

Atelier Amden

Exhibition Venue

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Katharina Grosse came to Amden in the summer of 1999, the first of many artists who would exhibit their works in the stalls of a barn. Since then, the use of that building has changed very little. Traditionally, Alpine farmers used barns briefly but intensively for a period of time defined by the natural cycle of the seasons. In winter, yearlings would stay there until they had consumed all the hay and the aftergrass. When there was no feed left, the farmer would drive the livestock to the next barn. Since these were scattered on farmland at different altitudes, the animals could be moved from one barn to the next, for each contained hay from the adjoining meadows that had been harvested and stored during the summer months. Most of the time they were empty, however, even in the days when their use was still governed by the rotating rhythm of cattle and hay.¹

The barn in which the works of art were exhibited—for the most part in the summer months after haymaking in May—is situated not far from the former home of the artist Otto Meyer-Amden and the farmstead that once supplied the hay for the barn in winter. In early summer, farmers used to drive their livestock up into the mountains to spend the summer grazing on the alp. While they were there, the farmers were kept busy making hay for the winter down in the village below. This was dried in the sun and stored either as hay (first cut) or as aftergrass (second cut). In autumn, leaves gathered from the neighbouring forest were stored in a loft next to the stalls for use as bedding.

When Katharina Grosse made her way through the snow to take a look at the land and the two small buildings in which she was to exhibit the following summer, the barn was packed with yearlings. Actually, the barn itself and its continued use were under debate at the time because of new animal welfare regulations, although few farmers had begun to adapt their operations. Those who believe in the future of Alpine farming have since implemented the necessary changes. They now bring fodder to their livestock, which they house in cowsheds that comply with the new laws. In Amden, therefore, the system of rotation has become history and most of the small barns that still dot the landscape are no longer in use. Left to deteriorate, they will probably soon be torn down if no other suitable use that meets local zoning regulations is found for them.

Is a Small Barn an Exhibition Venue?

When I invited Katharina Grosse, Anya Gallaccio and Anselm Stalder to exhibit on the premises of the former Grappenhof colony, Alpine farming was already in the throes of the changes described above, although this did not affect the project I had in mind. To give visitors to the exhibition *Viereck und Kosmos* an idea of the size of Josua Klein's farmstead, I had the artists mount works of art in various places on the lower slopes of the mountainside in Amden. That was only one reason for placing works by contemporary artists in different locations. In addition, I wanted to give visitors an impression not just of the village, but, more importantly, of the landscape that around 1900

1 On farming in Amden, cf. Hans Krucker, *Die Amdener-Landschaft und ihre Kultur*, St. Gallen: Fehr, 1919; most recent: Alois Stadler, "Zur Geschichte von Amden," in *Veränderung als Chance für den Wald: Ortsgemeinde Amden*, Basel: Sophie und Karl Binding Stiftung, 2006, pp.20–47.

had been so crucial to the *Lebensreform* (“Life Reform”) settlement and that has barely changed ever since. By cutting to the present, I also wanted to create a contrast that would effectively highlight historical events. The original objective was not to add a new chapter to the history of the village, although this is what has since happened as a result of the series of exhibitions presented in this publication. The barns have not been changed or adapted in any way to their new use as exhibition venues. One could even say that the barn in the Zand, where all the exhibitions have been held over the years, has actually not been repurposed at all. It still retains the atmosphere of its original function as barn and byre, although it is becoming increasingly clear that it is no longer used for cattle. The easily accessible mountains above Lake Walensee are now a popular destination for people from greater Zurich. To situate an exhibition venue instead of a barn in this landscape would therefore be a logical tie-in with its new purpose as a recreational space. And it is presumably just a matter of time before the landscape has been given over entirely to recreation. As I will show, however, even a conservative conversion of the rented barn to serve as an exhibition venue would have undermined the objectives of the project. Yet additional questions have indeed been raised in this connection in recent years: Can a building also be fallow ground? And, if so, how might that be of interest?

