

In Between

Bernard Fibicher, in Catalogue "Ilona Ruegg", published for the exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, 2002

Visitors entering or leaving the Kunsthalle find there is something in the way, a volume about knee-high - or rather various, precisely matching volumes. They are immediately intelligible. You realize at once that certain "fenced" zones (over two thirds of the complete area of the entrance hall) are closed off, and that a path has been set out like a cross between them. The cross defines the co-ordinates of the "inserted" space. Visitors are guided to the corridor running along the longitudinal axis of the entrance hall, which has built-in loudspeakers on both sides. This work by Ilona Ruegg is called *VOLUME/unpublished*. The ambiguity of the word "volume" alone is a clear indication of the work's multi-dimensional qualities. "Volume" can be understood here as an abstract three-dimensional quality, as spatial content, as a book in a series (this interpretation is supported by the addition of "unpublished") or - for French and English speakers - as sound volume. The volume in the entrance hall is not dull, solid, monolithic. Its ground plan consists of parallel lines, hatching, i.e. 10-cm thick boards set on wooden laths, forming a right-angled grid. In the space, these lines form 29 parallel obstacles or low walls that "cut across" all the other space-defining elements: the stone tables, the elevator indicated by a joint in the floor and the wall of the adjacent room. The tops of the walls (seen from the entrance) thrust into the main hall like battlements. The boards have a darker coating on one side, giving the impression of a "shadow side". The width of the boards determines the relatively low height of the walls (60 cm). The material - insulation boards standing on their long edge - has an important technical quality as well: it is intended for sound insulation, and is used for this purpose in the construction industry - for sports hall ceilings, for example.¹ The insulation boards in the entrance hall are not stacked, which would have made them much easier to handle. They are precariously balanced on their edges, then held together in blocks by "fences". This suggests that the artist is not primarily interested in the idea of *deposits*, but in *positioning*: not "natural" sedimentation, but "artificial" installation; no horizontal stacking one on top of the other, but alignment dictated by a grid.

In his short text "Des espaces autres",² written for architects, Michel Foucault postulated that in the second half of the 20th century it was no longer time and history that were in the foreground; our epoch would be the "époque de l'espace": "We are in the epoch of the simultaneous, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, in the epoch of the near and the far, of being together and apart. We are, I believe, at a point in time where the world perceives itself not so much as a great life developing through time but rather as a net, linking its points and crossing over its entanglement. (...) Nowadays placing replaces the area that had replaced localization. Placing is defined by the neighbourhood relationships between points or elements; formally they can be described as rows, trees, meshes." It is precisely these characteristics and motifs that are the key features of *VOLUME/unpublished* by Ilona Ruegg. Like Michel Foucault, Ilona Ruegg resists an absolutist perspective arising from a continuous, closed space existing for itself. Space is seen or demonstrated instead as something relational, as the result of a process of arrangement. In the early 20th century the theory of relativity defined space (and time) as a dynamic quantity that can be influenced by everything that happens in it. This dissolution of the classical concept of space was reflected in fine art, in Cubism and Futurism, for example.

In his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, which appeared in instalments from 1931, but is the (fragmentary) result of decades of work, Robert Musil describes the city as a dynamic quantity: "Cars shot out of narrow, deep streets into the shallows of bright squares. Pedestrian darkness formed cloudy strings. Where more powerful lines of speed cut across their loose haste they thickened, trickled faster afterwards and returned to their even pulse after a few oscillations. A hundred sounds were woven together into a wiry noise with individual points standing out from it from which clear tones splintered off and flew away, (...) The name of the city is not particularly significant. Like all great cities it consisted of irregularity, change, gliding by, not keeping up, collisions between things and matters, bottomless points of silence in between, made up of cleared and uncleared ways, of a great rhythmic pulse and the eternal disharmony and shifting of all rhythms against each other, and at the same time was like a boiling bubble resting in a vessel made up of the durable material that is buildings, laws, decrees and historical traditions."³ Musil's city is not made up of houses, a main square, a church, a market hall and a town hall; it is pure dynamics, rhythm, pulsation, noises, black-and-white drama, interaction. Nothing is rigid and definitive, everything is relative and relational. There are no people in Ilona Ruegg's two series of city images *Town Town* and *Fair Town*: all that can be seen are "merely" temporary arrangements of human homes (caravans) and fragments of temporary cities within the city (leisure park).

