

The Meteoritenwerkstatt

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Outdoor sculpture. Thomas Stricker is a sculptor who works with form, material and space. But the crucial dynamic in his work is the process itself and the conceptual development and permeation of his chosen media. With the meteorite atelier he created for 'Aussendienst' in Hamburg he looks beyond the conventional modes of drop sculpture, site-specific sculpture and the present mood of scepticism towards their relevance, and addresses the contemporary debate about art in public spaces from the perspective of classical sculpture. Even his choice of location for his artwork, situated far from the beaten artistic track in the Alsterpark (where the Harvestehudeweg meets the Milchstrasse), was of historical significance. Although the park is 'admittedly quite far from the city centre', it nonetheless occupies a central thematic position, for it was here that in 1953 Werner Haftmann organized the major exhibition 'Plastik im Freien' (Outdoor sculpture) with 50 contemporary works, now due to be restored and reappraised in the context of 'Aussendienst'.

The Truman Show – Hamburg's reality. On 31 May, one month before 'Aussendienst' officially started, Thomas Stricker began setting up his open atelier, a domed tent which was both the first of his sculptures as well as the studio where he would make his second and third sculptures. But it was also a kind of observatory, inspired by the designs of geodesic domes like those constructed by the American inventor, engineer and designer, Richard Buckminster Fuller. It housed an artificial world contained within its own cosmos, reminiscent of the movie 'The Truman Show'. In one of this film's key scenes the unenviable Truman is brought face to face with reality when a studio spotlight crashes down directly – and near-fatally – at his feet; yet his gaze up into the (studio) sky reveals nothing but the familiar expanse of blue. In Stricker's domed tent near the Outer Alster Lake there was no blue sky to be seen, but its interior was equally public, and although related to *television*, to seeing afar, it was more concerned with observing a sculptural process and the creation of a meteorite at close quarters.

Meteorites drop out of the sky, and anyone who sees one in the night sky is entitled to make a wish. Only a handful of the meteorites that glow at night as they enter the earth's atmosphere at an altitude of some 100km actually hit the ground. Most of them are no bigger than pebbles and quickly burn up, while those that are too large simply explode. The largest meteorite ever found weighed 60 tons and came down near Grootfontein in Namibia. Thomas Stricker has constructed a meteorite that is less heavy, but of a similar size. He employs sculptural techniques to simulate a natural phenomenon not directly

occurring in this world, but one which has dropped from outer space into our own.

Meteorites appear like time arrows that shoot forward into present time from the past of the astrally glittering firmament, similar to the accelerated projection of one level of reality into another – and as it finally reaches earth, only to be reduced to the time scale of our planet.

The work performed in Thomas Stricker's meteorite atelier showed various formative processes of a sculptural and communicative kind. In the temporary tent Stricker opened up his mobile studio to public access and scrutiny. This was where he worked on the experiment to discover in which way gravity and proportion, nature and art, shaped amorphousness and sculpture interact in the public domain. Although this is close to 'drop sculpture', the idea of a site-specific sculpture seems just as fruitful, one which in a literal interpretation of 'Aussendienst' – external service – forced Stricker into the role as director of a public studio.

Site-specific work at grassroot level. Inside the first sculpture, his atelier (Stricker prefers not to overtax the notion of laboratory) he built an enormous two-part spherical polystyrene cast (his second sculpture) of the meteorite's reverse form. The negative mold was made with plaster slurry applied in a swivel casting process. The same cement injection casting techniques as used in tunnel construction were applied to make the positive mold. Once released from the two plaster and polystyrene molds, the cement cast (now the third and ultimate sculpture) was 'brought down' to earth and coated in palladium; finally, the tent was taken down. The fact that Thomas Stricker chose to make his atelier the shared, coincidental location for both the construction (or birth) of the meteorite and its point of impact is highly significant. The processes of modelling, rolling, liquification, filling and hardening, the transitional stages of various material states and sculptural dimensions – in other words, the entire evolutionary process – acted as a permanent public formulation. The work's discursive co-ordinates (synonymous with the atelier) were made available to all visitors as a reference point linked to the object's symbolic past and oriented towards the future, and serving as a forum for articulating subjective inquiries about its present. In metaphoric terms, the finished, shiny meteorite mirrors our reality onto the perception of utopias; it hosts the second, third, but above all, fourth dimension within it like alien bodies – and now lies before us, utterly real. As if it had dropped out of the sky. Yet at the same time completely unreal and, astonishingly, also an agent of enlightenment – as in the crucial scene in 'The Truman Show'. By the same token, myth as a historical process anchors the inquiring visitor as the pedestal of this *in-situ* sculpture now invested with an autonomous status. Myth offers both solid foundations and protection for the endangered existence of this 'drop sculpture' in the form of a meteorite that, in its descent, seeks out its own location. Outdoor sculpture (in free fall).

