



Andreas Fiedler in conversation with Thomas Scheibitz

SAMPLE AREA FOR FORMS OF THINKING

Thomas, it is generally difficult to approach or describe your works through language. Even in your painting, any semantic definition reaches its limits relatively quickly. How can a work like Plateau mit Halbfigur be put into words? How would you describe it?

I've always talked about it colloquially as a sculpture—a sculpture constructed in the traditional sense, from the inside out. In the past, a distinction was made between additive and subtractive sculpture. Additive sculptural work—sculptural objects, object-like sculptures. Today these terms [*Plastik* and *Skulptur* in German] are mixed, but the basic thinking about the processes and results has probably remained the same. *Plateau mit Halbfigur* is an examination of contemporary sculpture or the concept of sculpture in general. Further details would be illustrative or would require pictures more than language.

Descriptions are especially difficult when what is being described—like this sculpture—evokes concrete images in memory that nonetheless remain extremely vague or constantly shift. All the elements on the plateau remind us of something—and in the same moment, this image dissipates again.

The possibilities of using language to capture the things we see or are reminded of are not the same for every viewer. We used working titles for the individual figures when we talked about them. If I could describe it really precisely, then I would end up with widely understood forms or things like “building,” “letter,” “face,” etcetera. But ultimately these are more like figures of thought or precisely developed, universal things, designed with a high degree of conceptual precision and yet with the greatest possible universality. In my statement in Volume I, I also talked about a sample area, a sample area for forms of thinking.

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It all started a little over two years ago when I asked you if you would realize a project here at the KINDL. But I had to emphasize that it would be in the Kesselhaus, a space with a height of 20 meters and an enormous volume. Do you remember your first thoughts on how you wanted to deal with such a space?

Yes, I first thought about an exhibition and not a site-specific situation. Of course, such an invitation is an honor. On closer examination, you realize that it requires an exact preparation and a precise consideration of possibilities and feasibilities. This alone greatly influenced my reflections on sculpture and painting, on color, colored areas, and spatial things.

It probably also forced you to think about your sculptures in a completely different dimension.

Ultimately, here you can see that an invitation is necessary, because otherwise I wouldn't have considered a site-specific work based on my daily process in the studio.

Can you explain a bit about this working process in the studio? How did you proceed?

Most things I do in parallel. I have a sculpture studio right next to a painting studio, and I recently set up a third, more intimate studio for myself. I move back and forth between these places every day. They feed into each other. One influences the other, just like every picture I find in a magazine. Then I let the project rest and continued working on other things. Of course, the best ideas come from doing, or when you do the opposite of what you meant to do. And so ultimately it came together very easily. And I knew relatively quickly that there could be three, four, five, or six designs at this scale. These took shape surprisingly quickly. Then it was about the feasibility studies and the requirements, materials, surfaces, weights, and ultimately a budget or a volume for an idea.

And, specifically, in the Kesselhaus we also spent a long time talking about critical questions regarding the height of the sculpture based on certain experiments.

We had a few "model days" when I first started to put a model or finished sculptures from my studio in the space to see what the shape does, what the color does, what the materiality does. In the second step, we brought rolling scaffolds and materials into the Kesselhaus, moved around the

space, and considered the scale, the perspective, the eye level, the horizon height, and the light. This made increasingly clear what I had always rejected: site-specific work, which had previously been quite foreign to me, because I actually believe that a work must have a consistent form and a certain quality of being finished in any place. Of course there are more and less advantageous places. It's something special to develop a work just for a certain place—only for this place and no other.

Back to the dimensions of the work. In a space like the Kesselhaus, which is about 20 meters high, the question of the height of the sculpture of course plays a crucial role. In the context of his painting, Barnett Newman said that it is not a "question of size" but a "question of scale."

That couldn't be expressed more precisely. The room would actually suggest using overpowering tactics: you can show size in an overwhelming way. But you can also show size at a scale. We both agreed on that fairly quickly.

Barnett Newman also speaks of a necessary "human scale." In all your works, whether in painting or sculpture, this relationship to the human body is always central.

