

# Interview

# HANS ULRICH OBRIST

# STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN

**HANS ULRICH OBRIST** *I think a good way into our conversation is to consider the idea of doing exhibitions in unexpected locations. I curated a show in 1993 in my hotel room, following my interest in how you can meet art where you expect it the least. Here, we have an exhibition on a wall on the street, which makes an obvious reference to Mexico and its long story of muralism. But before we enter into that, I wanted to ask about your beginnings. What was your first appearance as an artist?*

**STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN** My first exhibition took place in a law firm in Berlin in 1994. I showed some watercolours in a lawyer's office, but I couldn't see the show as I was living in Mexico. I made these watercolours in the eighties, maybe when I was 13 or 14 when I first decided to be an artist and started to sign my work. I still have those watercolours in my own collection.

**HUO** *What was on them?*

**SB** They were influenced by pop art and architecture; they show a series of building structures with very bright primary colours. I still have them because it's very different from what I do.

**HUO** *Are they figurative?*

**SB** In a way they are but they also become abstract representations of building models and structures. When I was young, I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do but I needed to choose between architecture and art. I was very influenced by space and its relation to society. At the end I decided to be an artist because you have more liberty in the sense that you don't need a client. You just do it and it happens but if it doesn't happen there's no problem.

**HUO** *Can you talk about this idea of the billboard and the wall?*

**SB** Obviously they are an important part of the cultural heritage of Mexico. They take you as a child to see the murals and they become part of your unconscious. The same way capitalism is also part of your unconscious; government elections and commercial campaigns are not regulated in Mexico, which results in having billboards everywhere, from the highways to the most unexpected urban spaces. It's a mix of both.

**HUO** *It's about the artist as a public figure.*

**SB** I believe that as an artist you are a public figure, and you can activate the public in different ways. For this project, having a wall in South Kensington close to Exhibition road with the Natural History Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum, I wanted to do an exhibition rather than an intervention. I wanted to twist and invert the idea of the exhibition. This project is conceived as an institutional show outside the institution. By using the same techniques of an exhibition in a gallery or a museum, such as displaying the works in a chronological way, I wanted to make a critique of the institution.

**HUO** *The project is almost like a retrospective of your text pieces. I was wondering, when did you introduce for the first time words into your work? Obviously it's not related to the watercolours, the words came later. There is a long history of text and words into exhibition space.*

**SB** It was a slow transition, in the early watercolours there were city landscapes showing billboards with text. The trigger came when I was looking at a copy of *Artforum* and saw the advertisement of an exhibition of the date paintings by On Kawara. Curiously enough I don't remember the date of the magazine or the exhibition but I do remember the works dealing with the consciousness of time and space. I realised that I could use language in a different way. While Kawara painted those works, giving them a gesture, I was interested in including text into my paintings. That was my first revelation.

**HUO** *When was the first time you made a text piece?*

**SB** The first time I put vinyl text on the wall was in 1997.

**HUO** *What happened in 1997?*

**SB** The piece is called *The event of writing may be the unevent of reading*. At that time I was reading a lot of structuralism and post-structuralist philosophy. I wanted to question the process of reading by twisting the mechanism of looking and thinking about a text. I was interested in how writing only exists in the process of reading, but also in how the act of writing, beyond the visual and formalistic process, is about the concept embedded. Writing can be invisible too.

**HUO** *Will this text be part of the exhibition?*

**SB** Yes, it is the first one.

**HUO** *Is it your number one in your catalogue raisonné of the text pieces?*

**SB** It is. They are placed in a chronological way, following the academic and traditional forms of display. It echoes the museum techniques of organising their works chronologically and thematically and also the way retrospectives are still being curated.

**HUO** *Can you tell me more about the chronological order for the text pieces? How will the chronology unfold, is it a sequence, or is it a story?*

**SB** It is the first time that I put all my text pieces together in this order. They are placed in a row as paintings are in the academy, which opens for a constellation of random connections. Normally I show them individually, but by putting them all together they become thoughts and voices that raise multiple questions. I also want to show the invisibility of the concepts they contain. I see the text pieces as mirrors; I am very fascinated by the idea of a mirror and how the text becomes a mirror to the reader. The purpose is that the text pieces become the internal voices of the audience. For me, that is when the work is activated, it makes you think and it makes you question.

