

Katharina Wendler in conversation with Stefan Alber

Studio Stefan Alber, Berlin, February 2018

KW: *So far you have only shown me photos of your umbrella sculptures, so I am very happy to finally see them in the studio today!*

SA: Same here! I have not yet fully documented the works, and the details are definitely important. However, I am not yet completely finished, the orientation of the handle is not yet perfect..., but standing in front of a work, the feeling one gets from it is totally different, in this case, from the umbrella, this object. Only then it is really possible to view it, to walk around it, to grasp the proportions and to perceive it as a sculpture and not only as an image.

KW: *Are the umbrellas a new work?*

SA: Yes. There is an earlier version, a completely black one, so to say a kind of basic version from 2016, but the colourful version, as you are looking at it, is new, almost a variation – a topic that reappears in my work frequently.

KW: *Do you construct the umbrellas yourself?*

SA: No, but I change and combine many a detail. Umbrellas are industrial products, mass articles that are nowadays primarily made in China, namely as fashionable utilitarian objects, varied and produced without any visual and qualitative pain threshold. I especially notice that when I order online and I have not only the image, but also the object in front of me, just like you do right now. For my work, I prefer the classic, well-crafted walking-stick umbrella sported by the stereotypical fine Englishman clad in suit and bowler hat.

KW: *Did you select the colours or change them? Or do you start working with the umbrellas as you find them?*

SA: I collect variations, by now having compiled a comprehensive collection of colourful umbrellas. On the one hand, they serve as photo objects, and on the other, as constructive elements. I always combine different models and forms, focusing on the proportions as well as on expanding or transforming the object. In doing so, I am interested in the form, the material, the segmentation, the colour schemes and where irritations in the coloured circle arise, for example. I have developed a clear notion by now, and I am looking very purposefully for what I need.

KW: *Tell us how you had the idea to work with umbrellas in the first place. You had mentioned briefly that everything started with a photograph.*

SA: To be precise, it began with a photograph that I took in Hong Kong. I saw an umbrella merchant on the street and took a photo of an opened umbrella. Suddenly, this coloured circle was available to me as an image, fitted into the format of the photo, and it abstracted immediately – although the object, the umbrella, is very familiar and clearly discernible. It is not about garbling the photographed item; the photo shows too many details like the structure, the seams and the textile of the umbrella. In any

case, I showed this photo in my first exhibition, titled “Umbrella”, at the HfBK in Hamburg. The photograph from Hong Kong became the lead image of the exhibition and was also part of the exhibition, however, developed and cambered on the stick of an umbrella, like a real one.

KW: So the motive was transformed from an object into a photograph and back into an object.

SA: Exactly. It is a fundamental motive that is reflexive, but also definable in different ways. I can name it clearly: “umbrella”, then it is about the umbrella. But I can also rename it and, for example, refer to the coloured circle, whereby the motive attains a different meaning in terms of art theory. Concurrently, the motive has become a kind of stock photo – a small witty wordplay on the side [“Stock” meaning “stick” in German]. I have created a stock photo database, in which I collect images as this one that I can use and title repeatedly in new ways. The motive itself is varied only minimally.

KW: Does this mean you collect “model images” that stock photos essentially are, or better: prototypes?

SA: Right. The only variation consists in changing the perspective when taking the photograph or to reduce the colour values to black and white, but apart from that, I go with the geometry of the umbrella. With these images as starting points, I continually abstract, making image objects for which I pin large-format photos of the umbrellas to the wall and add elements of a real umbrella to it, such as a stick or a handle. So I point out time and again: It is indeed about an umbrella. It is what it is. We only encounter it in various stages of the alteration – be it as a real umbrella, be it as a reproduction, be it as an image object, be it as a sculpture.

KW: I would not so much think of these works as ready-mades; the found objects are adapted to one another too closely, and you do in fact strongly intervene artistically, for example by connecting the umbrellas by an altered element, the handle. Although the umbrella in itself is familiar, an entirely new level is opened by the combination; it is, after all, not just any umbrella.