Critical zones. Outer space and the viewer's terrestrial space should be seen as parallel realms. Similar to the correspondence between observing the heavens and studying media

images of mega-telescopes or spectral analysis. The fascination that these evince is rooted in the body-expanding experience of time and space or in the encounter with alien, inexplicable phenomena – as in the example of the unusual tree in a therapeutic institute in the Swiss town of Flawil. Lodged in the crown of this tree is a strange object. It appears to have simply dropped out of the sky and fallen into our field of vision. To mark the day of the total eclipse of the sun on 11 August 1999 Thomas Stricker installed a shiny silver, amorphously modelled object in his Swiss home town. There it rests, held in place by three props until the tree can support it by itself, and is constantly changing. Sometimes it sparkles metallically, at others it glistens dully, depending on the sunshine; sometimes it is concealed behind leaves, at others it is fully exposed, depending on the time of year. It can be seen as a sculpture in a humorous location or as a meteorite that embodies a shooting star bearing wishes and dreams, all depending on your viewpoint. This work symbolizes permanently shifting and conclusive points of contact for a sculpture that has ‘dropped out of the sky’ and is situated in a school for handicapped children, a reference for a way of dealing the alien intruder in the crown of the symbolic tree (of life).

Monument of Hamburg (loosely based on Robert Smithson). One constituent element of the Hamburg meteorite atelier was the involvement of the park’s users, a feature that also made this project a special case within the overall framework of ‘Aussendienst’. The interaction and conjunction of three distinct aspects – the sculptural creative process, the idea of a freely accessible studio and the shift in artistic perspective – stemmed from the idea for a sculpture in a public space. Similar to a satellite launched as a probe to explore the project, it was essential to monitor and observe the work in progress, to hold discussions with passers-by and to publicly announce the sculpture’s location. When the sculpture was unveiled, the atelier visitors became witnesses and participants – and ultimately also shareholders – of a public, liberated and thereby ‘divided’ open-air sculpture. What had previously lacked shape was given a form that fulfils a functionally defined purpose which, as the sculptural formation of the hollow centre, calls for an outer shell. In sculptural and communicative terms this is unambiguous, physically complicated and, as a given and ordained entity, nevertheless real. Unmodelled form in a hermetically closed system – entropy as a formlessly irreversible process. Perfection on a physical level, on something that, when it seems palpable, has already achieved a different dimension, has reached a further, though never autonomous level. Another association is with an alien body that, having been shaped first in outer space and then in the earth’s atmosphere, has now found its way down to earth – whereby, as already mentioned, atelier, point of impact and standpoint of the general public all coincide. In both concrete and conceptual terms, Thomas Stricker draws on artistic modelling processes that are related to nature – simultaneously alluding to the political instrumentalization of art in outdoor and public environments. In the course of the sculpture’s development, a network of public information and communication was established by posting photos of the work’s day-by-day progress on an internet site (www.meteoritenwerkstatt.de), thereby also providing

access to the project for an audience outside Hamburg. This documentation represented a further pillar for the project's Hamburg base, a dimension that became all the more significant once the atelier was dismantled – and one that will also remain relevant in the future.

Logical instructions. 'In order to observe the sun, the moon and the heavens' was the answer Diogenes Laertes gave when asked for the reason for being on the world. One of the most fitting summaries of our present situation, this statement also anticipates the concept of Thomas Stricker's meteorite atelier. It might be possible to offer a physical description of the interstellar constellation, but there is no explanation or reason for it that can be advanced. Similar to 'Power of Ten, a Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero' (1977) by Charles and Ray Eames, or 'Scale Model of the Solar System' (1983) by Chris Burden, the utopian visions of dimensions and fantasies about expanding space that are treated in the sci-fi genre or in 'The Truman Show' all seem to belong to some lost epoch. All things that occur in the course of time as entities encountered on earth are not subject to the need to be explained; they are just simply *there*. Explanations are an abstract, logical exercise performed by our limited field of perception, are constructions of the mind that are triggered as soon as we endeavour to grasp the correspondences and entities of our world as rational truths. The famous instruction manual for operating 'spaceship earth', as Buckminster Fuller pointed out, has not gone missing; it is simply that we are also part of these instructions, a component of the spaceship that has been furnished and equipped with such immaculate care. The desire to extend this instruction code as part of the overall plan can be found located immediately adjacent to the quest for meaning and the facility for abstract logic inside the human mind – which, unlike the chunks of cosmic rock, clearly did not drop out of the sky.

