their particular time and space. – I believe these points of connection are important to me, where no order is complete in and of itself, at least not in a predetermined way.

DK: The elements in *Ex Box/Time Construction 3* begin to play a somewhat different role when I listen to what you're saying about *Two or Three Things*. It's as if the elements – the façade sections – were placed in quotation marks and final marks, through the diversion, held up as a model out of the fabrication events...

IR: No, I don't think that's the case. I don't want to hold anything up and make a model of it. The low-loader remains a low-loader and yet it doesn't somehow. It is in an exceptional state.

DK: Let me return again to the concept of the context of activity. You hold these connections up for a while at least, or you stop them in order to show what is invisible or hardly visible. You are exhibiting a little bit more than just the architecture in *Ex Box/Time Construction 3*.

IR: Yes, by stopping the façade in its transportation, other things come into view which belong to the reasons why the Info Box was built in the first place.

DK: And those would be?

IR: Well, The Westhafen area in Frankfurt was mainly renewed urban space, with buildings which mainly became office space. The Info Box was on the one hand a visible peg to hang things on, visible through its signal red colour, its small size and it wanted also to refer to information through the modular appearance of its façade. The Info box itself was not all that modular; it was much more permanently built and screwed together. That was also part of the difficulty in later selling it, because the costs for its reassembling would have been too high.

DK: The modular appears in this respect to be almost ideologically loaded along the lines of a quotation from constructivism which suggests lightness, changeability, progressiveness, etc. But the purposes which lie beneath this redevelopment, are more of a speculative nature, are they not, as it's about questions of usage, of city marketing and suchlike. Were those reasons for you choosing this Info Box?

IR: Again: It wasn't my interest, to present these things programmatically and in a manifesto. I was interested in the fact that this Info Box promised information. Now, you can never really keep a promise! That was my starting point. Precisely at the moment of its dissolution there was a possibility that this fragmentation would behave like information, without being a promise. How does information behave? There are parts, which are facts, and you introduce these into new contexts. You can use them this way or that or prepare them in different ways and present them. At the point of dissolution there is a kind of free behaviour, beyond meaning. These panels are actually without meaning and therefore so full of potential. So it's not about the political, ideological elements, that I want to point at with my finger. Rather it's the processes. I'd like to show what points of these and similar processes remain open and particularly at what precise moment.

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