New Rooms for Exhibitions

In the history of modern art, artists have characteristically explored new locations and forms of presentation for their work. Institutional critique was a constant of the twentieth century, leading not only to a modified perspective on the purpose of museums, but also to an expanded concept of art. Since the 1960s, contemporary practitioners have propagated the practice of exhibiting art in locations not specifically designed for that purpose. Other sites for presenting art have proliferated while exhibitions in museums and galleries have begun to explore the nature of the venue itself.² The Surrealists were among the first to mount exhibitions in which curatorial and artistic methods joined forces to transform spaces for art.³ The series of exhibitions in Amden, however, did not and does not aim to permanently transform an existing space and its atmosphere. I am primarily interested in juxtaposing different orders, each of which should remain intact and effective in and of itself. The works of art are perceived in a context clearly indicative of the fact that the building was built — and used over several generations — for a different purpose. The physical presence of the barn has not changed very much during the many years in which it has been used to present contemporary art — actually a short period of time compared to the age of the building. Weathering and aging have not been kept in check; no modifications have been made to accommodate its new use. Nonetheless, that use has exerted a subtle, though not immediately perceptible influence on the identity of the building. The barn still stands empty for most of the year, as it has done for decades. The only indication that there has been a hiatus in its history is the sign on the façade, easily legible from the hiking trail, that reads “Museum”. But the meaning of the sign painted by Christine Streuli is not clear to the uninitiated passer-by. What kind of museum could it be? Or is it even the barn itself that has been singled out to bear witness to a slowly de-

2 On the more recent history of exhibiting, cf. Reesa Greenberg et al. (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996; Hans Dieter Huber/Hubert Locher/Karin Schulte (eds.), *Kunst des Ausstellens: Beiträge/Statements/Diskussionen*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002; Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History: 1962–2002*, London: Phaidon, 2013; Jens Hoffmann (ed.), *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, Milano: Mousse, 2013

3 Further reading: Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*, Cambridge MA/London: MIT Press, 1999.

clining agricultural tradition that has dominated Europe for centuries? These concerns have also been severally addressed by the writer, artist and art historian John Berger,⁴ and are an aspect to which we shall return, it having proven to be of greater interest to those who come to Amden specifically for the art than one might think. Can we perceive an artwork presented in this hybrid situation independently of the building in which it is shown and the landscape through which we have passed on the way there? As mentioned, using the barn for exhibitions of contemporary art has not altered the building, although the sign does attest to its assimilation of an additional context. Presumably only the gaze of visitors familiar with recent developments in art will appreciate these considerations.

Specific to Site and Situation

For a long time I thought that site-specific works were the crux of the series. But whether it is even possible, in this context, to draw a distinction between work, exhibition and exhibition venue is a question that haunted even the very first exhibition. Recalling what she did in Amden in 1999, Katharina Grosse describes having the feeling that a house had met up with a picture of the same size. Most of the exhibitions that followed did in fact link building and work. It is therefore absolutely crucial to this project that the space available to the artists for their work not be changed, and that the barn look to each new artist as if it had never housed an exhibition before. There is thus no reference to an “exhibition space.” We are talking here about works created specifically for an exhibition in this particular place in the mountains and also about a curatorial project. Can the concept of sculpture perhaps be broadened to embrace almost anything that happens in space — anything that can be perceived as material and volume? Does that make Atelier Amden itself a sculpture?

For the art historian Rosalind Krauss, to whose thinking I am much indebted, sculpture is not a universal category but rather historically determined and hence a precisely defined convention. The history of sculpture is very closely related to that of the monument. Sculptures have a function in the logic of representation and of marking. In consequence, they are generally figurative and placed on a pedestal that is distinct from the figure and hence mediates between it and the location. In the late nineteenth century, this logic began to lose sway, as demonstrated by the fact that artists began to treat the pedestal as part of the figure. Krauss cites artists like August Rodin and Constantin Brancusi, whose art is situated between the end of this process and the beginning of Modernism, as heralding the age of modern sculpture, whose overriding feature is that it is functionally placeless.

By the early 1960s, Krauss argues,⁵ sculpture could no longer be defined in positive terms, but only by describing what it was not: not figure, not landscape, not architecture, and not place. She cites a 1964 exhibition of minimalist objects by Robert Morris at Green Gallery in New York, some of which referred to the architecture of the gallery. The sculptures orchestrated the space; they were freestanding, they linked walls and floors, they were suspended from the ceiling, or they were placed between two walls. Sculpture was now the addition of not-landscape to not-architecture. Krauss also observes that the sculptors of her own generation since the 1960s no longer work exclusively according to this logic, namely the addition of not-landscape to not-architecture, but instead

4 On the relationship of the farming experience to art, cf. John Berger, “The Ideal Palace,” in —, *Selected Essays*, London: Bloomsbury, 2001/New York: Pantheon, 2002, pp.516–521. On the perception of space in a farming society, cf. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, New York: Orion, 1964.

5 Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp.30–44.

have begun to look into the potential implications for sculpture if landscape and architecture become part of it — an aspect that is self-evident in other cultures and in earlier centuries was common in the West as well. Labyrinths, for example, are both architecture *and* landscape.