Absolutely. The human body is influenced by factors. I like to talk about the "known sizes" that surround us, and what instinctive condition causes us to call a door a big door or a small door, for instance. So where does it start, and where does it end? What scale does this have to do with? Ultimately, the scale goes back to our body, because this is the only meaningful comparison we can have. Of course, we can apply this to a skyscraper and a bridge, just as we can to a small or large sculpture. A drop conceived as a reservoir. Or a gate, perhaps thought of as an entrance. A shoe and a face conceived as a facade. These are instinctive orders of magnitude that actually cannot be described in greater detail, or that ultimately have to do with instinctive measures or instinctive uses of dimensions.

And at the end of this intense phase, there was a more or less binding design.

Yes, but of course the designs came out of the extensive, long process of work and research. Ultimately I was able to draw from this in order to put these things on a plateau in a distilled collection.

The previously published Volume I of Plateau mit Halbfigur offers insight into this extensive research, which is fundamental to your work. Let's take a

look at a few specific examples from this catalog: One illustration refers to Donald Judd and the works that he set up in the middle of the Texas desert in Marfa. Judd thought very carefully about how his art should be exhibited and what would be the ideal conditions for presenting his own work. Do you have a specific idea about what the ideal setting for your work would be?

Yes absolutely. That's why I really appreciate the Marfa property as an idea. It's a total work of art of the highest precision. What's great about it is that it's conceived based on his own work, and that to him a kitchen situation or a library situation is just as important as developing spaces for Kabakov, Chamberlain, or other artist friends—both indoors and outdoors. That's not often the case.

And when a space is already very defined like the Kesselhaus? This enormous space has its own face. It has prominent traces of its former use and is thus anything but a supposedly ideal exhibition space, as the White Cube is often called.

Yes, the question is also whether the White Cube is an ideal exhibition space. Considering Marfa, a converted military facility, sometimes it's not so bad to be faced with conditions that are only halfway ideal—precisely because these semi-ideal situations invite you to take on different challenges or different ways of dealing with something. And, of course, one could mention the Kesselhaus, which has a kind of industrial romanticism. From a purely formal perspective, a repurposing of such places is a major task, and of course it invites us to respond to it somehow. From a social perspective, today many production sites of the past have become places for visual art, theater, or housing projects. This could be another subject for investigation: Tate Modern in London, the Zollverein in Essen, the Museum Küppersmühle in Duisburg, or the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The list is endless.

And what served as a guide for you?

Especially in terms of the presence, the approach to the space is crucial. It should by no means be something illustrated or reflected. In such a space, you have to give the things you might have changed or simplified a bit in a White Cube a little more precision and power. And this is certainly an interesting challenge. Like I said, this space it is not about overwhelming, but about a possibility. Of course, as soon as they enter the Kesselhaus, in the first few minutes visitors will look up, down, to the left and to the right. But during the installation we noticed that if you

are somewhat familiar with the space, strangely enough, it is not that big anymore, not at all.

In addition to Donald Judd, there are many other references in the first volume. It would surely be wrong to say references—let's just call them materials that you collect. In his text, Julian Heynen calls this as a “materialized stream of consciousness.” Can you explain a few of these associative references? Why did you include a work by Hans Baldung Grien in the first volume, for example?

The work by Hans Baldung Grien, the drawing of a face, is shown on the left side of a double page. On the opposite side is the interior construction of a large sculpture by Dubuffet. Grien's delicate drawing of a human physiognomy, drawn almost like a scaffold, reminded me of a picture I returned to for my research. It was about Dubuffet and architecture. Dubuffet is also an artist that I used to study often, and then, two or three years ago, I first had the opportunity to enter one of his sculptures. This was a special spatial situation and a special spatial experience. On the one hand, it is about the technical feasibility, and on the other hand, about how one tries to design it, to reveal it or see it as set. With our construction methods, when things were unclear, sometimes it was very beneficial to ask the technician, carpenter, or woodworker how he would do certain things, in the sense that they have a technical beauty. This organic aspect visible from the outside in Dubuffet's sculptures was transformed into the very graceful drawing of a rod-like system as a supporting element from the inside. I think this results in a beautiful parallel, visual stringency to a roughly drawn face by Hans Baldung Grien.

In the catalog there is also a picture of a full-scale replica of a ship that was apparently shown at the World Fair in Paris in 1900.

