

Personal habitations

Sibylle von Halem was born in Germany in 1963. She grew up in USA and Pakistan, and studied sculpture in Glasgow, Scotland, where she lived from 1975 until 2003. She has been working as a self-employed artist since 1986, and became a member of the artists' association [kunstwerk] krastal in 2004. She never quite gave up her nomadic way of life, though her work is now centred around Klagenfurt and in particular on Krastal in Carinthia. Just recently, once again on the move, she spent six months in Paris.

But one cannot really describe Sibylle von Halem as a traveller, since she lives very intensively in and with the places which offer her a temporary home for certain periods of time. She forms acquaintances with artists, establishes new networks and adjusts herself to the artistic conditions prevailing in each place, without, however, being assimilated by them.

And yet the themes within her work are determined by these conditions, by experiences and impressions formed in different places, as well as by her life in general. For more than 15 years many of her works have consisted of assembled fragments, and particularly in recent years, of puzzle pieces. Here, the question of „whether the visible assembly might not also be differently arranged“ is always left open. The materials deployed vary greatly, from stone, wood and porcelain to latex, wax, translucent tissue paper and recycled boxes. The piece of sculpture is seen not as a finalised, static object in space, but rather as an agglomeration of extendable and possibly interchangeable elements which suggest flexibility, mobility. Occasionally the open-ended puzzle pieces merely simulate flexibility, transformed into a compact block of marble.

Puzzle box, made in 2007, plays with the illusion of an actual interlocking of separate stone slabs. The artist suggests this dovetailing by setting the finely ground, smoothed edges into contrast with the carved planes of the cube. A hollow body formed of stone slabs is implied to the viewer, which is actually a solid stone block worked with all the finesse of sculptural technique. The question of the spatial body and its contents remains open, for the artist as well as for the viewer. Any interpretation of the object will be fused to the experience of spatial form within one's own biography, and is dependent on the extent to which the individual perceives this box as a space for the imagination, or as a delineation of space. It was evident that Sibylle von Halem would „puzzle“ these fragments „together“, to form temporary dwellings in the true sense of the word.

She had built a house out of wooden puzzle pieces once before, and sited it on the roof of the sculptors' house at Krastal. The idea of a house made of flexible jigsaw pieces underwent consistent development during her Residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris.

In the course of many changes of location I have grown to accept and even welcome constantly changing realities, and wish for a form of housing that can be taken along on the journey. When moving from place to place, even the permanent components of your life must always be brought into new arrangements. (Sibylle von Halem)

The title of the series *temporary lodgings*, produced in Paris, describes not only a condition – the state of being temporarily housed – but also the object or dwelling in which this takes place. The works are constructed from puzzle pieces, an 'open' structural element allowing for extension in every direction. They are made from paper: fine tissue paper and also cheap egg boxes and newspaper. By this means, the works already generate their own contexts. In fact, they were also affected by impressions of the homeless people in Paris. According to the artist, „many seemed as if they went to ordinary jobs during the daytime, some had laptops and were quite smartly dressed. I got the impression that they had a normal daily routine and just happened to be temporarily without accommodation. Others, though, had obviously been out on the street for a long time. I was reminded of my idea of a flexible, easily transported shelter, which I imagine as the ideal domicile, without limitations and irrespective of boundaries. I began to develop a series of works within this framework of reference.“¹ The little houses vary greatly, at times the geometric elements and formal considerations prevail, others are dominated by a pictorial surface treatment, one even wallpapered with the glossy pages of french life-style magazines – simultaneously questioning the ideals of furnishing a living space which are served to us by advertising and industry. Traces of gold leaf on the outer surface of another piece can be interpreted as images on an external wall, and open up another of the artist's themes: traces which become visible, and pose the question whether these are old traces left on the object, whether the object is already in a process of disintegration. The factor of time is also present in her works made from latex and textiles.

