

With me everything is negotiable until the end

Two aesthetically certainly gratwandering exhibitions of last autumn: Matthias Tremmel showed sug zansibar fried war at EFES 42 in Linz, Edgar Lessig exhibited I thought I wanted to be there, but I wasn't sure at Stiege 13 in Vienna. Die Referentin invited Edgar Lessig and Matthias Tremmel to talk about their approach to art, to material and their way of looking at things.

Conversation **Edgar Lessig, Matthias Tremmel**

M: And now we are sitting in a café in St. Pölten to chat for die Referentin.

E: Yes, because if you calculate from door-to-door St. Pölten lies exactly in the middle. I even looked it up on Google Maps. Have you thought about something for our conversation?

M: Listen, what do you think about this: I believe that the artistic approach we have towards our projects is very similar. Just diametrically different. In principle, we're both funnels. Only with an opposed orientation. My work is a rather broad funnel so that people can slide into it. Almost like magnifying glasses that point somewhere – possibly to something diffuse, it's hard to say. With your work it's the other way round. They are concentrated, clear and concrete, but difficult to latch onto: The small opening of the funnel. But once you have latched onto it, you get into the vastness.

E: That's an exciting thought.

M: For example, your exhibition at Stiege 13, people have to know you and the whole thing to get to close to the work, don't they?

E: I wouldn't know, because I know myself too well. I can only repeat what some visitors told me, which I found quite beautiful. They didn't really know my work, went to the exhibition but could already connect to the chair piece due to the exhibition title. They asked themselves whether something had actually taken place, whether they were too early or too late, and then started to philosophise: at what point does too late become too early? Because by putting the chairs back up after a meeting, you're basically creating the potential for them to be taken down again. And to hear that from people who hadn't read Jasmin Mersmann's exhibition text beforehand – I thought of this as something very nice! But also with your show at EFES 42, I'm not sure how many people were able to discern your own interpretation of the work.

M: That's generally not possible, my works can only completely work out for myself. For everyone else, they function as a show. My approach to every piece of work always is: if a person happens to come in coincidentally, they must somehow be able to find joy in the space. But of course others aren't able to have my understanding of it. My work is open to everyone, but no one has the chance to decipher the interpretation the way I do.

E: If you dig deep, you might get close. You had an accompanying text that consisted of only one sentence: 'What is a knockout like you doing in a computer-generated gin-joint like this?'. I just googled the phrase and then realised it was from 'Star Trek: The Next Generation'. It's about this holodeck – specifically about an episode in which a bar is generated in it. That gave me access to your work. In the show I could then see fries painted green, and immediately made a connection to this very holodeck. The accompanying text works a bit like an Easteregg in computer games. You don't necessarily need it to apprehend your work and have fun with it. But if you put a little work into it, you feel like a king because you were able to look behind the scenes.

M: Like with your photo-poster piece, actually. There are five people sitting tightly packed on a sofa, behind them the title of the exhibition 'I thought I wanted to be there, but I wasn't sure' on a huge poster, looking at you. And in the second room the empty chairs.

E: Exactly! I did that to offer a look behind the scenes. To get a brief glimpse of my interpretation of the exhibition.

M: This whole internal coherence that you put into your own work is important to you, isn't it?

E: I simply need this structure so that works can emerge at all. There are so many possibilities and decisions to be made, I just need a certain coherence to come to a decision.

M: But do you really have a choice of possibilities? Sure, theoretically there is an infinite number of possibilities to choose from, but in fact there is only one: the possibility that fits the artwork and that is to be found, right?

E: True, but first I have to create a framework for myself, in order to be able to find that one possibility in it.

M: Sure, there have to be structures and boundaries, but for me these are often only spatiality and temporality. That's as far as I dare to limit myself. I shy away from that, am even afraid of it.

E: Me too.

M: But don't you do it?

E: Yes, by now. But it's scary because I'm afraid of missing something. But somewhere it even gives me certainty. Somewhere I have to start making decisions so that I can move forward and then revise them again.

M: With me, everything is negotiable until the bitter end. Anything is possible and it's only finished when the exhibition is fully installed. Before that, everything can change at any time.

E: But I do think that you make decisions beforehand too. For example, the materials were already fixed at the beginning of the show: wood, fries and this cloud material – your frame so to speak. And how the material then comes together as an artwork, that is the only possibility to be sought.

M: They weren't really certain, they rather emerged, but in any case I also move within frames, even if only to break them again. I often feel like I'm stumbling through frames like a clown in the circus ring.

