

Interview

with Axel Malik on December 11, 2004 in the SWR Studio Freiburg

Elmar Zorn: At the SWR Studio in Freiburg you have realized one of the most unusual installations I have ever seen. You present opened books in display cases offering exhaustive documentation the daily writing project begun in 1989 and continued uninterrupted since then. It is possible to follow individual writing processes on video monitors. By contrast, your acoustic work SCHREIBENHÖREN (HEARINGWRITING) can be experienced via headphones. And a work breathtaking in its dimensions measuring 20 meters long and over 6 meters wide takes up the entire height of the foyer. Why so gigantic?

Axel Malik: I wanted to relate the dimensions of the writing process to the spacious architecture of the foyer and, more importantly for me to the expansive context of this location, to transmission and broadcasting. A network of lines towers up in front of the visitor; from every floor, and seen from up close fresh perspectives and different insights into its interior structure reveal themselves. The process can be experienced in an especially unique way when you travel along the work in the transparent elevator.

E.Z.: Precisely in a broadcasting station, a house of the media such as the SWR in Freiburg, your works very aptly express the function and nature of the media. And your contribution is certainly not self-referential, in other words it does not present itself as a personal biographical monument but is transformed into a work of art that can be objectivized.

A.M.: I would very much agree with you on that. First of all, the autonomy in the motion of writing means I can experience the characters as being unconnected with my person. I recognize their independence through the fact that they create themselves – the structure and evolution of the movement is the result of an inherent order intrinsic to the phenomenon. The movement is determined by a situation, or rather by *its* situation, by how it instates and articulates itself. To a certain extent this autonomy makes it inaccessible. Although handwriting is typically considered to be the most subjective trace a person can leave, the most individual of expressions, here in the dense structures of the motion of autonomous writing, the individual self seems to dissolve. Originality and individuality are manifested solely by virtue of the movement, while the delimiting Self, the individual subject, is without location and support. In other words, we are confronted with more than we can input ourselves. Autonomous writing is much more direct and intensive when it goes on air.

E.Z.: It is not long before anyone who seeks – as an observer - to understand your writing

realizes you have much less in common with other styles in the history of art than might first appear to be the case.

A.M.: Some people think my work has to do with calligraphy, and some even try and pigeonhole me as a maker of “concrete” or “visual poetry”. Calligraphic methods are always based on an existing script that serves as a compositional system of symbols. This existing script is processed, distorted, shifted and altered in its geometry and static properties. Things are similar with “visual poetry”, the aim of which is to place the semantic weight of the writing in an altered balance with its aesthetic weight. My work has nothing in common with any of this, as I refer exclusively to the dynamic aspects in the writing itself. What I want to do is to capture the motion of writing at the moment of its fleeting fluidity, and then again in its incomparable capacity to differ. Naturally, people often use the term “écriture automatique” and imagine they have spotted Surrealist methods and goals in my work. They realize I am not bothered about revealing the unconscious powers at work in the realms of the psyche. Nonetheless, though there are no structural similarities or affinities in the flow of lines between the representatives of “écriture automatique” and my works, people still claim I subscribe to the utopia of the Surrealists, and that there is a pure, unadulterated, innocent source of free and creative associations to be revealed. My project is not directed towards the liberation or emancipation of emotional aspects. It is not about “free associations”, or the “unconscious play instinct” but about a highly specific act of perception and concentration. The conceptual severity of the scriptural method is a manifestation of how much conscious control is needed to focus the linguistic quality in the motion of writing itself.

E.Z.: Given all these distinguishing features I would see in your work a medium sui generis, and use the word “charge” in relation to your production method.

A.M.: What I like so much about your use of the term “charge” is that it not only emphasizes the active side but also contains an element of tension. We can look at this again in comparison with “écriture automatique,” which is concerned with a degree of leisureliness, with deactivating your daytime consciousness so you can give yourself over to another space and produce projections from the dream state. By contrast, what I seek to do is to pay attention to the ability of the consciousness to grasp and to open up the ability of the perception, to sharpen it by applying it to a tense situation and intriguing task, namely writing that mirrors only itself. The moment of expression, the scriptural action has the function of a funnel, which channels the present moment of agitation in the motion of writing, and emits it in a charged concentration.

E.Z.: Looking at the open books in the Freiburg show, I would imagine they are to be seen as constituting various series of notes that make up sequences, as do diaries. But

outsiders cannot interpret the characteristic features of the entries. Are you able to assign the individual ideograms to various times or places and identify them as would be the case, after all, with customary diaries?