As in Musil's description, we do not have this or that motif in the foreground here; it is about nothing other than shimmering relations between scarcely recognizable elements, light-dark contrasts, a complex spatial structure of insights, views and reflections. The busy human traffic, the dynamic of the city, that Musil describes, has transferred itself to the people looking at the images in Ruegg's case. What they see does not correspond with any objective, clearly identifiable, comprehensible reality. They use their eyes to construct (each time) their (different) temporary spaces. They *improvise* on the basis of the rich possibilities offered by irregularity, change, gliding by, not keeping up, collision, silence, rhythm, disharmony and shifting. Ilona Ruegg's photographic works link precision and indeterminacy in a paradoxical way: despite extremely precise focusing, Ilona Ruegg manages to leave a great deal open. Her cities and excerpts from nature are characterized by the fact that they cannot be grasped in principle, or more precisely, an indeterminacy or openness that only appears as subjective reality for the person involved in the observation process.

The acoustic component of the work *VOLUME/unpublished* consists of four distinct parts: music, spoken and sung textual fragments, and silent sections. Various speaking voices are heard (three men and two women) in three languages (German, French, English) and a duo (viola and cello). The "score" probably does not have a beginning and an end - the first spoken statement already announces the end: *le temps qui nous reste* -, but is conceived in such a way that it is possible to start listening at any point. The text of *VOLUME/unpublished* consists of a total of 27 quotations from 24 people. It makes up a conversation between artists, art agents, writers, film-makers, composers, philosophers, and also some completely unknown authors: Giorgio Agamben, Michael Asher, Samuel Beckett, Gilles Deleuze, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Gotthard Günther, Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, Bethan Huws, Jean-Paul Jungo, Pierre Klossowski, Joseph Kosuth, Luigi Kurmann, Gary P. Leupp, Ulrich Look, Paul Maenz, Charles Perrault, Raymond Pettibon, Martha Rosler, Joe Scanlan, Gregor Schneider, Franz Schubert, Kurt Schwitters and Lawrence Weiner. These people from a very wide range of periods, are given (other) voices - some sentences are even sung. Ilona Ruegg has now paraphrased these "quotations" in a parallel text called *Fussnoten* (Footnotes).⁴ She is the 25th voice in this conversation and helps to make it even more complex.

Who is speaking? Whose voice are we hearing? When all that remains of a long conversation between Rémy Zaugg and Jean-Paul Jungo but one sentence taken completely out of context *Que je laisse ou que j'élimine*, and it is no longer possible to see what the reflexive pronoun *que* refers to, then we can assume that the author's identity is not important. The statement could be by anyone. But it is different in the case of *Je ne vois rien que le soleil qui poudroie, et l'herbe qui verdoie* or *Lass irre Hunde heulen vor ihres Herren Haus*: Any French- or German-speaking person will inevitably know where these sentences come from. They are from the popular fairy-tale *La barbe bleue* by Charles Perrault and Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* respectively, and are common cultural property. Even if we do not know who wrote these sentences, our memories will "speak" in these cases. The quotations as an excerpt from a text usually has an interpersonal aspect. X chooses a quotation from author Y, intending a positive or negative transfer between X and Y. Although the same person - Ilona Ruegg - has selected the textual fragments and paraphrased them as well, no individual perspective emerges. The privileged voice of Ruegg the author is not dominant, but many voices⁵, some of them contradicting each other, just as the whole variety of stylistic levels enjoy equal rights. The conversation is a polylogue involving highly diverse points of view that usually make "sense" only when related to each other constructively by the listener. Ruegg is not looking for either a synthesis or communicative unambiguity. Here complex textual networks have some characteristics of hypertext, here not consisting just of words and texts, but also of sounds, materials, spatial structures, indeed images. Hypertext is not linear text, but a complex of texts that are linked with each other. One of its essential characteristics is the discontinuity, the simplest classical concept that corresponds to it is the set-piece. In Ruegg's photographic series *Escalator* the escalators are still packed up in plastic on the nocturnal street, and in the series *Trees older than me, waiting*, transportable olive trees with their roots wrapped in plastic sheeting with a little earth stand around in the landscape. Spatial (but also temporal: *older, waiting*) discontinuity are the actual theme of these two series: something that is supposed to go up and down (escalator) is lying motionless in a horizontal position, and something that in principle develops vertically (tree) becomes mobile and transportable. Discontinuity is created in *VOLUME/unpublished* by thrusting a space into an existing space, the interpenetration of these two spaces by (temporarily) setting upright normally (definitively) horizontally fixed elements, by deploying *ceiling boards* on the *floor*. The acoustic "set-pieces" in this work (the "quotations", the music) also refer to something else. The assembled voices flow together from a wide range of sources and impinge on the listeners' consciousness in the "intermediate camp" of the entrance hall and then escape again or make themselves concrete as "Footnotes" - whether these are Ilona Ruegg's or our own, Ruegg takes full advantage of the hypertextual potential of language.

