

The Politics of Small Gestures

– Chances and Challenges for Contemporary Art

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2.5 It's a Cathedral - Hans Hemmert

Let us focus on another example, an example that takes us to a cathedral: a work of art that deals with a functional entity that we all know and recognize, but it deals with it in a way that is very different from what we are accustomed to. It does what it is supposed to: it gives us something that we can relate to, but makes us aware of how we relate to it. This is called self-reflection with a joyous vengeance.

Hans Hemmert has built a cathedral out of balloons. These balloons are all the same size, but they come in all the fine colours from red to green and back to yellow again. The colour structure is achieved randomly using the circa 3000 balloons needed for this work titled *Kapelle*. It is a structure (600 x 380 x 400) that we are asked to go into. The idea is to experience it from the inside. To feel what it might mean if all the world's cathedrals were made of air and rubber.

If this level of appearances was all there was to Hemmert's work, it would serve as a perfect example of one of the main dangers of the enterprise with which we are working. In American

slang, it would then really deserve to be called ‘a one-trick pony’. It would be just a funny, but short-lived curiosity: a cathedral made of balloons. But there is something else, something more that gives a lot of substance to the vital question ‘So what?’.

The materiality of the work has an ambitious and ambiguous character. You cannot simply solve it and set it aside at one glimpse and one experiential glance. We are, all of a sudden, back to the basics of any sculptural activity. This is air inside a rubber material. Or to put it into a time perspective: What happens to the air and the rubber structure of a balloon once it is inflated and the time, oh yes, goes by by by.

This has the distinct quality of ‘that sinking feeling’. A troubled notion that something that you see there and then will not be there in the near, but still so distant future. Hemmert has made us aware of the transient nature of our existence in an entertaining and speeded-up way. We are not silly enough to claim that, through Hemmert’s work, we are able to confront our existential angst about losing time or about never having enough of it, but what we do claim is that, with his work, we are able to laugh at ourselves and with ourselves. We can almost hear the sound of the air slowly, but surely seeping out of the balloons. There is no recognizable hiss but something is going on. A cathedral is shrinking as we watch it. And yes, this is again about *how* we watch. We are watching, but not seeing. The idea is something else. To conceptualize it, and to sense what is going on. To make it your own. There and then.

Interview with Hans Hemmert, September 2005

“The politics of the small gesture? Yes, I do find that a very sympathetic expression. I like the play of opposites within it, you know, combining the concept of politics that is something of a large-scale entity with a small gesture that is something domestic, something about our daily realities. It is also clear that in direct comparison with big, spectacular gestures and actions, a small event or gesture is intuitively much more interesting. For me, a big gesture has something inherently unpleasant about it, something of an emptiness that is close to a lie.

“The pleasure in a small gesture is how something that is in itself so little and so meaningless can turn out to be or can become so interesting and intelligent. For me it is all about our perception, about how we perceive things. And a small gesture, for example, is a way to change and alter the existing reality slightly. It means visually changing the taken-for-granted parameters of a site just a little bit.

“The strategy can be to make or present something big as something very small, to turn opposites inside out, or to duplicate everything as we did in a proposal for Potsdamer Strasse with the group Inges Idee, duplicating a lamp, a bus stop etc. on one part of the street. Another example is the series of air-balloon works I did at the end of 1990’s in which I covered everyday, domestic situations with yellow latex rubber from the inside, for example, my living room and my studio. In these photographs, what you saw was me in my typical everyday setting. Everything was like before, only slightly different. The difference was the latex, an extremely thin (approx. 0.02 mm) layer of it that covered all the surfaces.

“Then again, the strategy can be about hiding or covering something. A process in which you partly guess what the object or activity might be, but you are not completely sure. The point is that you can never be quite sure, there is always that moment of hesitation lurking. It is what the Germans call an *Ahnung*, or put in another manner, it is when something is almost there, but not quite – *knapp vorbei, knapp daneben*. Something that looks functional, but which on closer inspection is not functional at all. Or the strategy is to combine things that do not normally belong together, creating a new kind of object in which there are details that we can recognize from other objects or settings. In all of these, as a sculptor, I tend to trust the minimal effect, or the minimal gesture that crystallizes and pulls together the various elements into into a single, unified entity – as in a work of art.

“In one sense, the question of perception is for me a political question. This is in line with the thought that the personal is political, something that too often gets forgotten or is not taken seriously, and that is a pity. The process by which we perceive is both very fascinating and important. Let’s take a chair, a simple chair. A chair on which you can sit, but what else can

you do with it? This is a play with connotations, a play with expectations. A play in which you have to rely on and trust the visual possibilities.

