

IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD

ALLES GLEICH SCHWER

BY HELMUT LANG

CONVERSATION BETWEEN NEVILLE WAKEFIELD AND HELMUT LANG

NW: The title of your show "ALLES GLEICH SCHWER" can be interpreted in a number of different ways. But in its most straightforward incarnation it suggests that everything is of the same weight, by which I take it you mean that all activities are in some way equal.

HL: As one of Jenny Holzer's works states, "Everyone's work is equally important." I believe that the approach of creative equality whatever one does is one of the basic rules of human coexistence. There is a similar kind of importance to mastering a process regardless of what it is that one is attempting to achieve. But consequently, I want it to be considered on another level so that it does not only suggest that things have the same difficulty or weight through the commitment of activity. I wanted "ALLES GLEICH SCHWER" to be concerned with the ideas and feelings that are fundamental to human existence, a consideration for everyone's evaluation of which weight or importance one wants to contribute for oneself in a time of changing values.

NW: Is the implication there's no hierarchy between the different kinds of activity that you've chosen to pursue?

HL: For me personally, there is no hierarchy.

NW: Most of the pieces are new works that are shown for the first time. *Séance de travail 1993–1999* is a piece that was a collaboration with Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois, and I'm wondering the extent to which it functions as a retrospective element, both in that it's comes from a previous body of work and also it speaks to your own past in a way.

HL: *Séance de travail 1993–1999* was created in 1998 and I feel it has enough relevance today. It reflects excerpts of my work, but equally important, it extends to the earliest expressions of individual and social existence. The audience gets involved without asking and becomes part of the piece itself.

NW: In the sense that it collapses the idea of projection and reflection into a single plane?

HL: And you have to take it from there.

NW: *Arbor* is the largest of the new works. How did it come about?

HL: *Arbor* is about the maypole formalities. It carries with it a horizontal and vertical communication implemented. The symbolic aspect travels in both directions.

NW: The symbolism being that the pole is connected to the underworld and also the human and the spiritual?

HL: I see it as a vertical conductor but also as an element that connects humans. It has the capacity to be a transmitter of events and meanings and although it has mythological and folkloric resonances, I feel it is quite relevant today.

NW: And then there's the symbolic aspect, which has to do with the phallus, fertility and the ritual celebration of potential.

HL: The ritual celebration of potential is probably the most elegant association connection with phallus and fertility I have ever heard anybody say. The ritual celebration of potential includes for me a natural as well as a man-made angle.

NW: And to that extent, it's an interesting connection with the Life Form pieces, which are also about growth and potential. In referring to both planting beds and graves, they also suggest a kind of short-circuiting of life and death.

HL: The beds represent a living force, and while life implements death, it leads to an engagement in existence and inevitability, an audit of life forms themselves.

NW: It's interesting that, given the symbolic richness to all of this work-the maypole with its invocation of pagan fertility rites, the Life Forms' symbolisms in terms of life and death and rest and activity and all of that stuff-you still seem more interested in the formal problems or solutions. Is the symbolic content secondary? Do you even think about it at all?

HL: What happens to me in the work process intellectually and form-wise is that I approach a piece with a perception or an idea, which then is condensed and layered, broken up and again collected and suddenly taken over by another. It becomes an interactive struggle for balance for the importance of form and the importance of content.

NW: Right. And also I think there's no such thing as free association [laughs]. You're always doing things that describe your preoccupations, even if you don't start out from that premise.

HL: I guess unconscious and actual content often merge...

NW: It's giving form to what you don't know, as opposed to describing what you do.

HL: I like the idea of shedding any kind of preconception.

NW: It's interesting, because when we first started talking about it there were pieces that were much more figurative, in the sense that they seemed to invoke, or actually demand, a human body.

HL: I probably started there unconsciously because of what I know, but it became clear that it was not the issue that interested me right now. I became more involved with the idea of human needs and not the human form.

NW: Some of the iconography you've worked with in the past has found its way into the show. I'm thinking particularly of the mirror ball and the eagles, both of which existed as elements in the design of your New York store. And I'm wondering what kind of transformation you've had to make to bring them into this very different realm.

HL: Both pieces served me as raw material. They have very traditional meanings and are highly ornate. I think I sometimes demand change for myself and, consequently, I implement change of context, form and content of the found object.

NW: In terms of the invocation of freedom, power, fascism and so on, it's very loaded material.

HL: So it became impossible not to engage this object into a broader cultural ecology and dismantle the traditional boundaries and values of aesthetic and cultural status.