Language is indeed not an accumulation of written or spoken words (dictionary), sentences, statements or texts, structured according to certain rules (syntax, literary categories, social conventions etc.) or trying to contradict the usual structures (poetry, metaphor). Language is an instrument of communication and cognition that creates *relations* between things and concepts, between *signifiant* and *signifié*, between texts (intertextuality), between the subject and the world, between people, between people and machines. It is obvious that language can never be completely adequate as an expression of these (real, possible, fictitious) relations. "The world", people, thoughts, concepts, language itself are in a state of constant change: consequently their relations can never be considered concluded, constant, or, in brief: definitive. Anyway, language is only the visible/audible part of a much richer, text-external, extra-linguistic reality. Nathalie Sarraute coined the concept of *sous-conversation*, of infra-conversation, which consists of sensations, images, feelings, memories that can hardly be expressed in language. She tried to break through consciousness and get behind it "into these silent and dark regions into which not a single word has yet penetrated, on which language has not yet had a desiccating and petrifying effect, into something that is still uncertainty, virtuality, vague and embracing feelings, into this unnamed that resists words and yet demands them because it cannot exist without them."⁶ Ilona Ruegg takes the inadequacy of language into account by using texts in *VOLUME/unpublished*⁷ that do not have a beginning and an end, sentences without a verb, or a subject, even some monosyllabic utterances (e.g. the prefix *dis* from *discontinue*). Little is fully formulated, much is left open. There is an oscillation between deep structures and surface structures, to use Noam Chomsky's terminology, between *sous-conversation* (pre-linguistic) and conversation (articulation), as Sarraute would say. The utterances are not just horizontal, i.e. they are in a temporal state, linked by the techniques of memory, premonition, repetition and reflection.

VOLUME/unpublished is organized polyphonically. In music, "polyphony" means a piece for several voices with an independent melodic line for each voice. The aesthetic quality of polyphony (known as counterpoint) lies in a constant comparison of the voices in terms of the form of their movement: in parallel, or shifted in various ways. The perception structure in *VOLUME/unpublished* is similar to that of a polyphonic work. Visitors hear certain sentences or words at the same time as others; they hear the composition as a whole. But to understand what the individual sentences mean they have to select the fragments that "appeal" to them and put others to one side. They pick up the *conversation* and the *sous-conversation* consciously, to an extent, but also subliminally. Adert's analysis of Nathalie Sarraute also applies to Ruegg: "La graphie de la narration sous-conversationnelle procède donc par empilage de voix qui s'enchaînent les unes dans les autres pour créer une moire au chatolement extraordinaire: elle est une partition polyphonique dans laquelle les voix du locuteur, de l'interlocuteur et de tous les autres parleurs font retour sous la forme d'une pulvérisation de voix enchevêtrées. Au regard de l'histoire des formes, il est intéressant de souligner qu'il ne s'agit plus ici de monologue intérieur, car la sous-conversation ne déploie pas ce qui se passe dans la tête d'un sujet entre les répliques du dialogue; elle réalise en effet l'éclatement de l'unité factice du locuteur, l'effacement des claires délimitations entre soi, l'autre et les autres [...]"⁸ And so if we ask again who is speaking in *VOLUME/unpublished* we come to the conclusion that it is neither the author of the piece nor the individual authors quoted, but all these at the same time as each other, or shifted in space/time terms, i.e. contrapuntally. This game on many levels, the confrontation of voices and discourses, does not just mean the loss of the subject and of uniform logic, but also a loss of spatial unity. Polyphony has hypertextual characteristics and gives an impression of being in a complex, multi-dimensional space. It conveys an impression of depth, i.e. it promotes perception in time, without falling victim to an illusion.