SA: What is important to me in these works beyond the mere object is communication, between the two umbrellas that relate to each other as well as with the viewers, challenging them: What do you see? What do you want to see? Is it funny, serious, sad? In any case, the umbrellas can somehow not be separated, like a happy or unhappy couple.

KW: Simultaneously, we are dealing with a rather tender, fragile situation, an act of balance. One gust of wind and, as we all know, the umbrella is gone.

SA: Certainly, we are melancholically pre-shaped by numerous images and motives, especially from film and music – “standing in the rain”, “waiting for somebody”, and so on. I think that the sculpture attains something physical, like a figurine, a dancer; a friend of mine has once drawn a comparison to a ballet figure by Oskar Schlemmer.

KW: The umbrella does consist of quasi-geometric shapes: circle, semicircle, cone.

SA: That may be the main reason why I find umbrellas so interesting: Because so many shape-wise elements are inherent to them. Of course the umbrella as such has changed over time, has been revolutionised in terms of construction, mechanism and textile. These factors are indicators of progress, zeitgeist and tradition.

KW: *You have not only created colourful, bright sculptures resembling sunshades, but also black and transparent ones, what about those?*

SA: The sculptures are part of several series that are created by an assembly kit principle, in other words, by the continual joining of new parts. The character of the individual work is also defined by this, but this usually only happens during construction. Because the handles always point into different directions like the hands of a clock, a different mood is being created for each work, so to say. The works were also created in varying contexts. I always create works very specifically for an exhibition. That is a peculiarity that I pose myself almost like a task – to really listen in to what is the basic thought of the exhibition, why is this exhibition being done? And if there is already an exhibition theme, I try to take it seriously and to react to it.

KW: *When you are invited to a group exhibition that already has a title or a superordinate topic, you see this similar to a working mandate?*

SA: At least it is an opportunity to question my work in that respect.

KW: *Does it occur frequently that a specific work of yours is being requested? Or is it more likely that you are being invited to come up with something yourself?*

SA: It is more likely that I am being invited first, and the works that I will show or create arise subsequently. At the moment, most exhibitions are an occasion for me to produce something new. But I also backtrack works or photographs, and for that, an exhibition is always a good occasion. For example, in 2011, I participated in an exhibition with the title „Su Nero Nero / Over Black Black“ at the Castello di Rivara in Turin for which I returned to a place that I had discovered already a year before during a journey through Romania. On occasion of the exhibition, I went to Copsa Mica for a second time, one of the gloomiest places in Europe, one might almost say. There are ruins of a huge former industrial plant for the processing of carbon black and non-ferrous metals. The region is completely destroyed, the environment catastrophically contaminated. On my journey, I passed by the place coincidentally on a train and felt like in a movie. I had not even known of its existence and was totally dazed. I took photographs on this first trip there, but rather as research material, and it was clear that I had to return. So I went there again and collected further material, and a large installation with photo works and sculptures emerged from it.

KW: *For the sculptures, you collected contaminated trash on-location, didn't you?*

SA: Essentially yes. They are pieces of the plant's ruins that I have presented on plinths in the exhibition space. They look like miniatures or architectural models of the region. This idea also stems from the fact that the inhabitants of Copsa Mica – some impoverished people do continue to live there – take the toxic junk from the industrial plant and reuse it as construction material. At the same time, I created a new photo series for which I photographed trees and plants as being part of the soot-contaminated nature. During developing, I overexposed the motives up to the point of completely dissolving into black. The image has thus been impressed on the paper, but it is not visible any longer. Impossible to discern anything except for blackness – the motive recedes to the background. I have many such works with photography as a point of departure, which turn out to be photographs in the actual sense but do indeed refer to the medium. Often, photography is pivotal for a thought process, it serves my research and memory, it helps me to perceive places, encounters and situations, to *better* perceive them. In the first instance, it creates something permanent that I can resort to time and again.

