

Christin Kaiser in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Studio Christin Kaiser, Berlin, September 2021

KW: What are the main ideas behind “Future ruins”?

*CK: The first considerations for the exhibition at Åplus began with a photographic work, or rather a photographic series (although I often struggle with series) entitled *Baumwall [Tree Wall]*. About two years ago, I began to photograph different locations. By the end, the series comprised only two places: apartment buildings on the Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin-Friedrichshain, and the Haus der Kunst in Munich. These are two examples of, one might say, “ideologically tainted” architecture....*

KW: ...and also two very contrasting examples...

CK: ...yes, exactly, both of which were apparently considered problematic by the subsequent generation. An attempt to temper, or even to actually hide the buildings, was made by planting trees in front of them. The example in Berlin involves two multi-story apartment buildings with balconies, constructed in 1949-51. Shortly after the war, Hans Scharoun was appointed as city architect to develop a master plan to rebuild the destroyed areas in Berlin. For the heavily bombed district of Friedrichshain, he devised the ‘Wohnzelle Friedrichshain’ concept, which included a development of apartment buildings. Working together with architect Ludmilla Herzenstein and two other architects, he designed the two buildings. They’re strongly characterized by a modernist formal language, i.e. they are based on a style of building design that was dominant before the war. In the middle of construction, however, there was a paradigm shift on the part of the Soviets towards urban planning according to the socialist model. This also explains why only two buildings from the original development plan were completed. In short, Scharoun’s plans were incompatible with the “16 principles of urban planning”, i.e., the socialist ideal of architectural aesthetics.

KW: The far-reaching consequences of this urban planning policy can still be felt and seen in Berlin today. In comparison with the long row of imposing, ostentatious Soviet structures on the Karl-Marx-Allee, the apartment buildings clearly stand out.

*CK: Exactly. The ‘ostentatious structures’ as you call them, were still being developed during construction of the apartment buildings. Nevertheless, due to the economy of absolute scarcity at the time, you couldn’t just tear down construction projects that had been started. During my research in the Berlin public library, I came across, among other things, an article in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* from that time, in which a Soviet architect is quoted as advising “to hide the imperialist buildings behind fast-growing poplar trees”. In every sense of the word, he proposed to relegate the buildings into the shadows.*

KW: The Bauhaus, or more specifically, Bauhaus architecture, was not very well respected at the beginning of the GDR. As far as I know, it took until the 1960s before a reappraisal of the Bauhaus was even approved, and another 10 years before it was admitted that the housing problem in the GDR could only be solved with industrial mass production based on the 1920s. Thus began the triumph of prefabricated housing—the ‘Plattenbau’ [concrete block, high-rise apartment buildings].

CK: In fact, in the GDR this changed over time. On the Karl-Marx-Allee, or Stalinallee at the time, buildings—so-called ‘workers’ palaces’—were built in the socialist ‘gingerbread house style’ of the early stage of the GDR, even though I don’t really like that term. Modernism was considered to be too formal, elitist, bourgeois: something the working class couldn’t relate to. The buildings on the Stalinallee were supposed to be objects with which the workers could identify; they symbolized the bond with homeland, tradition, craftsmanship, and so on. Later, of course, with the ‘Plattenbau’, less representative and more functional architecture emerged.

KW: *In your photos, logically enough, one doesn’t see much of the architecture at first, even though it’s the only element in the picture that’s in focus. But the tree trunk in the foreground, whose bark is blurred into an almost ornamental structure, dominates the image. The photograph of the building, somewhat smaller than letter-size paper, is then also surrounded by a much larger frame, the greatly enlarged and coarsely grained section of the photographed tree bark.*

CK: The works are a photographic approach to architecture, but also an investigation of image and background, or image and environment. I usually don’t like to constrict my images within a frame. On the one hand, the frame eclipses the materiality of the work, and on the other hand, I want to add another narrative layer to the image. *Baumwall* is the third photographic series in which large-format mounts are used. I like this form of presenting photography, which for me also has something sculptural.