Ilona Ruegg's photographic series *Hang und Neigung* is based on the (illusory) attempt to present an image-parallel slope, without any principal motif that might help us to define top and bottom, front and back. Undergrowth, subliminal notions, lack of structure, of space, something merely in between becomes concrete as we look, and then escapes again. Perspective is scarcely hinted at. Everything is lacking in distance (within the image and in relation to the viewer). Maurice Merleau-Ponty interpreted distance phenomenologically as a personal investment in a spatial relationship: "... one can understand the perception of distance only as a *being in the distance* that joins it where it appears. (...) Distance can be experienced directly to the extent that we can find the living present at the point at which it reconstitutes itself."⁹ More important than the incline or inclination in the image is the viewer's inclination *vis-à-vis* the image. It is only when the image is actively acknowledged that it loses distance and gains depth. It is only by seeing that what is perceived acquires relations that were not prescribed but emerge only from the medium of contemplation. The image is not a copy, but a constantly changing result of a mental process that regenerates itself uninterruptedly. The text is merely pre-text (*sous-conversation*?) that has to be subjected to a subjective formation process that is always different in its nature. Temporarily setting up sound insulation boards creates an intermediate

camp that is aimed at certain aesthetic, acoustic and spatial conditions. Ilona Ruegg makes pictorial structure, speech-locations, sound worlds, imaginative spaces available; the viewers/listeners are not just drawn into them, but have to conquer them and make a new decision about them each time: between light and darkness, between thicket and clearing, between location and mobility, between constraint and autonomy, between here and there, between published and unpublished, between volume and transparency. *Du possible, sinon j'étouffe*.

Bernard Fibicher was director and curator at Kunsthalle Bern, in the time of the exhibition. Currently he is director and curator at Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts in Lausanne.

¹The Durisol brand insulation boards were imported from Holland, stored temporarily by a Swiss construction firm, used for artistic purposes in the Kunsthalle Bern and the finally built into a sports hall near Zurich when the exhibition was over.

² Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1984*, "Des espaces autres", Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité, no. 5, October 1984, pp. 46-49: "Nous sommes à l'époque du simultané, nous sommes à l'époque de la juxtaposition, à l'époque du proche et du lointain, du côté à côté, du dispersé. Nous sommes à un moment où le monde s'éprouve, je crois, moins comme une grande vie qui se développerait à travers le temps que comme un réseau qui relie des points et qui entrecroise son écheveau. (...) De nos jours, l'emplacement se substitue à l'étendue qui elle-même remplaçait la localisation. L'emplacement est défini par les relations de voisinage entre points ou éléments; formellement, on peut les décrire comme des séries, des arbres, des treillis."

³ Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ed. by Adolf Frisé, Rowohlt Verlag, 1972, p. 9 ff.

⁴ Strictly speaking we should not use either the word paraphrase or the work quotation here. A quotation should appear in as complete a form as possible, so that it cannot be decontextualized. Ruegg almost always infringes this "law". Paraphrase actually serves to simplify a text or statement and make it clearer. But Ruegg reformulates a text by borrowing a thought or a concept, or sometimes a structure from it, in a very subjective way. Her *Fussnoten* are not part of a (pseudo)scientific apparatus, they are to be understood more as "musical" interpretations or variations - as notes, in fact, as a score.

⁵ Especially as certain recurrent quotations in the piece are read by different speakers.

⁶ Nathalie Sarraute, "Ce que je cherche à faire", in *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, 2. Pratiques, Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972, p. 32f.: "vers (...) des régions silencieuses et obscures où aucun mot ne s'est encore introduit, sur lesquelles le langage n'a pas encore exercé son action asséchante et pétrifiante, vers ce qui n'est encore que mouvance, virtualités, sensations vagues et globales, vers ce non nommé qui oppose aux mots une résistance et qui pourtant les appelle, car il ne peut exister sans eux."

⁷ And "unpublished: also because the spoken piece has the status of something incomplete, in other words in principle something that has not yet been passed for release.

⁸ L. Adert, *Les mots des autres, Flaubert, Sarraute, Pinget*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1996, p. 228.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 307: "... on ne peut comprendre la perception de la distance que comme un être au lointain qui le rejoint là où il apparaît. (...) la distance est immédiatement visible, à condition que nous sachions retrouver le présent vivant où elle se constitue."