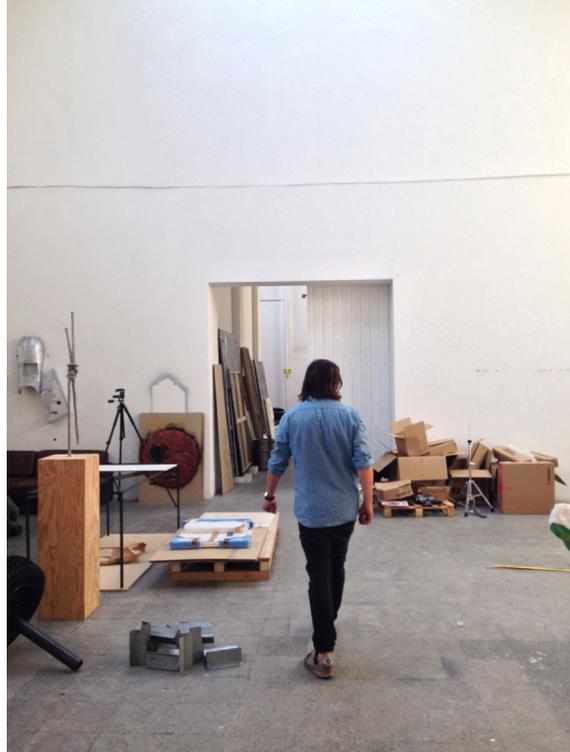


( n d k s )

AUGUST 2015

## Interview with Michael Sailstorfer *Talking Tuesday – what a sculpture can be!*

<http://www.indechs.org/interview-with-michael-sailstorfer/>



**Can you tell us about your practice please?**

At the beginning, it is always sculpture as a medium which is in the focus: what sculpture can be. Then, what matters is finding the idea one wants to realize, and how to translate it into the right materials. I believe the idea determines the means and materials. It is a three-step process: research – idea – realization.

**Among others, you are well known for your outdoor interventions. Many of these by now iconic works, such as “3Ster mit Ausblick”, “Wohnen mit Verkehrsanbindung” or “Waldputz” originated when you were still a student, and exhibition venues and eventually also financial means might have been limited.**

That’s right, I started realizing my first pieces outdoor since as a student I didn’t have the possibility to exhibit in art galleries, museums or institutions. I’ve always wanted to do things and at first it was easier to realize the pieces at the countryside because that’s where I come from and where my parents did live: I could actually use their property and the infrastructure to install pieces in the landscape, like I did for example with Waldputz, Heimatlied, 3Ster mit Ausblick or Wohnen mit Verkehrsanbindung.

**Were such circumstances crucial factors, influencing or even generating these works in the first place? Could you produce works outside the studio today with the same focus, drive and passion, even though your exhibition, technical and financial situation has considerably improved?**

I think it wouldn’t make any difference. Still today I am often invited to realize pieces for outdoor shows. When I started producing works for gallery spaces, the works got smaller, more suitable to the context, catching the viewer on another level: for instance, through sound or smell – you might call it fourth dimension – filling the space with non-visual means. And yet, whether I conceive my works for indoor or outdoor exhibitions, the question remains the same: what sculpture can be. All works rely on some kind of contrast. They engage with the outdoor or the white cube environment in a different manner, though always generating a similar kind of tension. If one places a piece like Zeit ist keine Autobahn into a gallery space, the materials and the smell recall a car workshop rather than a gallery. I think it is probably the same with pieces that are installed at the countryside; there is always some kind of contrast that is important – even necessary – for the pieces.

**Another dominant aspect in these and more specifically in works such as "Zeit ist keine Autobahn" or "Freedom Fries am Arbeitsplatz" is the technical aspect and incorporated machinery. Do you have a weakness for mechanical tools?**

Mechanical tools or motors are not a concern in themselves. Honestly I don't like motors that much. Quite often they serve the idea of relating time to movement, defining a timeline for the pieces. They also help visualizing a certain kind of personification of the objects used. For example, the hairdryer with the microphone in Anna or the car tire in Zeit ist keine Autobahn have an animated quality to them, appearing as beings with a life of their own, performing autonomous actions.

**When considering such works, one assumes endless fiddling around until a new work or even idea for a work materializes. Is this true or do you rather have an idea and realize this through clear technical planning and consequent execution? What does the production process look like?**

A piece does always come from a clear idea. Through a consequent technical planning, I try to stay as close to the initial idea as possible. Mostly, it's the case that things are removed rather than added. Quite often the pieces turn out even more minimal than the first idea was.