**HUO** *Duchamp said that the viewer does 50% of the work.*

**SB** The public does 50% or even more of the work. I like the idea of my work being activated by the public, which raises many doubts. I like to think of my work as an unstable source of thinking, which can be perceived and understood in multiple layers and through many interpretations.

**HUO** *Since it is the first time that the Text Pieces will be seen together, these sentences were not planned to be written one after the other, and you made them for a specific context and exhibitions: can you tell us how these are activated and maybe you can give us some examples to talk us through these different works?*

**SB** The piece *This work is realised when I die* is about the impossibility of seeing the work completed. It has to do with the agency of the author upon the work and in relationship to the audience, which may or may not be present in the future where the work may happen. It's an existential piece. *Looks conceptual* questions how conceptual art became a style, betraying the original notion of the dematerialisation of the artwork. As a kind of mannerism, Conceptual Art was objectified as it became impossible to make the object disappear. In addition, it wittily plays with the idea of looking at a "concept" which, in this instance, is a contradiction. As an artist, I am obsessed with the void, which I am always trying to represent. This failure is part of trying the same experiment over and over. The text *This is not supposed to be here* and its opposite *This must be the place* deals with the placing of the artwork and its contradiction. *Money creates bad taste but creates culture* deals with the capitalist view of society, of how money has become a producer of taste. It's a remark of how you cannot judge it on taste but you can judge it on culture.

**HUO** *How do you see the change over time in your pieces ? From the very beginning which is a sentence about the act of reading the text, to more recent self-referential and existential compares, about life and death. How do the works change ?*

**SB** I think I am becoming more existential, trying to be a mirror of society. The last text in the exhibition, for example, *Love never fails*, is more romantic and optimistic in a way . I don't know how I have come to this point, I think of it as rhizomatic. I don't work in stages, and my bodies of work often contradict themselves. They are direct observations of our time.

**HUO** *What is next, how do you continue, do you have some unrealised works?*

**SB** All my works are unrealised. The text pieces are unrealised because they are in the mind even though they are texts on the wall.

**HUO** *One could say that all these pieces on the wall are unrealised.*

**SB** Exactly, I will consider them all unrealised, so now that you were talking about this I would like to think how I could realise them.

**HUO** *I think that will be the next step. How to realise all these sentences materially?*

**SB** I have another piece that I offered to a botanical garden but they didn't accept it. It is a gravestone with my name on it and my date of birth and the gap for my death date. The piece would be activated when I die and my ashes will be buried by the gravestone in the botanical garden. I wanted to close and open a cycle by becoming fertiliser for the soil. This is also an unrealised work until my existence ceases. I like when my work raises a lot of questions: is this an artwork, is this a proposition, is this a conclusion, or is this a statement? Perhaps, it's all these things at the same time and they take different shapes and different ideas.

**HUO** *While we see in the streets of London, Kensington, your billboard murals, you also work with painting and installation. For the reader of our interview to know what else you are doing, because you are doing many other things, can you tell me what is going on with other media?*

**SB** The latest painting I have done is called *I*, which shows the letter 'I' in black vinyl on a white canvas. When you look at it you don't know if it's a rectangle or a letter. It confronts you like an invisible mirror, and it becomes an existential problem, a void. I normally work with vinyl text, which always goes on the wall, but in this case the vinyl goes on canvas. I made five of them putting the vinyl myself, which displaces the 'I' when they are together but if you place them apart they seem to be the same painting. They are a reflection about humankind and how we are all the same and different at the same time.