KW: *The picture thus has several levels, and the architecture which lies hidden behind the tree, seen only through the peephole, shifts further and further into the background behind the tree-bark frame. What about the Haus der Kunst in Munich? I can hardly imagine that this colossus can be hidden by trees.*

CK: In that case, they planted linden trees, which grow much more slowly and have narrower trunks. In Munich, it was not so much a matter of ‘hiding’ the building, but of ‘tempering’ the National Socialists’ aesthetic. In the 1970s, the area around the Haus der Kunst, especially the section in front of it on the street side, was redesigned. On the building itself, the staircase that used to run the entire length was significantly reduced in size, and a row of linden trees was planted in front of it to counter the monumental architecture. The building is supposed to be restored by David Chipperfield’s studio, who, as I understand it, wants to take away the trees, widen the staircase again, and practically restore everything to its former state, which has notably triggered some criticism.

KW: *Can you say something about the frames of the photos?*

CK: I welded the steel frames myself and then had them hot-dip galvanized. You come across this weatherproof material in public spaces all the time: Street lamps, bollards, railings, and bike racks are often made of galvanized steel. I like the camouflage-like quality of it, and also the coarseness, the irregularities and quirks in the material.

KW: *Apart from the photo series, there are also two textile works in the exhibition, both of which reference architectural elements: Center Arc and Dorischer Ärmel [Doric Sleeve]. Center Arc is a textile wall in the form of a quilt, representing a fragment of a wall with a round arch.*

CK: There is a precursor to *Center Arc*, which I showed at the Kunstverein Leipzig in 2018. I had an exhibition there entitled *Hausdurchsuchung [House Search]*, and developed a 3 x 10 meter textile wall especially for the space. Similar to the exhibition at Åplus, it also started with a photographic series. I had photographed building facades that had been given a new, smoother ‘face’, so to speak, through subsequent thermal insulation.

KW: *A facelift for houses.*

CK: Yes, something like that. Based on that, I started to work associatively with textile thermal insulation.

KW: *Did you happen to be influenced by the down jacket trend?*

CK: I was literally thinking about a down jacket for the building.

KW: *I was just kidding, of course, and it sounds a bit zeitgeisty now, but in the long term it's definitely important to consider which sustainable and resource-efficient techniques we use to heat or cool our homes and cities.*

CK: True. And the connection isn't that far-fetched either. But the work entitled *Gewand [Garment]*, which I showed in Leipzig, is not only influenced by the down jacket, but significantly by the architectural theory of Gottfried Semper, who, among other things, dealt intensively with the origins of architecture—with humankind's stylistic, handcraft, but also cultural practices. The terms ‘adorn’ and ‘clothe’ play an essential role here, one also speaks of ‘clothing theory’. The title *Gewand* thus plays with a double meaning (garment and wall), which—just like the term ‘Decke’ (German for blanket and ceiling) for example—was also addressed by Semper himself. He saw a connection here, which I have taken up in the work and brought into the present. It's exactly these kinds of connections that interest me.

KW: *Is the new textile wall a continuation of the previous work? What makes it different?*

CK: The new work grew out of reflections on the architecture of imperial baths in ancient Rome. When I visited the Caracalla Baths in Rome four years ago, I found the fragments of the ruins to be very fascinating. Both the architectural dimensions and innovations impressed me. In the course of further research, I then found out how the baths were used—that they were not meant exclusively for use by the political elite, but were essentially intended for the lower classes (society in ancient Rome was divided into 2 groups, 1% upper class and 99% lower class). Citizens could go there, and their slaves could too. Not much is known about how exactly things were organized there, but very likely everyone sat together in the same water. In addition to the baths, the buildings also housed an infirmary, a sports area, a library and a theater. Music was played on the terraces, and prostitution was probably also allowed. And the whole thing was inside this huge, overwhelming architecture.

KW: *The rabble had to be kept happy. Actually quite clever to provide free wellness facilities to distract the public from possible dissatisfactions... Is it a coincidence that the title is phonetically similar to*

Center Parcs? (*I must admit that, for me as a child in the 1990s, I always dreamed of going to these places.*)

CK: No coincidence! One of my daughter's school friends was apparently on vacation there recently; I was amazed they still exist. When thinking about wellness centers, this bridges the gap (Arc) between the imperial thermal baths of antiquity to the tropical bathing paradises of the present day.

KW: *So the quilt is a reflection of a section of this thermal spa architecture?*

CK: Yes, exactly. I was really impressed by the architecture, by the ruins—especially the huge round arches. I picked out a fragment of it and translated it into textiles.

