

msk7 – contemporary travelling entertainers

msk7 reads like a sober determination of position in a coordinate system, either in the geographical domain or as a data sheet of any kind. At any rate, the form alone already suggests a reference to prescriptive systems of orientation and recording. It is well known that such forms of depiction are nothing but approximations. Their utilisation is based on agreement, on convention. Certainly msk7 is also an abbreviation, whose complete version is never revealed to us, although the figure can be deciphered unambiguously. Seven women artists – six permanent members and a special guest for each project – make up msk7: Mona Babl, Christine Berndt, Kati Gausmann, Ricarda Mieth, Ulrike Mohr, Anja Sonnenburg + guests constitute a Berlin based group that takes action in temporary forms with Berlin as a base and has organised a large-scale action in international public space every year since 2004. The name guarantees a certain degree of anonymity; it sets msk7's understanding of their identity as a group working together in the foreground rather than concentrating on the individuals involved and, in contrast for example to New York's Guerrilla Girls, consciously opts not to indicate that that this constellation brings together women artists.

Analogously to the pseudo-location in the name msk7, journeys, and sometimes navigation and mobility, play a role for the group's art, but above all those techniques and mechanisms that guarantee visibility and attention are important. The group thus sets its projects in a specific perspective: that of oversight and overview. msk7 really demonstrates methods of effective visualisation. Historically this mode of looking was reserved primarily for male subjects and their multiple symbolic representations, including technical and media aids. msk7 thus alternates between the actionist in public space, which inevitably can be experienced as excerpt-like in temporal terms and in a fragmentary fashion spatially, and the dimensions of the overview, which pieces together the details to form an "image". Only optical analogue techniques such as aerial photos, their digital extrapolation in satellite location or model-style abstractions, such as maps, guarantee oversight and an overview, and document the way in which space is appropriated. This is the perspective from which the giant crossword puzzle "blümerant" (2007) is presented on the invitation card. This angle is what renders the classical schema of verticals and horizontals filled with capitals legible as a whole, whilst viewers on the square perceive above all the materiality of the letters in earth, grasses and mosses and in a sense walk their way to individual words. The aerial view on the other hand emphasises the essential site-specific nature of the installation, in other words the place in which the work is rooted and by which it is determined: "blümerant" forms a kind of garden maze on the Gendarmenmarkt between the French and the German Cathedral in Berlin. The answers are already filled in, including words

such as “elite”, “malheur” and “gendarm”, the latter a term that entered German as a remnant of the French appellation “gens d’armes” (people with weapons) who in the 18th century had the stables of their cavalry regiment on the eponymous square. The terms sound as old-fashioned as they are familiar, at least to the ears of adults from Berlin. Not ‘proper’ French but also not ‘good’ German, even the spelling calls for one to consider the etymology and thus reconstruct the historical and political influences of French on the German language and – to take a regional approach – on how people speak in Berlin. This influence dates back to the history of the expulsion of the (reformed) Huguenots from pre-Revolutionary France in the late 17th century. Just like the French refugees in Prussia, and in connection with the fashion for French as the language of science and education in the 18th and 19th century, individual words also put down roots, although they underwent a process of adaptation whilst being absorbed into colloquial language, thus offsetting their migration in the altered pronunciation and spelling of the terms. In the process, the words moved through various social classes with the passage of time: shifting from the language of the court, the sciences and the aristocracy to dialect. Revealingly, the words that have survived in Berlin slang seem to be primarily terms that can represent the taste of an era both affirmatively and sceptically. And fashions have a far-reaching impact. In 17th-century Berlin, people would say you saw blue rather than blacking out just before becoming unconscious, as you could no longer see pale blue – long the favourite colour in fashion and interior design. And those who could not afford the luxury of real coffee, as Frederick II introduced exorbitant coffee taxes, soon began to drink ersatz or false mocha – “mocca faux” – giving rise to the term “Muckefuck”. By the way, “Hugenotte” is in itself also an expression of emancipation, as manifested in the appropriation and ultimately self-confident use of an expression originally used as a term of abuse.

Semantics thus mark historical (and contemporary) social, cultural and religious movements: they immigrate and become assimilated by becoming appropriated by their surroundings. Ultimately, just like warp and weft, another cultural text, a third text, comes into being. Metaforo, metaphor is written on Greek removal vans. Here we find a reference to the mobility with which msk7 operates, not simply in the sense of transfer, in other words metaphorically, but in spatial and material terms too. For “Raum_Fahrt” (2004) (Space_Travel), the artists moved seven transporters the size of small removal vans from Berlin to Lodz. At various staging posts along the way they showed a small exhibition of works in the vehicles – each truck presenting pieces by one of the artists. One of the words from the following text appeared in two languages on each of the trucks: SPACE TRAVEL VOYAGING FROM BERLIN TO LODZ. The words formed new groupings at each stop, and exhibition venues, as well as the border crossing at Frankfurt/Oder, were also viewed from the perspective of transit: motorway service stations, public squares, galleries, the 1st International Biennale in Lodz. A concept of this type picks up poetically and subversively on elements of the autarchy of travelling entertainers who set up their booths