I did a project with a reference to Dan Flavin's *Monument for Tallin*, which I titled *Monuments for the ceiling*. They consist of 1:1 replicas that I placed on the ceiling, so they became the lights of the exhibition. I went to the same factory where Flavin produced them but instead of putting them vertically on the wall I return them to their status of fluorescent light on the ceiling, so they would illuminate the space. I like to play with that contradiction about the visible and the invisible. Every time you enter an exhibition

space you never take in consideration the lighting, which has such a big presence. It also conceives the idea of the monument being inverted, instead of being from the floor to the sky it's the other way around, I am twisting it.

I am also working on this project called *Shift*, where I participate with other artists. Influenced by On Kawara's date paintings, I question the notion of history as a horizontal line. I want to break that line through associations with artists in which each of us come with an artwork and a contract that changes the authorship of that artwork every five years. Therefore, the price, label and history of that work will change. I did the first one with Robert Barry, he made a work on paper with words and I did a photograph of a light bulb, so every five years we shift the authorship, and the history of the work becomes a zig-zag. It challenges the signature of an artist, which seems to be perpetual. In this case, the piece is a Barry for five years and a Brüggemann for the next years and so on.

**HUO** *So if you show it in 2011 it might be Barry's and in 2015 it might be yours.*

**SB** It is also about breaking the speculation on history and value. Some artists have rejected it, which is very interesting as some artists don't let their work go. Luis Camnitzer also agreed and I am talking to other artists at the moment.

**HUO** *So what did you do with Luis Camnitzer?*

**SB** He wrote a word in vinyl that is very similar to mine aesthetically; it's a word that you can read it but you don't understand what it says. I did a painting that says *This work is realised when it's destroyed* that is also a text piece at the retrospective.

**HUO** *Can you tell me more about the relationship to conceptualism and to the 60s? Because so many young artists revisit the past, how do you see the whole idea of repetition and difference?*

**SB** My work is not nostalgic; it reactivates certain strategies and tries to take them a step further. I am not intending to engage in a nostalgic or romantic practice, I want to use the experimental ideas from the 60s and take them to the next level, or rather, to the limit. I want to complicate things. Maybe at the end of my career I will go back to the watercolours.

**HUO** *You could go back to those early watercolours that you showed in that law office in Berlin.*

**SB** For instance, *Shift* is a breakthrough on authorship; it's a new way of looking at the art and about separating authorship and ownership. It breaks the system; it puts it in a different situation. That's why sometimes my work is not well received in institutions or biennials, because it is very problematic to put in a package. They find it difficult to deal with.

**HUO** *We talked about artists from previous generations that inspired you: On Kawara, Robert Barry. Who are the artists you feel close to in your own generation? Do you feel part of a group?*

**SB** It's very strange to say because I have two personalities: I have the Mexican and the English or the international one. In the more international I have connections to Jonathan Monk, Martin Creed or Ceryth Wyn Evans. In Mexico I am close to Mario Garcia Torres; he started as a curator inviting me to his exhibitions; also Gonzalo Lebrija or Carlos Amoraes. I think it's very difficult to be part of a group; I can be everywhere and nowhere. I am very curious to see how the exterior puts my work in a niche and for the time being it is very difficult. I find that fascinating.

**HUO** *But that's very twenty-first century, not to belong to a specific geography.*

**SB** I don't know which pavilion in the Venice Biennale I would show at, the German or the Mexican.

**HUO** *In 2014 what would be your advice to a young art student?*

**SB** I would say: *Don't go to school!*

Artist:  
**Stefan Brüggemann**

Editor and Publication Coordinator:  
**Marina Kurikhina**

Text:  
**Nicolas de Oliveira** and **Nicola Oxley**

Interview:  
**Hans Ulrich Obrist**

Published by:  
**The Wall**  
**Corner of Harrington Road and Queen's Gate**  
**London, UK**

**On the occasion of the exhibition**  
**'Stefan Bruggemann. Text Pieces (1997 — 2014)'**  
**May 2014 — October 2014**

Curator:  
**Marina Kurikhina**

Graphic Design & Art Direction:  
**Atelier Dyakova**

© 2014 — ISBN NO. 978-0-9929496-0-0  
Unauthorized reproduction of any material is strictly prohibited.

Project supported by South Kensington Club  
Location by Union Car Parks