KW: *So you chose a material that is basically the opposite of its origin, a wall made of stone. The wall becomes a comfort blanket that you can snuggle into. We already briefly touched on the revival of the down or quilted jacket earlier; in the past, they were worn at most by people who lived in very posh neighborhoods, and now you can get artificial down for 15 euros at Decathlon. Of course, functionality comes first—down jackets are practical, they keep you warm and weigh almost nothing. Hence something has changed in our relationship to this garment, to this material, and I find it exciting how you illustrate changes to the 'shell', but do so by making a reference to architecture.*

CK: The 'shell' is definitely an important keyword. I also find the term 'skin' appropriate in this context—I'm interested in both architectural and textile 'skins'. The work *Gewand* in Leipzig was also based on this, in terms of color, and thus had an even more concrete reference to the human body than is the case with *Center Arc*.

KW: *A good transition to the work Dorischer Ärmel, which, as I see it, is a literal connection of a Doric column and a sleeve, that is, a part of clothing, the so-called 'second skin' with which we enclose our bodies.*

CK: This work further explores the ideas we just mentioned. The sleeve is, of course, an important element of a garment. I have connected it with an architectural element, the Doric column, which, if you turn it by 180 degrees, comes pretty close to a sleeve. For me, this also references the trees we talked about at the beginning. Ancient stone temple architecture has its starting point or origin in wood; wooden construction shifted to stone over the course of time. Hence, the column as a support is the unifying element here.

KW: *The sleeve nevertheless retains its characteristic shape and thus actually defies the strict architectural rules of column construction, which must of course ensure stability and thus rely on symmetry. The use of fabric and soft padding further emphasizes this conversion from the hard and solid to the soft and hollow.*

CK: Basically, I just have a lot of fun translating individual architectural structures into textile, and to think about how to best realize that translation. But it's not just about softness, it's also about other material properties of fabrics.

KW: *Which fabric did you choose for Center Arc?*

CK: The front is made of bluish taffeta, in reference to a bathhouse or the tiles in a spa. The back is a silvery functional fabric, cool and smooth.

KW: *Functional fabrics are also mainly found outside. Just like the floor, which I'd like to talk about briefly: you've completely filled it in with gravel. Did you also want to bring a bit of the outdoors into the gallery space?*

CK: On the one hand, I wanted to appropriate the space even more and get away from the classic white cube (the room at Åplus actually is a cube). In addition, the gravel prevents one from wandering through the exhibition space as a matter of course, even indifferently. It forces visitors to walk slowly. And yes, secondly, I also wanted to blur the boundary between inside and outside. The gravel reminds me of museum sites, like the Caracalla Baths are today. There, you walk along grave paths between the ruins.

Christin Kaiser (b.1984 in Erfurt, DE) studied Fine Art at Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg. She had solo exhibitions at Kunstverein Hamburg, Kunstverein Leipzig as well as Galerie Åplus, Berlin. Her work was exhibited in numerous group shows such as nGbK Berlin, Künstlerhaus Bremen, Kunsthau Hamburg, Galerie Jahn und Jahn, Munich, Galleri Opdahl, Stavanger (NOR), Produzentengalerie Hamburg, Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf, eigen+art lab, Berlin, and Museum Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, Santa Cruz, Tenerife (ESP). Christin Kaiser was a stipendist of Stiftung Kunstfonds, the Berlin Senate as well as the City of Hamburg. She lives and works in Berlin.

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Katharina Wendler (b. 1988 in Hamburg, DE, lives and works in Berlin) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences, Art Management and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realized and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin. In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format in conversation with.

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in conversation with is a curatorial format aiming at bringing people together through conversation and subsequent collaboration. Artists are invited to engage in dialogue with curators, authors, other artists, art historians, journalists or scientists and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are documented in writing, serving as text material accompanying the exhibition. They enable visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the artists' methods and of the artworks. in conversation with is based on the premise that it is the artists themselves who can best provide information about their works, their methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask. The project was initiated in early 2018 by Katharina Wendler in Berlin and is guest of various (project) spaces.

Exhibition

Christin Kaiser

FUTURE RUINS

September 18 – November 20, 2021

Opening: Saturday, September 18, 2021, 2–7 pm

Åplus, Stromstrasse 38, 10551 Berlin

www.åplus.de