A.M: I direct my entire concentration and perception solely towards the motion of writing itself. My concentration aims at achieving the greatest possible approximation of the deep dimension in the movement of writing. The motion structures produced are what can be subsequently read and recorded. Since this project is solely concerned with systematic vocabulary, the individual parameters and self-organization of the writing process, there are no connections to either temporal or local phenomena. And since writing defined in this way is only concerned with the differences in the motion of writing and the consistency in grasping and recording the movement, there are no personal feelings or biographical moods connected with the recordings.

E.Z: Given the restriction inherent in the serial nature of the scriptures artistic discipline also checks the relative liberty of the arm and hand movement. After so many years producing millions of millions of signs do you never feel tempted to jump over the traces and do something completely different?

A.M: At the point when the motion of writing becomes autonomous, when you allow the writing to refer to itself, the individual character no longer has an external point of reference, it is no longer a symbol, no longer has a referential character, it no longer describes things and objects that are outside of itself, something very remarkable happens to and within the motion of writing, because the absence of objects re-emerges as a very intense presence. Only then an expanded intensity of the moment is released and expressed in the motion of writing. Writing that in the production process renounces its customary orientation and defining capacity to surrender itself with method and intent to unrest and turmoil, produces with its sign-like agitation a highly differentiated structural language.

Given that the motion of writing never loses itself in a monotonous, frenzy of movement, in a diffuse, stereotype haze of movement, but repeatedly is precisely structured in complex entities, is defined at many levels, and offers a convincing statement, you can never tire of it. What is more, the intangible vibration of the space where the movement occurs can only be given a basis of sorts by the durability of the process and the stringency of the inscriptions.

E.Z.: Do you ever look back at signs in the way graphic artists or artists sometimes re-examine their works, only to discover details they had not noticed before, are you surprised at past signs?

A.M.: Yes, that happens to me very often. The elasticity and extent of contrast in the extremes of motion, the fluid and dissimilar dynamism of the scripts fills it all with such verve and variability. Simultaneously, it becomes inaccessible and unobtainable as a result. There is no question of staleness setting in, the gaze, even a second one is always fresh.

E.Z.: The observer is fascinated and astonished by the incredible wealth and diversity of the scriptures. Going by your own experience would you say people get more of a general impression or are there observers who study character for character in the way the reader of a book progresses or the viewer of a drawing structures his perception: as a general impression, focusing on a detail, tracing lines, recognizing patterns?

A.M.: Someone once told me he took on a new character every day. Other people have told me how incredibly tiring it is to read a whole page character by character. Continually alternating between the two has a special meaning for almost everyone; studying individual characters close up, and then observing the general picture from a distance. Whenever the writing processes are long and time-consuming, the personal standpoint becomes increasingly important.

E.Z.: We are all familiar with the mysterious, archaic symbols and lines scattered over a large section of the Nazca Plateau in Peru. Did you ever dream about presenting your vestiges of writing on an oversized, gigantic scale even, of creating from them an artwork in a public space?

A.M.: My project has evolved directly from writing. Writing seen as a motion performed by the hand, writing seen as a concentrated effort and as a specific movement to achieve and generate precise form. Producing autonomous signs of structural density and concentration is connected to a series of physical but also mental states. True, the small or minute offer several advantages as regards focusing intensely or and scope of differentiation possible. Yet at the same time I feel the structural results are so enormous, the rotation and scope of the motion so unrestricted that enlargement allows other aspects to enter the focus of experience and recognition.

E.Z.: Some artists that draw consciously seek the inspiration of music, even attempt to transfer music topics into their medium. Do such interdisciplinary approaches play a role in your work, could or should they perhaps play a role?

A.M.: As my project is not about anything like expression, or of portraying moods or atmospheric oscillations musical stimuli are not relevant for me. My aim is to register the curved characteristics, the erratic impulses, the opposing contrasts and the introverted

alternation of the motion of writing. Having music as a model, say as a musical topic would result in harmonies and a compositional structure, in imposing an aesthetic paradigm and thus entail restriction. It would involve abandoning my project approach of removing writing from its typical functional, useful context in order to record writing in its irregular identity, in its incalculable potentiality and in its autonomous self-centeredness. But what might be very interesting is a special project in which you have atonal structures and phenomena collide and interlock with a process of scripted cast-offs.