

**Filipa Ramos:** In Sol Lewitt's 1967 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', he stated that 'it is the objective of an artist who is concerned with Conceptual Art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore (...) emotionally dry. However, most of your work moves clearly in the field of conceptual practices but deals with a strong emotional and ironic side. What is your view on the possibility of co-existence of these two approaches?

**Stefan Brüggenmann:** First of all, I would like to tell you that Sol LeWitt was never a reference to my work; even his sentences on conceptual art never influenced me much. In reference to the origin of conceptualism, I relate myself a lot more to Kosuth, Weiner or Barry. All my work is focused on testing the possibility of unifying something conceptual and mental with something sentimental. I try to combine the intelligent with the superficial, the visual with the cerebral. All my work has a lot to do with opposites and with how these opposites create certain contradictions between themselves, almost as if I was stretching them into two diametrically opposite directions. I believe that the interest of my work lies in this contradictory interchange. I like the idea of a twist, in seeing how I can induce a constant change in things, and how this serial changing can lead to a new meaning. At the same time, while I am trying to test these contradictions, I am obviously putting them in crisis, and this really

interests me. It is a crisis that everything takes place and it's through that crisis that we manage to solve things.

**FR:** 'To be political it has to look nice'... It is often mentioned that conceptual art developed in the mid 60's as a reaction to the beautiful commodifications of art in the face of the Vietnam War. This establishes a social/political posture that links conceptual art with politics. However, your work seems to celebrate these same commodifications in a direct way. The loss of political and social ideals of our time allows for the celebration of the welfare estate?

**SB:** I see this sentence as an accurate representation of our actual socio-political situation. We presently live in hypermodernity: our maximum ideals celebrate individual choice, freedom and also the cult and celebration of image. The sense of collectivity is somehow lost. However, there isn't a direct political tendency in my work and I'm not even interested in politics as I am, for example, in sociology. But I can't avoid thinking that, to a certain extent, all art is political as it deals and it establishes a relation with reality and with our world. What we must always bear in mind is that art is totally unable to solve political problems! However, as I said, even without that intention, all art is somehow political. Appearances and aesthetics are very important issues in the moment we live in, and even deep and complicated issues need to be presented in a certain attractive and convincing way in order to manage to communicate their

contents to the world; that's why I say that 'to be political it has to look nice'. It is not even a critique to those artists who deal with politics. I am enhancing the importance of the media to express messages, even political ones.

**FR:** Recently, Pedro Cabrita Reis stated he was not a Portuguese artist, he simply was an artist. Knowing you've been called 'the first American artist born in Mexico' and at the same time having you stated that you 'think and love in Mexico City' what is your relation to territorial associations? Is there a need for an artist to relate to his origins in his practice?

**SB:** Regarding that last sentence, I was playing with the typical sentence that accompanies all artists' biographies, 'lives and works', turning it into 'lives and loves'. However, this is something that can happen anywhere, not only in Mexico City. At that precise moment I was living there, so at that time it made sense. I feel that, as an artist, often there is absolutely no connection between the place where I am living and where I am working. I don't feel defined by territory and I don't always belong to the same context. It is obvious that I absorb certain elements of the external world, but my work doesn't allude to specific local issues. I deal with philosophical ideas, questioning notions of representation and analysing global capitalism and consumer society, but without any reference to any place. My work isn't illustrative, it is not like a newspaper. It is obvious that I can't avoid being affected by the reality that

surrounds me, but I think that this can come out more through the creative and productive process of my work. I don't work in the street, I don't take pictures of the street, and therefore, context doesn't affect me directly, because I am dealing with ideas and not with daily reality. The music I hear, what I read, what I see on the Internet affects me a lot more than a specific place.

**FR:** Classical conceptual practices establish an unfulfilled desire for an artistic object that, at the end, only exists in its allusion. However, pieces like your 'Conceptual Decoration' contain this lack at the same time as create a tautology that, in its objectiveness, becomes once again the object of contemplation. Is there an attempt to pervert orthodox conceptual notions in this attitude?