Of course, that was also a deliberately large and overwhelmingly exhibition situation in the Grand Palais. It probably was really about overwhelming the viewer. It's more this “house in a house” thing. These are things that you can easily see at every boat or car exhibition these days: it always has a special effect when things that are actually meant for outdoors are situated indoors. Ultimately, Roman Signer's opening exhibition here at the Kesselhaus was a very similar situation: an airplane that you would otherwise see in the air or perhaps at an airport is hanging in an exhibition space. This is a kind of shift in media that seems interesting to me. This is why I wanted to include this picture from Paris.

. . . and then a mural from Pompeii.

A mural from Pompeii is interesting and important here for aesthetic reasons, because today you probably can't imagine exactly what this house or these murals looked like when they were new. We view these things in a similar way to the previously described industrial romanticism of a used space. In that case, it is a space destroyed by the volcanic eruption and worn by the time that has passed. And, based on our understanding of surfaces and spaces, this seems incredibly fragile, aesthetic, and somehow special. Today this is called "hierarchical proportion," which I think is a very good symbolic term. After all, it is not these strict sectional views and cross sections, but hierarchical proportion that has this showing or explaining and seeing aspect of the whole. I see something similar in these Pompeii structures. Perhaps it is also about a central perspective and symmetry, axes or illusionistic things that alter the space. This is an interesting aspect that we also have here in some surfaces of the sculpture or in sculpture in general.

All these examples make up the aforementioned "materialized stream of consciousness"—or, in other words: they make up the research materials that you are constantly collecting. Can you describe the status that this material has for you? Although in my opinion one cannot speak of role models or direct references, these research materials influence or permeate your work as an artist.

How could I describe this? Most things are extremely pointed results from other writers or artists, just like pointed generalities that are not necessarily attributable to an authorship. Of course, you can collect this in the sense of a visual-studies collection of things—or, so to speak, as the tip of the iceberg of an author who might have spent his life arriving at this moment. The point I have in mind, which I continually come back to, a model in a sense, is the inventor of visual studies, Aby Warburg, who with his panels and visual studies brought together the "school of seeing," the "school of remembering," and the "school of origins." And perhaps it's about comparing things that are incomparable and yet exist alongside one another. Or things that are similar but come from a completely different direction. In any case, these are things that—to come back to the beginning of our conversation—are not necessarily describable or that cannot be quickly put into words. Even when every image has a caption and its origin is clear, in combination or interaction they have a different dramaturgy or produce a different result.

From design to realization—the installation at the Kesselhaus took over two months. During that time, countless decisions had to be made. And here it was a process that involved construction specialists.

After talking to the architect and bringing in a scaffold, we had to start from an ordered processuality—that is to say, what material is there first? Which color follows from it? Will materials be colored? Will they be painted later? After they are installed or before? Of course, it's also a way, how should I put it . . . I would say it's the "beauty of a logistics" that is necessary. This means that things can come together around me. And then you have the opportunity to touch them and build them, or vice versa.

And many questions didn't arise until the installation, because certain issues simply didn't exist in the model. But in the final size, at a height of over eight meters, you are suddenly confronted with certain problems that continually require specific solutions. For example, it is striking that each of these realized figures has a completely different surface. Are these things that became clear to you while the process was ongoing?

As a concept sketch, I had already decided that the seven elements would either be all the same or different, or that the material should be linked to the respective form and meaning as precisely as possible. On the other hand, this type of construction also relies on things that exist as semi-finished products—and which you use to assemble or develop something. Or, through research, it is possible in advance to refer to a precise volume that can be produced with certain semi-finished products. It requires a static self-evidence. You need a visually steadfast self-evidence, so to speak. And things can only be developed step by step—from the cardboard model to the volume model to the visual model to the final model. These are definitely three or four stages that play a role at this scale.

And why was it important to you that these surfaces are so different?

Every surface already has a different "visual" chain of derivation. You recognize materials from other, perhaps familiar environments. With the addition of color, there is another intention that can steer the viewer in one direction. The effect of different light sources is another crucial point. Everything is linked to everything else. The treatment of screws, joints, plastered joints, sanded surfaces, removed layers of paint, protective coatings, and even valuable coincidences. Ultimately you have to have intuition. Finally, it was the special sunlight that was very present during the installation. The exhibition will run for a good nine months.

Winter light is another aspect. The low sun shatters the sculpture visually through the window gratings of the Kesselhaus. These are all things that everyone can see. And, let's not forget: It was a lengthy and important process to adjust the artificial light, to pay attention to the shadows cast by eight light sources. One evening I modified two larger surfaces because the lux value of the artificial light had brought the surfaces into another conceptual, chromatic context.