NW: It's interesting that the formal pairing and mirroring that runs through the work also makes itself felt in the symbolic content, which seems often to be about marriage of opposites, life and death, freedom and fascism, and so on. The eagles now seem more like sculptures of angels...of heavenly beings rather than terrestrial power.

HL: I wanted them to be relieved from the pressure of an artifact and to be looked at as openly as possible.

NW: Yeah, of all the pieces that's maybe the most dramatic intervention into a kind of pre-constituted idea.

HL: The perception of feelings has changed with the redefinition of form and surface, which I think is consequently what I am interested in.

NW: [Laughs] Lovingly crafted and equally lovingly destroyed...

HL: Louise Bourgeois said recently "I have always said that materials are just materials and that they are there to serve you. The subject is never the materials but what you want to express". I believed her.

NW: Would you say that's also true of the bumper pieces?

HL: I'd say that to the extent that they use recycled and manufactured materials they still speak to that idea. Not having a formal training, I felt less obliged to use traditional distinctions between sculpture and painting. What I'm interested in is replacement forms that break the classical frames.

NW: And like relationships, they have this history of impact and abuse which itself carries a certain kind of beauty.

HL: [Laughs] But also protection. They are also end pieces, obstacles to be overcome that mediate between the interior and the exterior.

NW: You describe your working process as essentially reductive. It seems that you often start out with ideas and materials that are quite elaborate and then gradually strip them of ornament and tradition to become these quite minimal enigmatic forms.

HL: I only find it interesting if it is the logical consequence of opulence and if the work is demanding it.

NW: Right. When we first started talking, you were following a direction that seemed to have much more to do with notions of skin and sentience, and that starting point seems to almost be entirely stripped away. I was thinking about the "surrogate skins," which are perhaps the clearest expression of that original intention, and it struck me that even there you are using accumulation as a form of erasure. .

HL: The surrogate skins for me are layers of opportunities and contain on each layer ideas and possibilities. Every layer is equally important. In their invincible collectiveness they accumulate

a certain weight. The last layer is literally the "skin," and the final result, although it could have been stopped nearly at any given point.

NW: Sometimes it feels almost as if what you don't do is as important as what you do.

HL: Yes, it is a process of accumulation, elimination and knowing when the piece is strong enough to fight you.

NW: How does this relate to the idea of the ideal, and particularly the role of imperfection as compromising something that becomes too pure.

HL: I would not even call it an imperfection. It is rather that in the deviation from the expected of the unexpected, it is possible to find the new and the need for mystery and enchantment.

NW: Do you believe in the life of objects? I mean, without getting too corny about it, that there is an aspect of animism, of spirit core, to some of this.

HL: Not in a rigid sense. The idea of soul is simply about a certain form of impression that you want your object to have, comparable in a sense to when you see a person for the first time and look at them but don't speak to them. You take away a self-made impression that goes beyond appearances, and you yourself influenced that vision. This aim is true to the object.

NW: Is that encounter also reflective of another encounter-namely, between classicism and modernism-that has in some way or another underpinned your sensibility? I'm wondering about the extent to which modernism is about the introduction of impurity into classical ideals.

HL: I'm only interested in classicism if it is genuine and not used to cover weakness. The need of modernism is implemented in reevaluating the relevance of former guidance, symbol and rules.

NW: It's the difference, perhaps, between a process of discovery and one of illustration? I think this kind of working process also allows the end result to be a question rather than an answer, and I suspect that is important to you.

HL: My initial ideas are never my outcome-rather, a framework of thought. I want the end result to be visually strong and emotionally layered.

NW: It's perhaps the Zen version of the final outcome-that the exhaustion of the process of looking is itself the end result.

HL: That conclusion might pre-date any formal art.

Neville Wakefield is a writer and commentator on contemporary art, culture and photography. He currently is a senior curatorial advisor for PS1 MoMA and the curator of Frieze Projects at the Frieze Art Fair. He is also the creative director of Tar magazine, first issue to release, October 2008. Neville recently organized the celebration of designer Adam Kimmel at Pitti Immagine Uomo held in Florence. He collaborated as the guest editor with W Magazine on their annual Arts Edition, November 2007 and again for the 2008 edition. He is a co-founder and co-producer of Destricted, a series of films that address the issue of sexuality in art. Neville curated, Helmut Lang – Alles Gleich Schwer, at Hanover's Kestnergesellschaft.