on market squares, at carnivals and fairs and whose performances function(ed) as something temporary, not dependent on fixed premises or an institution, because they are open to audiences not generally numbered among theatre-goers. At the chosen locations msk7 opened up the flaps on their white containers – which externally at least parodied the classic White Cube as purportedly modernism’s ideal exhibition space – and opened themselves up to an exchange with viewers. Perhaps in this initial msk7 project, as well as in subsequent projects, we can talk not of the now somewhat outdated concept of the participation of the viewers or players challenged by this type of unusual mobile exhibition, but instead of the notion of metaphors in practice. This signifies an attitude that displays curiosity about the reaction triggered when transposing one’s own work into another cultural and geographic context. As the work is transformed in this way, it constantly forms new spatial metaphors of borders and territories. That is particularly the case as the trucks themselves can by no manner of means be perceived as neutral, unlike the claims made for the White Cube, given that these vehicles have been and still are notorious suspects in illegal transportation. The situation is scarcely any different for metaphors, as they can also smuggle in ‘illegal’ meanings and associations under cover of the image that they primarily evoke – a sometimes trenchant, sometimes cautious means of criticising ideology. As an aside, “Raum_Fahrt” also evokes symbolic departure from the art college, coming to the end of one’s special training as a Meisterschüler and concluding all those “years as a wandering apprentice” familiar from the old saying and here given a contemporary twist. The model could be understood particularly romantic, yet if we read “Raum_Fahrt” as space travel, this also, with a wry twinkle of the eye, refers implicitly to reaching for the stars and conquering the dimension once described as a bird’s eye view, which now goes by the name of Google Earth.

In this sense “ping pong N-S-O-W” (2006) (ping pong N-S-E-W) continued this process of moving gestures, positions and symbols between cultures, and transposed it to Korea, where msk7 travelled in four large lorries for five days along the almost 250-kilometre border between North and South Korea on the southern side. When the side walls of the lorries were raised in the various stopping places, ping-pong tables in traditional Korean colour combinations invited passers-by to have a game. It is no coincidence that the ping-pong tables are set up as if on a stage – a situation that targets viewers and introduces an exemplary element into every game. The metaphoric content is as simple as it is explosive. Despite or precisely due to the playful situation, adversaries compete against each other. They play across a border, which, whether it is a net or a fixed barrier, divides territories, because it first of all establishes these. On the other hand, the ball overcomes the barrier in the course of play – a parable referring to the still unresolved Korean conflict and, in a broader context, to the Cold War in its impact on the FRG and GDR. It was actually the Korean msk7 artist Won-Yeon Chung who noticed that three of the group come from East Germany and three from the West, whilst she herself began to observe the

so-called reunification in Berlin when the first peace talks between North and South Korea were held.

The action "sfumato" (2005) in Schwerin was also rooted in the idea of vision. Here however the contrary was staged, with the gaze being blocked. To that end msk7 temporarily filled Schwerin's Friedrichstraße with artificial fog. On a Sunday in early summer, which endowed everything with clearly contoured shadows, this kind of phenomenon does not seem first and foremost to be "unnatural", which might appear to be the obvious conclusion if one gropes helplessly for an explanation, but the possibly atmospheric aspect of romantic blurring manifests itself immediately as smoke and thus from the aggressive, destructive angle of a potential fire. And here once again we find a reflection of the way in which the material can be transposed into the symbolic and vice-versa, which msk7 succeeds in deploying with piercing simplicity. Suddenly the fog has apparently rolled into the town, where it doesn't so much hinder the flow of traffic, but instead, by disrupting vision, sheds light on the nebulous aspects of economic and town-planning policies with houses standing empty and exorbitant rents. Walls of fog, as metaphors know, have something impenetrable about them. Driving into them can be just as fatal as crashing into a brick wall. Of course, long before that kind of extreme scenario, one first encounters the dizziness that sets in when you are visually disoriented. That is why, rather than an official police warning, we find an informal notice: "Fog – switch on your lights". That is the advice given by a handwritten sign on the edge of the fog-ridden zone. The street thus becomes a life-size stage and the fog, ever an effective theatrical sleight-of-hand, becomes an ephemeral reference to political machinations.

And as so far we have referred to the metaphor as a stylistic device from rhetoric, the striking dimension of the msk7 projects, which is also impressive even merely in terms of logistic considerations, lifts the rhetorical up into the visual register. In the case of the convoys of vehicles, the focus is on maximum visibility; the red lettering is visible at some distance in "Raum_Fahrt", the capital letters are four metres high in "blümerant". Whether we think of a vehicle or a letter, it is only when they are linked together that we find, alongside the massive corporeal presence, the semantic layer of meaning, which enables a different reading in each recombination, but also sends out a different optical signal. This kind of prominent visibility appears to be a prerequisite for the positioning of the artists themselves as well as for external perception of them, which can ultimately transform mere visibility into recognition. The spatial, temporal, media and mechanical components of experience are expressed beyond the psychobiographical dimensions when vehicles are driven and journeys are conducted along borders. These kinds of borders are political, geographic and cultural, but above all they are linguistic borders. Sometimes they can be suspended in play, for example when hitting the ball back and forth in ping-pong or indeed when looking at art, whilst it certainly cannot by any

manner of means be claimed that one could leave them behind playfully. A border is not just simply a place. Instead it is shaped by the experience of exclusions and inclusions, of peripheries and centres, whose relationship is not at all one of co-existence but instead one of dependencies and hierarchies. Any case of defence allocates a particularly prominent status to these borders. msk7 thus conceived settings, in which certain borders are tested, transgressed either in reality or symbolically, which at times took the form of the group adopting an actionistic approach and drawing on their overview perspective to stake a claim to public space and public consideration, a topic addressed repeatedly. This radical combination of the everyday and self-evident with the utopian is a hallmark of msk7 projects.

Hanne Loreck