Let's talk about the title: Plateau mit Halbfigur. How did the title come about?

All of my titles for sculptures and paintings come from my own solitary collection of titles, phonetic compositions, and terms, numbers, or names, as well as lived biographies or things. And instinctively it was clear from the beginning that a sculpture like the one we see here needs a name that is not so narrative. One that describes more philosophically but still depicts a parallel world.

It's a plateau, not a pedestal. It's also not a platform, as it might be called in architecture. Geographically, "plateau" refers to flat, higher-altitude areas. But here there is something like a step, right? This step could be understood as an invitation to enter the sculpture. But the sculpture is not meant to be entered. Still, this step was important to you. Why?

Hmm, as an invitation to enter it . . . you could see it that way. But just as important to me was the area as a fragment—not as a pedestal, which would have to be a rectangle or a square or a circle. Even in the model, I noticed that the question of what to call the base needs a precise answer. I wanted to design something that would show something fragmentary, because it was not about a traditional pedestal, but really about an open area, a plateau, visually and statically stable enough to hold and contain the figures. Conceptually, the still-life- or exhibition-like situation of my sculpture studio contributed to this. I often see prototypes, half-figures, or fragments there, while making things or putting them in storage or even when viewing them while walking by.

And the term Halbfigur [half-figure]? You speak of a half-figure, in the singular.

The so-called half-figure is meant as a figure of thought, as a prototype. Its imprecision is what the half means, so to speak. Something that does not want to be precisely described.

Yes, since half-figure isn't meant in the art-historical sense. You also mentioned the term "semi-finished product." What do you mean by that?

Semi-finished products—that might sound like Wittgenstein, but it's a nice term from the technical production of objects, machines, and everyday items. These are prefabricated forms made of raw materials such as plastic, metal, or wood which are meant for further processing. A term from my apprenticeship as a toolmaker, the profession that I originally learned.

Let's take a closer look at and name the individual elements on this plateau.

We have to imagine that these elements form a collection that only as a group shows the sculpture as what it is. And, in my repertoire, I also have some ways to combine things that derive an amplifying function from each other. As working titles or terms, one could call the individual elements of this complex sculpture a drop, a gate, a building, a letter, a shoe, a bridge, and a face. As an element or prototype, these things in turn stand for reservoir, entrance, house, information, human scale, and facade.

And, in combination, these elements undergo a marked distillation and take on an enormous complexity.

A sculpture of this size must reflect a complexity—the way our world is, the way our world is built, so to speak. It would certainly have been possible to find a theme such as a column or basin, a tree or an animal—which can be just as complex, but was too formal for me, too one-sided, as a theme. In general, in most of my sculptures, I pose the question of the stage, model, architecture, or, in this case, due to the size, the question of the monument, as a suspicion—all interesting contextual questions that would also call for usefulness or repurposing. For example, I would like to design theater scenery or a stage for a band which works like an amplifier for the respective musical form. In the case of *Plateau mit Halbfigur*, the question is—and this is probably the complicated thing about the freedom of assertion—whether it can be useless and yet compelling or significant here. Whether the work can show something like a distillation. To what extent a precision or a generosity or a formulatedness has to go in order to get to this point, which is hard to describe. This is the big and endless question about art that must have a form. Radicalism in subject matter is also always a question of form.

Drop, gate, building, letter, shoe, face, and bridge—could they also stand on their own?

Yes, of course, these are things that could also exist on their own in other situations, but not in the interaction of size, color, form, and materiality as in this sculpture that we are talking about now. And that's actually a kind of grammar, I'd really like to call it, that I can use to build a "sentence-picture," so to speak.

In many reactions to the sculpture it is apparent that people make use of attributions such as: It is like an alley or looks like a piazza. If you walk three meters further, you suddenly see a street lined with buildings. We automatically and self-evidently use concepts from architecture and from our experience of cities. Plateau mit Halbfigur apparently very direct evokes memories of experiences in the urban space.

I would be delighted if I managed to develop a sculpture that has a conceivable suspicion of a stage, monument, and architecture.

Hmm . . . stage, monument, architecture . . .

Still, the concept of sculpture here is irrefutable for me, site-specific or not.

Translated from the German by Anthony DePasquale

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