

CONTROLLED FLOW: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CLAUDIA SCHMACKE AND LILLY WEI

I first met Claudia Schmacke in the late 1990s although I can't quite remember where. Wherever it was, I do remember the first time I saw her work. It was an installation of clear tubing that spiraled across the floor and pulsed to the hum of a small motor that pumped water through the sprawling circulating system like a heart. It was part deconstructed sculpture, part expressive, post-minimalist, three-dimensional drawing in space and I was greatly attracted to its transparency of construction, economy of means, ambitious scale and elegance. The utilization of commonplace materials to make art is certainly not a new trope nor is the blend of art and science but Claudia gave it her own distinctive imprint. There was magic in the ordinariness and magic in the transformation, the image spellbinding in its truth to engineering and hydrodynamics and spellbinding to look at. Who would have thought that plain water and synthetic hose—water plus the shaping of water by means of mechanized, industrial apparatus, liquid forced into a skin to make a temporary form—could be so dazzling? I have followed her work since then with the greatest interest and am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss its progression with her.

LILLY WEI: I have a vivid memory of my first encounter with your work, an installation of yours that I saw at Smack Mellon, the alternative space in dumbo, Brooklyn in 2000. Would you tell me about the history of that installation?

CLAUDIA SCHMACKE: That was "Ripple", one of a series of floor pieces which were based on the principle of rotation. The first of these spiral works were realized one year before, during my residency at the Chinati Foundation in 1999. The installation there consisted of two identical shaped, separated spirals. In one of them, water coursed from the center towards the periphery; in the other, the circulation was reversed, directed towards the midpoint of the spiral. The title of this work, "Lambda Lambda", was inspired by quantum physics; Lambda is one of the particles in quarks which can have different spins. In "Ripple", two discrete circulatory systems formed one spiral but the movement was still oppositional, there was one outward flow, and one inward flow. That was very difficult to see but it was the underlying structure of the piece and therefore essential. I am greatly interested in how difficult it is to perceive the complexities of movement. It was in Italy in 1990 when I was on my first residency that I became intrigued by movement. I was researching the impact of time and space in the work of Leonardo da Vinci and from then on, physics played an increasingly important role in my work.

LW: The next time I saw your work, you were still using water, but it was dyed with a toxic yellow green color, a kind of electric chartreuse, which has become almost your signature color. When did you first begin to use that color and why?

CS: I first used that particular bright green in "Ridge" in 2001. Although I had used strange greens in earlier sculptures, I had intended to leave the water undyed. "Ridge" was originally planned with clear water and transparent hoses but when I made the first tests at the site—an enormous bridge over the Rhine in Cologne, Germany— it became clear that this would be disastrous since nothing was visible. I had to re-think my concept or let the work almost disappear. So I added color. It became important conceptually, this introduction of the "artificial" into the "natural," the toxic color into the clear substance. From there it proceeded. When I was searching for a suitable color, I was already leaning toward a strong, poisonous shade. The pigment I eventually chose is used in water experiments to observe the dynamics of fluids and also in medicine as a contrast pigment in the observation of cells and flow.

LW: Will water and "toxic" chartreuse remain in your repertory?

CS: I don't think of myself as an artist who has a set of repertoires to be repeated endlessly—with variations. It's true that I work in phases, and if my interest is intense, I won't leave what I am working on for something new. I want to dig deeper. Hydrodynamics, chaotic structures and space-time are so complex. They always surprise me. I am also interested in the qualities of color. There are so many gradations, created by different flow. It can be foamy, dark, dirty or it can be shiny, fluorescent. Color also makes everything more visible. I value the process, not just the product. Therefore, I can't predict what I'll be making in the future.

LW: Who or what have been some formative influences on your work?

CS: I have always been as fascinated by science, dance and music as I have been by visual art. All of these disciplines are in my projects, in one way or another. I am also greatly influenced by visionary art, by people who reach for something beyond normal perception, who try to visualize invisible forces. The force that drives different disciplines is the same to me, it's just a matter of which disciplines one chooses but they are only instrumental. As for visual artists, I have felt close to the works of Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, Walter de Maria, Otto Piene, Hans Haacke, Robert Gober, and certainly Leonardo has also been a significant influence.

LW: Could you describe some of the key works in your career and why they were important?

CS: Some of the early works, like "Radiator" from 1990, were paraffin casts of real objects. "Radiator" was a critical piece because it was connected to the idea of fluids although without actually using water. Slightly later, I began to work with wash basins. I was very interested in the inner void, which could be filled, emptied, then filled, and emptied again. The exchange of identity between negative and positive space intrigued me. This duality of positive and negative led to the networks of tubing streaming with two different elements, water and air. It reflects how we receive reality as dualities. It is the otherness, the border between things, the interval that defines one element against another.

