

Between the Signs

By Friederike Fast

Gabriele Horndasch and Maiko Sugano's dual exhibition at the Japanese Cultural Institute in Cologne from December 2011 to February 2012 was referred to, in keeping with the tradition of the house, as a "dialogue exhibition". And it was a "dialogue exhibition" in more ways than one. Not only did the works of two artists from very different backgrounds enter into dialogue (as was also the case with other exhibitions in this series), but also the exhibited works themselves referenced the phenomenon of language. Moreover, the title of the exhibition "Between the Signs" describes what the artists – whose work is formally very different – have in common. For although Gabriele Horndasch and Maiko Sugano grew up in two completely different cultural contexts – Germany and Japan – they are connected by the fact that they have both 'ventured' abroad to gather in-depth experience for their artistic work. Thus, various scholarships have provided Gabriele Horndasch with the opportunity to travel (e.g. to France and South Korea) and Maiko Sugano left Tokyo to further her studies in San Francisco, before travelling to Germany where she lived and worked until recently. Despite this fascination for foreign cultures and an intense exchange with other artists, both Sugano and Horndasch found their way back to their own linguistic sphere for this exhibition.

Maiko Sugano began by taking the visitors by surprise in the foyer with a wooden sculpture in the pond at the foot of the stairs, before escorting them up into the exhibition with further objects made of soap shown in the stairwell. The round wooden disc, radiating like the sun, integrated harmoniously into the water landscape. The Japanese art of garden design can also be found as a point of reference in Sugano's earlier works. In her "Shakkei" series she produced miniature icebergs that floated on water. "Shakkei" means "borrowed scenery" and in Japanese culture it refers to a field of landscape design that reverently incorporates the natural and already existing landscape into the garden composition. In other works too, Sugano translated landscape elements such as mountains and the sun into other materials and transferred these into the domestic context. The artist, who also studied design, has no reservations presenting her work in an everyday context. On the contrary, she has always specifically looked for project spaces that were far

removed from galleries and museums and investigated, most recently in a research project, the term 'Domestic Art': How can we overcome the existing boundaries between design and art, between life and exhibition? What happens when art suddenly and surprisingly appears in an everyday context or outside of a museum? In her "Soap Diary" – a series of small, carved sculptures that lined the stairwell of the Japanese Cultural Institute – Sugano chose an everyday material far removed from traditional sculptural materials by expertly crafting the organic shapes out of soap. Despite their delicate, uniform colours the abstract soap objects are vaguely reminiscent of animals, flowers, human organs ...

Sugano's wooden sculptures were inspired by characters from the Japanese writing system (Kanji). These characters, derived from Chinese characters, are in part stylised forms of what they denote. Or they are comprised of several characters that are combined to give a new semantic field related to each individual character. In contrast to the Latin alphabet, school-level Japanese already comprises of over 2000 such characters, whereas considerably more Kanji are required at university level. From this immense treasure trove of characters, Maiko Sugano chose several Kanji and transformed the two-dimensional characters into three-dimensional objects – sculptures that she crafted from linden wood using traditional Japanese techniques. It was the Japanese character for 'light' (光) that inspired the golden bowl in the pond. The sculpture with its finely serrated contours, pointing in every direction, elegantly floated on the water like a lotus blossom. An object on the upper floor was based on the Kanji for 'sky' (空) that also stays for 'void/emptiness'. Sculpturally, she interpreted this character with a Buddha-like figure that was hollow on the inside and at the same time reminiscent of a protective shell. The Kanji for 'mountain' (山) on the other hand assumed the shape of a life-size funnel that was made up of several individual, interlocking components. In keeping with the term 'Domestic Art', this hollowed out mountain sculpture could also be used as an everyday functional object, e.g. a storage box. In the same way, the sculpture in the pond could be used as a bowl. The Japanese character for 'thing' (事) is itself reminiscent of a vertical structure similar to that of a set of shelves. Sugano also crafted this object using traditional Japanese woodworking techniques and placed it, like a shelf, against the wall. In their totality, the sculptures created an abstract landscape inside the exhibition space that in turn formed a bridge to a world outside.