KW: Then it is possible to say that you employ photography in a twofold way: On the one hand, you collect material; you have an image archive, a collection of exemplary image material, of prototypes that do not tell a specific story. And then, on the other hand, there are those photographic works that concretely relate to just that, the other, i.e. a story, a place, a time.

SA: That is true, but it is not always possible to separate it so clearly from one another. Is it material or motive? There are works in which I focus on the material, the pure material, thus, the tangible. The question about surface or intention is already inherent in the word motive. And the intention always stays related to the place and the situation. There is indeed no photograph without a respective background, be it visible in the image or not.

KW: But only you know the background, not the viewer. I cannot recognise from the outside standpoint that the umbrella photographs have been taken in Hong Kong. For me, the stock photos are, just like the umbrella sculpture, totally free from temporal and spatial context – ok, maybe not entirely free because I could draw certain temporal conclusions about the material, for example. But I would not be able to recognise that I am looking at a typically Chinese umbrella, neither in the photograph nor in the work itself.

SA: Only the very first image was created in Hong Kong, and many others followed at many other places. You are right insofar as that the series is indeed not tied to specific places, which is of course not true for my memory, but at least for the perception of the viewers. Oftentimes, the act of photographing is more important to me than the photograph resulting in the end. Similarly, I am interested in our handling of images: What kind of photographs are they, where do they come from, who took them and why. That can be tedious because nowadays, we are completely bombarded with images, keywords Google and Instagram.

KW: Images do not only represent, but they also become part of our memory, even if we did not experience the pictured situations ourselves. But surely this is not what you are aiming at in your work.

SA: No and yes! It is definitely great if, as an artist, one succeeds in triggering something in the viewer and to stay remembered. I also find it interesting that by consuming images we get a feeling of knowing ever more. People live with a massive overload of images and get ever more dependent on them.

KW: Did you study Photography? Or Fine Arts?

SA: I started out at the HfBK in Hamburg with the goal of studying Fine Arts. Previously, I had completed a carpentry apprenticeship but actually spent my entire spare time in the photo lab. I photographed and developed a lot during that time, tried out many things, experimented much. However, the photo classes during my time there somehow did not entice me that much; apparently, I had missed some amazing photographers, Wolfgang Tilmanns and Anna and Bernhard Blume had just left, and there was a gap in the photo department. And that is how I ended up with the sculptors. I studied with Wiebke Siem, Andreas Slominski and briefly, also with Haegue Yang, and ultimately, sculpture did turn out to interest me more than classical photography. Maybe that has to do with my prior carpentry apprenticeship. In photography, I was missing the third dimension. The balance, or better, the border between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, still occupies me today. I try to grasp this “in-between”

in my works. That is why I fold the photo paper and make it three-dimensional, laminate it, experiment with it.

KW: So then we can say that the photographic technique is a further option for your sculptural practice; you use it to fathom the space between photograph and object. Photography serves you as material.

SA: Very much so. Surely also because images or motives tend to quickly annoy me. The photo paper itself is often good enough for me since it intrinsically has many qualities and offers many possibilities of working with it. I can develop it, but I do not have to, I can let motives disappear via exposure, I can go abstract and decide myself how much I want to influence.

KW: Do you have your own photo lab or a darkroom?

*SA: I do that here in my studio. Of course only at night, but that is the best time anyway to work in the studio for hours on end because of the silence and the temporal limit of dawn. When the day begins and the light comes up, it is usually enough. But this race against time that occurs sometimes, or generally *time* itself, does indeed represent an important topic in my work. One work of mine, by the way, is titled “Waiting for Dawn”.*

KW: Compatible with the topic of time are also those works for which you expose photo paper for various amounts of time to specific light situations, without chemically fixing it.