LW: Would you elaborate on the lavatory piece that you did in Poland for the International Biennale of Lodz in the fall of 2004? It was a haunting installation, like the opening of a film noir. I liked the fact there was nothing in the 15 seconds or so between the time the water had drained away with a gurgle—which sounded like a sigh of regret—and its silent, luminous return. How did you come up with that?

CS: The installation, “The Green Zone” / “Der Grüne Bereich” which I developed for Lodz was very much related to the Uniontex factory, the site of the Biennale. When I visited Lodz last summer, I was amazed by the complex which I thought should not be renovated. When I saw the remains of the washrooms, I knew what I wanted to do. I liked the set of two, almost identical spaces, each with four sinks next to one another. They were very dark and had a dark presence. I wanted to work with this quality and transform it. Conceptually, the installation was connected to the idea of duality, of appearing and disappearing. I also wanted the installation to give the impression of a larger structure, to stimulate viewers to imagine a hidden network. In principle the installation was not that difficult since it utilized the existing lavatories, but there were a lot of details to take care of. The basins filled simultaneously with dyed fluorescent green water by means of a pump on a time relay. When all four sinks were filled to the very top, the pump stopped and the water drained. The process was totally soundless until the very last moment when the pipes made a gurgling sound. The whole cycle took about five minutes. The rooms were lit by a single lightbulb, while the sinks were lit by hidden black lights, which illuminated the water causing the fluorescent glow of the water.

LW: I remember a video piece you showed at Plane Space, your New York gallery, in 2003. Could you tell me more about it and how video fits into your overall endeavor?

CS: That video, “ 14short pieces”, consists of short clips of motion: the flow of liquid, bubbles, drift, vortexes. The video served as a notebook, the subject was, as usual, movement, time and perception, filmed as close-ups. It was also a way to show processes that were not always visible in the final work. I interwove material, I filmed in daily life –like air bubbles in puddles created by heavy rain– into the film to create a random structure.

LW: And your drawings and wall pieces?

CS: The drawings of the past few years refer to movement and spin. Here I transfer movement through the body onto a two-dimensional surface. During my residency at Smack Mellon in 2002, I experimented with left hand and right hand drawings and drawings using both hands at the same time. I did some with closed eyes to see if they would be much different from those made with open eyes. They recall diagrams from particle physics in which the motions of quarks – the smallest particles –are tracked. The later drawings in that series –done in the same way– were scratched into the support, the paper replaced by acrylic plates of fluorescent green and other colors which caught the light in different ways. My installations are connected to the idea of

drawing. If one considers drawing as the trace of energy, my installations with tubing are drawings with a fourth dimension, time, the movement of the water seen as a function of time.

LW: Which installation of yours did you love the most?

CS: I consider "Ridge" inside the Deutzer Bridge in Cologne to be one of my most favourite projects. It was an extremely difficult space but because it was so difficult, the resolution was even more rewarding. The installation executed for "BrückenMusik VII" also had an acoustical component, which attracted an audience interested in contemporary music. "The Green Zone" for the "Lodz Biennale" worked also very well as a site-specific piece. I enjoyed the research I did for the project as I tried to integrate my installation with the history and architecture of the site. I also very much liked "Light Spots" (2003) for the Goethe-Institut Salvador-Bahia. This was an installation that fit in a tiny suitcase. It consisted of plastic bags I filled with water. For me, the wonderful thing about it was that it was so low-tech and transportable but still retained the essentials of my work.

LW: What has been your most difficult installation so far?

CS: It is the one I am working on right now for an outdoor sculpture project in Lippstadt, Germany. It is a very ephemeral installation called "Undine" sited in a stream of the river Lippe. It will consist of an illuminated vortex that appears and disappears at intervals. The project interests me greatly but it is very complicated technically. Not long ago, I thought it might remain a utopian public sculpture but, luckily, the last tests brought satisfying results which means I can proceed. After such a difficult process, I am thrilled!

LW: As an artist who lives and works in Germany, but is often in New York and other parts of the world, what do you think of internationalism and how does it affect your work?

CS: I think globalization affects us all; this is the age of diaspora. Personally, I am very glad that I have had the opportunity of living and working in places outside Germany. It is important to be confronted with other cultures and mentalities, and to experience other perspectives. Globalization is often defined as capitalist monopolies and art can act as a counterbalance to that. But globalization can also be defined in other ways. It also provides cultural dialogue and helps us discover our own cultural roots at the same time we discover other histories and cultures. As a German, a European, a Westerner, I think we still have much to learn about otherness and difference but I am full of hope that broader visions will prevail.

LW: How would you differentiate between festival art and an art of engagement and where would you position your work?

CS: Art is a way to engage the world around us and inside us; it is about miracles, speculation, vision and commitment. I think of festivalist art or spectacle art as something that follows market trends, driven by product, but no artist whose work counts does that. An art of engagement is concerned with process and shaping awareness; it is more difficult but it is the only means we have to communicate with the world. I would hope that my work is one of deep engagement.

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