Krauss visualizes sculpture's "expanded field" in a diagram that illustrates all the possible combinations of landscape and architecture, thus providing a fruitful means of distinguishing and understanding site-related works since the 1960s. In this diagram, the minimalist object takes the place of "sculpture." It is not sculpture, but it refers to architectural entities; it is not space, but it calls for the experience of space. One might also say that "minimal," here, describes the zero point from which artists expand into new forms of spatial work. The counterpart to sculpture, defined as the combination of not-landscape and not-architecture, is "site construction," in other words, the combination of landscape and architecture as exemplified by Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) at Kent State University in Ohio. In addition to the combination of landscape and architecture in site constructions, Krauss proposes the term "marked sites" to describe the combination of landscape and not-landscape. The latter are themselves landscapes, even while nullifying the experience of landscape. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), and Walter De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* (1968) are all a case in point. Finally, Bruce Nauman's corridors and works by Richard Serra or Sol LeWitt illustrate the combination of architecture and not-architecture, or "axiomatic structures," as Krauss calls them. Axiomatic structures build on the experience of architecture while simultaneously nullifying it in the artwork.

What Krauss defined in 1978 as an "expanded field" was not reality but rather a means of mapping the field in which artists were operating at the time. It was intended as a model to provide orientation and a deeper insight into the way artists had begun to investigate questions of space and spatial orientation — independently, incidentally, of a specific medium.

Exhibiting after the Performative Turn

Given the way my series of exhibitions in Amden developed, one might speak of their "expanded site-specificity," that is, of the exhibitions as a contribution to art and aesthetics in specific situations, as pioneered by Marcel Duchamp, for example, and more recently by the American artist Michael Asher.⁶ It was Asher, along with Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren, who spearheaded the institutional critique that emerged in the 1970s as a form of sociological inquiry. In their work, these artists aimed to encourage public thought and debate on the conditions under which art is produced (studio), distributed (art market) and preserved (museum/collection/archive). What they did in those years had a substantial impact on younger practitioners in the 1990s and is now firmly anchored in the history of art. Andrea Fraser and Mark Dion in the United States and Liam Gillick and Heimo Zobernig in Europe are among the younger artists who rose to the challenge, exploring forms of institutional critique under changed conditions at the end of the twentieth century.⁷ In contrast to Asher's generation, whose work attracted only small audiences in the 1960s, the artists who began work in the 1990s or later have operated in a context characterized by much more marketing and media attention. What I find interesting about Asher is how he has shifted from working on Krauss's "axiomatic structures" to works that prioritize participatory elements.

6 Kirsi Peltomäki, *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010.

7 Peter Weibel (ed.), *Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90's*, Köln: DuMont, 1994.

The question of how to exhibit in the wake of the performative turn is one of the most important challenges for me as a curator. I see Atelier Amden as a model that represents an attempt to answer this question. Some of the artists considered their works site-specific. When I, as a curator, describe the same works as exhibitions, I place more emphasis on the spaces that the works open up for visitors than on the way they relate to the site. Fundamental to this notion of an exhibition is the appreciation of art apart from the canonical structures of its presentation. The question “Where am I?” that according to Brian O’Doherty we ask ourselves in an installation, becomes even more consequential when the installation is not in a museum or a gallery. The art historian Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein has detailed the extent to which the Performative Turn of the 1960s heightened the significance of the relationship between place and space in art.⁸ She underscores the nature of space as process, space being where “language, medium, gesture, body, movement, visibility [fuse into] discursive topographies that engender emancipatory perspectives above all through their mobilization of action.”⁹ Several years earlier, theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte wrote about the necessity of having access to a performative aesthetic: “The dissolution of boundaries in the arts, repeatedly proclaimed and observed by artists, art critics, scholars of art, and philosophers, can be defined as a performative turn. Be it art, music, literature, or theatre, the creative process tends to be realized in and as performance. Instead of creating works of art, artists increasingly produce events which involve not just themselves but also the observers, listeners, and spectators. Thus, the conditions for art production and reception changed in a crucial aspect. The pivotal point of these processes is no longer the work of art, detached from and independent of its creator and recipient, which arises as an object from the activities of the creator-subject and is entrusted to the perception and interpretation of the recipient-subject. Instead, we are dealing with an event, set in motion and terminated by the actions of all the subjects involved — artists and spectators.”¹⁰

In the wake of performative art, exhibitions cannot be restricted to events in which art and artist involve the public; the choice of venue is also crucial. Artists of the second avant-garde in the 1960s gave works of art new forms and expanded their working methods, not only rebuilding the foundations that support our understanding of art but also giving new impetus to the business of exhibiting work, the consequences of which are gradually becoming apparent.

8 Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein, *Performanz und ihre räumlichen Bedingungen: Perspektiven einer Kunstgeschichte*, Wien: Böhlau, 2012, pp. 161–162.

9 — — *Ibid.*, p. 100.

10 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 22.



Katalin Deér – Gaden im Zand, 2010 – Foto: Katalin Deér