SA: I am currently working on several concepts here. For example, I experiment with grid systems that take on the qualities of the wall in the exhibition space, in this case at Dziedov. The first idea was to fold the photo paper according to the raster of the wall’s bricks, but there is also another version for which – similar to the production of a photogram – I lay a kind of grid on top of the pre-exposed photo paper, and the rest of the paper is being post-exposed throughout the duration of the exhibition. In this way, at the beginning of the exhibition, the works are light drawings rich in contrast, continuously losing contrast by the post-exposure up to the point of monochrome equalisation. These works are thereby defined directly by the lighting and the duration of the exhibition, and time is rendered visible.

KW: Is there at all a final stadium to these works, or does the transformation never end?

SA: A final stadium does not exist for these works, they are permanently in process. Since I do not fix the paper, it remains to be light-sensitive forever, either as a static image of darkness or as an acting image of light. I often title works from this series as “Reflektoren” [“reflectors”].

KW: What role does craft play in your production? Do you delegate a lot or do you do everything yourself?

SA: My studio is actually more of a workshop. I do almost everything myself and have to come up with new techniques time and again, for example I have developed a device for accurately folding long sheets of paper. I experiment and try out many things. Naturally, there are always more professional solutions for everything, but they are not necessarily the most interesting and, of course, one cannot necessarily afford them.

At the moment, I actually also find myself confronted with the problem of the dwindling number of photographic production sites and providers as they gradually disappear. In the past, it was much easier to develop and process analogue photographs. Today, this service is being offered almost

exclusively by specialised companies that produce in high quality, albeit for high prices. Similarly, sources for photographic paper are becoming ever less.

KW: In the course of digitalisation, analogue photography has turned from a mass medium into a niche product – what does this mean for your work?

SA: Ultimately, that probably does not make such a big difference for the production of my works – after all, I hardly develop photographs in the classic sense, rather I experiment with the various possibilities that photography offers, also digitally.

KW: Have you ever changed a work after it was done? Have you ever looked at an earlier work and thought of it as a little embarrassing?

SA: Not really. I do usually create a work for a specific reason, based on considerable thought. In the best case, one sees a development in one's own work of which difficult pieces are a part that one would not do again in the same way.

KW: To conclude, I would like to ask you how much time you spend at the studio. Do you continuously work on something, also independently of upcoming exhibitions? Or do you need an occasion?

SA: In the studio, it is always just an experiment. In the exhibition, on the contrary, a work becomes a work, it becomes what you are doing. Although there are always innumerable reasons not to go to the studio – too cold, taxes to be done, money to be earned –, I do end up spending quite a lot of time here, in fact, all the time that I can spare. But that is easier for me when there is a concrete occasion. Otherwise it can happen that I lose myself, doubting everything. An exhibition helps me to focus, to work accurately, to push the cause forward and to bring something to light.

Stefan Alber (b. 1981 in Bruneck, Italy) studied Fine Art at Hochschule für bildende Künste, Hamburg and China Academy of Art, Hangzhou. Solo exhibitions include the Museum of Art and Design, Ljubljana, Kunstraum Innichen and Galeria Franz Paludetto, Turin. Group exhibitions include the Finstral Collection, Augsburg, Kunstpavillon Innsbruck, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Kunstverein Tiergarten, Berlin, Funkhaus, Berlin, and Sudsudvestur, Reykjanesbaer, Iceland.

<http://stefanalber.com/>

Katharina Wendler (b. 1988 in Hamburg, Germany) is an art historian and exhibition maker, based in Berlin. She studied Cultural Sciences, Arts Management, and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg and Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. From 2013-2017 she directed Safn, a project space based in Berlin and Reykjavik. Currently, she works as Head of Studio for Karin Sander in Berlin, as well as a freelance curator and writer.

<https://www.katharinawendler.com/>

exhibition

Stefan Alber
Multigrade / Object
March 8 – April 15, 2018
opening: Thursday, March 8, 2018, 7-9 pm
Dzialdov, Maybachufer 43 / left souterrain, 12047 Berlin