E: By the way, surprisingly there was barely any smell of frying fat at your exhibition.

M: Well, when I was setting up, I fried inside every day. The smell was omnipresent. But I didn't even smell it anymore.

E: But the smell was too much for you then?

M: I've already done several works with deep fryers, and the smell of deep-frying is an extremely potent aesthetic medium that drowns out many other things. I didn't want to reduce it to just the smell of the deep fryer. That's why I radically aired out the room beforehand. And in doing so perhaps a touch too much. I would have liked the smell to appear only after you've been inside for a while.

E: It's difficult to control something like that in such an open space though.

M: Yes, but it also doesn't matter. It wasn't so necessary because the visuals were exciting enough anyway. The orange light plus the smell of deep-frying would have been too much as a sensual impression.

E: It's exciting how certain elements keep coming back into your practice but present themselves differently. You said that this time it was less chaotic – or how did you put it – more concentrated?

M: More certain, I was more certain this time. I think my works of the last six years were partly very overloaded because of an insecurity on my part. Precisely because I want everyone to get something out of my work and for that you have to cover a wide range of perceptions. The visual, the haptic, the receptive. This certain vagueness, whether it is a work of art or not, is also necessary to keep the art crowd from categorising a piece too quickly.

E: Which is always a bit difficult when you exhibit in an art space.

M: For sure, but still possible!

E: That's what I also tried to do with the works in Stiege 13. I fantasised about what the purpose of those two rooms on top of each other could have been and then created the narrative that it was a meeting place. That was the basis of this work and then there are just chairs inside and a photo-poster hanging on the wall. And then people were simply confused. I mean of course it's fun confusing people from fine arts, but if you're honest, everyone understands that it's a work of art – it does take place in an art space after all.

M: After two seconds they might get it, but in the first seconds there is a doubt, and that should be targeted. But one shouldn't reduce their work to this doubt alone. Nevertheless, every work needs a certain uncertainty in perception so that it can be perceived more openly and freely. But creating this moment in which one is unsure of what it represents, is a balancing act where one can easily do too much or too little. In my work "gebühnt tranchiertes narrationsimulativ_guerilla-ontologische machination" at the exhibition "eben" in Salzamt, there were, for example, boards, carpet, gelatine, video, eggs, ceramics, sesame seeds, plastic cutlery and neon light. That's already a blatant overload that can become repulsive. With this overload in place, it's rather difficult to get engaged with the artwork.

E: Well, but all your work is overwhelming.

M: Do you think the EFES 42 show was overwhelming too?

E: Definitely. But not in the abundance of the material, but rather how you used it. You enter and see some sort of wooden sticks standing up with green things in them. Then you realise that those are spray-painted fries, at the top there are some kind of plushies that colour the light and at the bottom there are wooden boards floating just above the floor. And oneself is standing right in the middle of it. It is precisely this brief overload that makes a clean sweep with your experience and through this you get to know the work anew.

M: Funny, because I was so proud that it was such a quiet work.

E: It is quiet, but this doesn't mean that it can't be overwhelming. My favourite comparison is the show at Secession by Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel, who carved drawers, reliefs and a bench. This bench stood where a museum bench would normally stand. It didn't say 'Please sit down', it didn't say 'Please don't sit down' either. In fact it didn't say anything at all, which is totally overwhelming because you're not told what to do. But it's only overwhelming at first. And if you can overcome it, you gain the freedom of choice.

M: Totally! A kind of space for action that enables one's own perception. It is therefore almost emancipating. I think art should actually always be subversive.

E: That's why I think being overwhelmed is not necessarily a bad thing. It radically changes your demand and common perception of this thing.

M: It probably depends on how one faces being overwhelmed. Deep inside of us there is this thing called acute-stress-response. This means, we react to an overload, to a momentary loss of control, either confrontationally or by fleeing. In other words, we take a step forward towards the unknown, or we take a lot of steps back towards the known.

E: That's a perfect closing analogy, isn't it?

M: Actually, in a way yes.

Edgar Lessig is at home in art, but also steps outside from time to time. He studied Fine Arts at University of Art and Design Linz and is currently completing his degree in Applied Studies of Culture and Art there. Most recently he exhibited at Stiege 13 in Vienna.

Matthias Tremmel prefers his narrative-simulated artworks to be deep-fried with pinpoint accuracy. After an interlude as a ceramics workshop leader at the University of Art and Design Linz, he is now devoting more time to fine arts again. Most recently he exhibited at EFES 42 in Linz.