**Often your works indicate art historical links, such as "E-Moll" or „Reaktor“ remind of Bruce Nauman or „No light“ of Felix Gonzales Torres. Are these conscious or subconscious decisions?**

I'd say it's quite a conscious decision. Especially Bruce Nauman, but Gonzales Torres as well, are artists I spent a lot of time with and I did a lot of research about. At a certain point it came pretty natural to me using their language as a material just like other materials which then become part of my pieces. I include this kind of references to other artists' practices into my work quite often, and quite intuitively.

**Obviously, spatial conditions are important for you as a sculptor. But interestingly you do not only work 2- or 3-dimensional but often even 4-dimensional. Sculptural works incorporate sound, air, smell or even taste. Your works are tangible even when not seeing them. Can you elaborate on this quality?**

These questions – how smell and sound can become part of a sculpture – have been very important almost since the very beginning of my practice. Working with sound and smell also has a very economical aspect to it: you don't necessarily have to use a lot of materials to build a sculpture that fits the whole space, when the space is filled with non-visual elements. Moreover, these decisions have the viewer engaging with the exhibition space and the art piece in a different way. When you for instance enter the Boros bunker, from the very entrance you can smell that popcorn is produced somewhere. I like the contrast of the bunker, of its massive architecture and the very playful idea that goes along with popcorn. What pops up in your head are kids' parties and movie theatres, and I like this combination.

**One could even go further and argue a 5th dimension through your deliberate choice of titles. Just as the viewer may feel/smell or hear the works without seeing them, they titles may already wake associations, that not necessarily link directly to the work. Hence, the works materialize not only without seeing but moreover without smelling or hearing anything. Where do you see the importance of a title?**

For me, the title is a hint helping the viewer opening one of the possible doors to understand the work. Or, say, it's like a trace for the viewer to follow my ideas. Coming back to Zeit ist keine Autobahn, if one looks at the work bearing the title in mind – time is not a motorway – one gets that the sculpture with a rotating tire, rubbing its rubber off, is about speed, about life, about time. I think it leads the viewer towards the right direction.

**Your Works often come in batches. There are more than 30 „Antennen“ and „Knoten“, and more than 10 „Zeit ist keine Autobahn“ and currently you are working on many masks. All works are unique, yet come in a certain seriality. Can you elaborate on this approach?**

The reason I produced several is because I mostly conceive the works for specific exhibitions, specific spaces. Certain works – such as the antennas or the knots – function better as forests, seemingly populating a space, and so I created several of them. At the current exhibition at Kunstverein in Wiesen, we for instance installed fifteen antennas in one space and I think that the room is of much greater impact than having only one antenna on display. The same counts for the knot sculptures – and for Zeit ist keine Autobahn. At a show at SMAK in Ghent I had a space with all five Zeit ist keine Autobahn pieces. Each piece remains unique and has its own character, and yet, installing them in one space, one gets an interesting energy field. That's the reason why I quite like to think of my works in series.

**Are you works project based, hence if the moment would have been right, a work like „Raketenbaum“ could have as well happened today or are the works somehow (even abstractly) based upon each other and reflect a certain moment in your career?**

I see my pieces as building up on each other and reflecting specific steps in my career. Therefore, I'm not sure if I would be interested in doing a piece like Raketenbaum at this very moment, since I am rather interested in more sculptural work.

**Nearly all works touch at the same time upon a certain romanticism ("It might as well be spring" (this is an exhibition title, not a work title!), Tragedy (the newest work "Tränen") or critique ("Anna") but always come with a good portion of humor. Is this an important factor to soften or even underline its core message?**

The portion of humor in my pieces is not something I add very consciously. I think it pervades them quite naturally. Like the titles as well, humor is another way for the viewer to easily step into the pieces and discover other layers the works can unfold – besides romanticism, tragedy or critique.

**As we have mentioned many of your works have been realized in Nature and currently you are exhibiting at the CentrePasquArt in Biel and at Kunstverein Wiesen in Wiesen. Both are excellent institutions, yet Biel being a 50 000 inhabitants town in Switzerland, Wiesen even just counting 1000 residents, both are located rather outside the typical metropolitan art centers like London, New York or Berlin. Are these major hubs important for you or do you rather reflect on each individual opportunity and project?**

Both is true: on the one hand, I choose venues which allow me to realize or show specific projects. On the other hand, I keep exhibiting in bigger centers because there you have a much wider audience. Thus, the venues are chosen if they can be important for the next steps in my practice.

**What's next?**

...To build the next important piece, I think.