“Is a small gesture enough? Well, that depends on what you want, and, of course, on the level we are talking about. In terms of success, and discursiveness about it, this can be problematic. Anyhow, being successful and getting attention is always cyclical, trends come and go, and during an artist’s career there are some busier and some more silent periods, and that is just normal.

“But if we talk about a small gesture on the level of a work of art, or what, for example, motivates me as an artist, then the question is easier for me to frame and to answer. If and when I come up with an idea that enables me to test the borders and habits of our expected perception, then I am satisfied. That does make me happy. Whether this then turns into a meaningful work of art, that is another matter. Tickling our visual senses is one thing, but it is obviously not enough. There has to be something more, and that something more only comes through via time. It is via the passing of time that I can see if an idea is worth it or not.

“Another very important aspect of the process of avoiding the work becoming just another funny gimmick and a gag is its technical implementation. This can be done in a smallish model, a sketch or a trial production, but it is very important to try things out. It is only then - via the necessary commitment of time and energy – that you can realize what it is happening and what is going wrong, and what is going right.

“The beauty of the procedural quality and character of a work of art is that very often you set out to do something like X, but during the course of the action something else happens and takes the idea in a previously unheard of or surprising direction. It is not only a matter of ideas bouncing off and against one another, it is also about the material realities, about how the chosen material guides and directs the process. Sometimes the end result is in fact much more than even you yourself thought at the beginning, and you recognize some of its main

connotations only afterwards. And this, of course, is the hardest part of the process, how to keep it open and alive - and to let those surprises really lead and guide you.

“I am constantly struggling with the task of keeping the mental processes open-ended, and not producing simply for the sake of production, and not keeping on repeating the same patterns of thought. This is extremely difficult, because we are so strongly embedded in our daily lives, in our expectations, prejudices and habits. It is difficult to break them, and it is even more difficult to get a fresh, alternative view of them. This kind of openness, an openness that you cannot directly strive for, but which has to be left to happen, is also amazingly valuable and desirable. It is so rarely that I get that different glimpse into my own reality, that something which used to be called inspiration.

“These possible alterations of mundane reality are something that I am constantly occupied with. It is like the project of mine in which I began to build a smallish paper model of a church. What was peculiar about this church was how it was put together solely out of paper collected from fashion magazines. I got the idea when I saw the façade of a famous, massive church under renovation, and a huge commercial that was put up in the front of it during the restoration period. Again, this is about putting together ideas and materials that do not seem to belong together, like fashion and a church, and so on. Or to give another example, which is rather banal: The other evening I was staring at a simple light bulb in our living room. There was only the bare bulb, no lampshade or cover or anything. And I started thinking: What if I make the lamp cover out of paper in the shape of a military tank, would it not be great to have a tiny paper tank sculpture glowing high up on your living room ceiling? Think about the baaad shadows and all the misplaced and playful connotations it would produce, just think about it.

“But to answer the question about whether a small gesture is enough: Yes, it is, absolutely. If and when I manage to create and think through a new, altered version of my reality, then that is enough. It serves a purpose for me as a sculptor. Even if the scale is small and only, in the first instance, affects me, I become a kind of master of my own reality. I can make the decision

myself, I can shape my surroundings, in a way, constructing, and very consciously, the way I am where I now happen to be.

“It is impossible to overstress the importance of the openness of one’s thoughts and also one’s perception. The task is to keep that openness alive, and also to open up and challenge the ways we perceive our realities.

“The danger for us all is that we can so easily keep producing over and over again things we already know how to do, and which are already gaining recognition. This can lead to megalomania, a slippery zone in which the scale of production grows larger and larger, while the content of the works seem to get tinier and tinier. I can’t do that, because I simply find it boring. I can’t repeat a formula over and over again. I need that openness; an openness that is not only pleasant, but which is also horrifyingly demanding. It very often leaves you very unsure about your work and its value and meaningfulness. A feeling of uncertainty that you nevertheless have to learn to accept.

“But, that again, is often hard enough. It is a kind of a balancing act between allowing the uncertainty and, at the same time, having solid enough self-esteem and belief in what you do – all in order that you can actually start something, try things out, and not just think about them. There is obviously no straightforward answer to this dilemma, it is characteristically something that is there to stay. For me personally, what helps is to rely on this type of self-reflective and conscious naivety. A very simple model or strategy – *einfache denkstrukturen* in German – that allows you to activate yourself and not be afraid of mistakes or misunderstandings