The question of what is preserved, which things thereby outlast the passage of time, is also the subject of her work *frozen flowers*, using the forms of rose petals. The rose petals are casts of the skin surface in vinyl glue, preserved in polyester resin, their authenticity a pretense. The stems, on the other hand, are from real roses, the crackled perspex alludes to iced blooms. As in many of her works in latex and synthetic materials, this one also contains personal experiences. These, however, remain hidden from the beholder, and in any case are not vital to the formal legibility of the piece. But they resonate within the work and evoke their own emotional response in the viewer.

Her works in stone reside out of doors and are definitely „made for the landscape“, as Sibylle von Halem has it. The objects in paper, latex and plastics, on the other hand, belong to the inhabited interior, make reference to the body and the human being's most intimate surroundings. The body is not represented as a whole, is only covertly present: by implication. A series of pieces in resin consists of different works which all contain casts of the artist's own skin surface, preserved and re-processed to form objects reminiscent of clothing or fabric, and playing on the (inter)changeability of ‚inside‘ and ‚outside‘. As with the puzzle pieces, they also encompass the subject of ‚dwelling‘ or ‚being at home‘ – but this time not as a temporary state. In fact, the skin records events in one's life, which leave traces on its surface, and impact on one's sense of identity.

Skin is permeable and also defines boundaries; all the same, it can be penetrated by much that leads to injury. Not so much on the surface, but deeper down in the emotional interior. Sibylle von Halem consciously plays with reversals of perception. Butterflies of white lace on a dress sewn together from puzzle pieces appear sweetly pretty, as do the pink dots on a mosquito net suspended over a wooden frame, apparently a protective screen over a bed. On closer scrutiny, however, real dead moths have been applied among the embroidered white butterflies, and the pink dots emerge as finger sheaths cast in latex, ominously grasping for the interior: the wooden frame turns into a bed, the protective curtaining becomes a threat. It is not without motive that Sibylle von Halem calls her works *day or night shift* or *towards dawn*: thoughts and memories rise to the surface from dark spaces in the subconscious. The skin is the borderline between the things we like to „allow to come close“, and those which one would prefer not to „let in“.

The skin, the visible surface, is at once the boundary and the point of connection between inside and outside (the Self and the Other), is permeable and vulnerable, shows traces of experience and is closely connected to our perception of our own identity. It points to what lies beneath, is occluded – what can be sensed but not seen, what „gets under your skin“. It records the events in a life. You can feel at home in your own skin, or perhaps not: but escape isn't possible. (Sibylle von Halem).

A further group of works form a combination of object installation and photography. Again the replication of her own skin surface is taken as a starting point, this time magnified and photographed through an electron scanning microscope. The interface of art and science was an important focus for Sibylle von Halem for a time, and was developed in close collaboration with palaeontologists and geologists at Glasgow University. This contact influenced a series of photographic works which, taken out of context, barely allow any conclusions as to their origin. The possible interpretations of the presented surfaces are too wide-ranging.

In a series of white wax tablets hanging within a frame, created some time later, she extends this idea through new developments. The background to this work occurred during a Residency in Cyprus. There the artist first collected spent candles which had been lit in church. The thought behind this was that the candles absorb the time and the energies of the place in which they burn. The wax for the current installation came from the candles on the kitchen table at Krastal, which Sibylle von Halem collected during the symposium held there. Later she dipped the wax into hot water and pressed it with her hands against her eyes, ears, mouth and hands – the body parts used in communication. Just as the kitchen table at Krastal is the site of discussions, laughter, and revelry. These casts are formed in contact with the body. They catch traces, impurities in the wax, particles of hair and imprints of skin. These are revealed or not, according to the angle of light – here, in particular, lies the connection to the other exhibits, as well as in the factor of time and its fugitive nature. Another factor is that of preservation in an originally liquid medium, which later hardens. The wax casts were subsequently developed in a series of photographic works, a similarly abstracting translation of the original subject as her earlier photographs.

Silvie Aigner, August 2009, Küb an der Rax, Austria

¹ conversation with Sibylle von Halem, Krastal, August 2009