Springs. The project Thomas Stricker is currently working on in parallel locations in Düsseldorf and Kenya, 'Das Land fließt wirklich doch' (Land really does flow), deals with global problems and the broadening of our horizon. The competition to produce an outdoor artwork, initiated by the Düsseldorf-based canal and waterways authority and the AWISTA body, commissioned Stricker to carry out an artistic proposal in accordance with the award panel's aims: a divided spring. By building a spring, Stricker has chosen an ancient, a highly symbolic and, at the same time, a sculptural and architectural object that by virtue of its political significance has enjoyed a paramount status in municipal planning since antiquity. Springs – as wells, sources of drinking water and decorative city and garden fountains – are lively, life- and pleasure-giving expressions of acquired affluence and power. When Stricker constructs a symbolic fountainhead in Düsseldorf that actually provides fresh running water only 'on the other side of the world', we find evidence of art in public spaces as a political act with far-reaching consequences or horizons. The two springs represent an artistic model of the planet capable of joining up the first and

third world and, ultimately, of placing our awareness and mental horizon in a down-to-earth correspondence with the reality of others and their unfamiliar world.

Inner worlds. Two further current works show Thomas Stricker's interest in similar forms of encounter. For the courtyard of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Hamburg he is in the process of making a walk-through bronze sculpture accessed by a wooden walkway. With its archaic, organic appearance, this sphere punctured by a door and porthole windows looks as though it could have risen up from the depths of the ocean or fallen from outer space. It is an attempt to let the sea have its say, to set up some form of intuitive communion between man (and his responsibility) and the ocean. As his contribution to the group exhibition 'Plug-in', staged in the Westfälisches Landesmuseum in Münster, Stricker's second 'Aussendienst' sculpture – the lost cast and the polystyrene sphere – was reconstructed and installed. Stationed inside the museum, the work offered visitors the opportunity to explore the sphere's interior by means of a remote-controlled camera and to see the filmed results screened on a monitor and a video beamer. The crater landscape of the sphere's inner surface thereby evolves into the media-generated observation platform of a virtual, possible sculpture – or of a seemingly alien or very distant object reminiscent of a celestial body. The view inside the sphere that in 'Aussendienst' had been part of a public process, has in Münster been transformed into a media-defined process and a dirigible extension of our range of perception within a public and artistic environment. Thanks to the interactive processes that link (traditional) sculptural modelling, the transfer of association and visual as well as verbal communication, Thomas Stricker's work turns our ideas of unfamiliar spaces and their realization – whether real, relayed by the media or virtual – into inward- or outward-looking contexts that use new media.

The dream of flying. The unconscious emerges as the exceptional material form of the outside on the periphery of the inside. His special relationship to amorphously shaped sculptures characterizes Thomas Stricker's process-driven method. The undeniably classic casting process, the modelling of the meteorite in its rolling, spherical shell, the shedding of the cast – or 'birth' – of an object not *from* another star, but *as* another star, its arrival on earth – all these stages add up to an unconsciously conscious signal that openly challenges the notion of art whereby the shapeless, chaotic structure of a meteorite is perceived more as an alien body than as an artistic object. A meteorite is an example of pure, if not indeed true nature, utterly autonomous from earth. Similar to sci-fi movies, the meteorite atelier and its resulting sculpture represent a relativization of nature and art, of probability and improbability, an enchanting accomplishment of studio craftsmanship – dream factory and dream projection rolled into one. With his project for 'Aussendienst' Stricker fuses material and myth to transform the surface into a distorted reflection of its context. Subsequently, what is familiar now resides in what is alien, and vice versa. In other words, there is a symbolic coincidence of the imaginary with the real. To attain and cross the limits

of something is a mark of our entropic conscience, in which ultimately this something is entirely without significance. Every day and, above all, every night – or have you ever encountered a meteorite before? With a little luck it might land gently at your feet, as it did in Hamburg. Don't forget to wish for it to happen this way.

Translated by Matthew Partridge