It is this exterior space that Gabriele Horndasch has repeatedly visited in the past. Whether it's the façade of the Düsseldorfer Kunsthalle or a central city shopping arcade, she too is interested in unexpected encounters with artworks outside the classical exhibition space. Even on approaching the exhibition, visitors could see her outdoor installation illuminated on the balcony of the Japanese Cultural Institute. For this work, Horndasch used 54 letters from two illuminated signs; the type that used to line the façades of our cities but are now increasingly being replaced by newer technology. The letters from signs for a Japanese restaurant "Nippon-Kan" and the insurance company "Württembergische Vorsorge" were rearranged to form a new text. Whereas today, museums such as the "Museum of Letters" (Buchstabenmuseum) in Berlin are devoted to this dying technology, Horndasch sets the illuminated letters in motion in order to constantly rediscover their hidden meaning. Each week, the artist rearranged the letters on the balcony thus "inscribing" a new poem into the cityscape. The visitor also encountered texts by the artist in the exhibition space. These collages of newspaper snippets, in the style of anonymous letters, subtly synchronised with the quiet, almost meditative, works of Maiko Sugano. However, only on second glance did the real bite behind the wild text combinations become apparent: "satter Rap im Gebüsch erkoren" (lush rap chosen in the bush) and "von vornehmer Küche satt – warne Rubens birg Gerippencorpi nass" (sick of posh kitchen – warn Rubens salvage skeleton corpses wet). Some of the texts specifically referenced the exhibition space: "sing von Nippon braver Wuenscher" (sing of Nippon well-behaved wisher) or "vier Krüge Misosuppe spornen Berber an" (four jugs of miso soup spur on Berbers). In other texts we encountered very trendy terminology: "Painrock – Mobbing vorausahnen Weg versperren Schritte spüren" (Painrock – anticipate mobbing bar the way feel the steps). Horndasch also composed seductive, poetic verses: "Raub im Schatten – wo Sperber vor Vergnügen rosa Kirschen nippen" (Robbery in the shade – where sparrow hawks sip pink cherries with pleasure). These "blackmail letters" were all compiled with a fixed number of 54 letters. By rearranging these same letters over and over again, like an anagram, the artist constantly created new texts. Despite the strict, self-imposed framework, this playful process offered ample room for discovery. The unusual blackmail-style collages seemed to further highlight the mysterious meanings hidden behind the letters. Just like in a poem, this ongoing search for new meanings in the old also reveals the artist's most private feelings and thoughts. Although Horndasch

uses language as her medium, she is not a poet. Rather, she regards herself a sculptor. In addition to her collages and site-specific installations, her work also encompasses performance and film.

From an art historical point of view, language and text has frequently been the subject of artistic exploration. Ranging from Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch through to the nouveaux réalistes, Lawrence Wiener, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, right up to the less explicit use of text in many contemporary works, language is (including the title of an artwork) an integral part of visual arts. When Gabriele Horndasch und Maiko Sugano use writing characters in their work, they do so well aware of both this tradition and the fact that humans as “symbolic animals” (Ernst Cassirer) – beings that use symbols – only understand reality through signs. However, neither artist is particularly interested in a scientific analysis of our language (although the artistic process is by all means accompanied by discoveries). Instead, they find themselves in a complex process between destruction and new construction, between a search for meaning and processes of creating a “symbolic consciousness” in a state of limbo “between the signs”. Whether it is Maiko Sugano’s artistic translation of Kanji into sculptures or Gabriele Horndasch’s scrabble-like anagrams, each of the artists, in their own way, appears to break open often seemingly fixed and unchangeable notation systems, setting them in motion and playfully modifying them. The result is a series of moments, ranging from elegant to funny that can barely be described with the “arbitrariness” (De Saussure) of signs made by humans, often conjured and conventionally shaped by the field of linguistics. Indeed, both make use of the ambiguity and flexibility of signs in order to inspire new images and ideas in the spectator.