**SB:** My idea about conceptual art is that it never managed to fulfill its paradigm, because it converted itself into a style. However, the notion of tautology, so explored by certain conceptual authors, has always interested me. I try to generate something I call 'jaded tautology', to reiterate what was already said in such an exhaustive way that it is worn-out and becomes overused. I try to pervert a certain system, in order to create something that, at the same time as it maintains its coherence, puts everything in crisis. When I declare that what I do is decorative, I am saying that I create something that is totally ornamental and that, at the same time, it is something that can be turned into an idea. If you think about it, concepts can also be decorative. And this is what I call

'intellectual decoration', how you can articulate objects in an intellectual way, which becomes a decorative way to use information, making everything look better through an intellectual process. A good example is when certain art critics write texts that serve to justify and to validate some works of art that. Without these (texts), those works would have absolutely no interest! Even Kosuth, who I deeply admire, is an intellectual decorator. He can ornate a room with Freud sentences' on one day, the other with Borges, the day after with Wittgenstein, and so on. And curators do exactly the same; they use an intellectual décor to justify their proposals. 'Conceptual Decoration' criticizes this attitude at the same time as it generates this duality, being itself a superfluous object and simultaneously an intelligent view of what is going on. It is almost like a stupid lucidity, like when you denounce a problem creating that same problem. I must have the courage to be the first to put my work in crisis, and that's exactly the interesting part of being an artist! If you think about it, I am using very fast and appealing media: neon, colour, wallpaper... so that I can attract the viewer with something nice to then be able to make him think about my ideas.

**FR:** You can't explain and you won't even try. Sometimes you think, sometimes you don't and we watch the effect of the misinterpretation of Derrida. Is it all down to the construction of a narcissistic construction of the Artist, something similar to what we saw in the 90's?

**SB:** 'Sometimes I think Sometimes I don't' is the most human and personal work that I've ever done. It is a declaration, because in reality, there are moments in which you think, and you are rational, and there are moments in which you don't, moments in which you act in an irrational way. It is almost as if the artist was there, saying something very intimate and personal, almost a confidence, and at the same time if he was completely absent, not thinking and assuming that. I am very fond of the idea of the antihero, a character who lacks conventional heroic attributes. From here it is easy to arrive at the idea of the death of the author, as it is seen in the work of Derrida and of the post-structuralists. This is almost like an anti-author, someone that, even if it is still there (other else he couldn't have died!), hides himself, runs from the back door and refuses to show himself. Black Box, your show at Kunsthalle Bern, is presented almost like a diagram, like the technical illustration of your working process, in which the outputs and inputs are mixed and are impossible to dissociate. What is the main concept behind it? For me, the Black Box gives shape to a process that occurs but that can't be followed, something that you never get to see. I was interested in producing a space in which strobe light and white noise sound created a whole experience, enhanced by architecture. This is the total opposition of text, which is a concrete work, with no movement. I tried to give form to what happens when you read a text, through a sensorial experience. All my text pieces are conclusions, are outputs of which you ignore the input, you don't know where they come from and you only see the final

result. The strobe lights, which is something that I've used in previous installations, give you the same effect that all those contradictions that also happen in the text pieces: they don't allow you to advance, to move or to understand.

**FR:** I like the idea that, at the end, all the text pieces create a new work that is something more than the mere addition of all of them. However, it also becomes obliteration in itself, almost as if negating its absolute pureness as a pure form and sentence. Is this last piece leading to the end of the text pieces? Or is it the beginning of a new obliteration series?

**SB:** This work has a similar process of that of the Black Box. I really like the idea of a black whole, something that sucks everything around it, that makes everything disappear into total darkness. Some of my works of mine carry the same kind of process, and they work like a magnet that attracts everything, as if the world was obliterated! I like to think that all the text pieces I present on the first floor of Kunsthalle Bern, when assembled together and in the same place, become a new and different work. This opens the possibility of the disappearance of the text pieces, as they become something purely visual.

**FR:** The show at the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, 'Soap Box, A Decorative Form of Nihilism' has an odd title. First alludes to Warhol. Then to an empty type of ornament. For me it sounds like a conceptual pleonasm! Isn't ornament, in itself,

already something completely useless and superfluous, thus nothing? And what about the Soap Boxes?

**SB:** First of all, I don't think that an ornament is nothing. On the contrary, an ornament serves to articulate a space, and even if it is something superfluous, it isn't an empty concept. In this case I am interested in analyzing how you can convert negative thoughts through a decorative and attractive presentation. All the works I presented there played with this idea. The obliteration neons turn mistake and scribbling into a final work; the wallpaper, in which the sentence 'conceptual decoration' was continuously repeated, creates a totally ornamental 'moiré' pattern that lead the viewer to do an exercise of flipping from reading the sentence and seeing it as a visual effect; and the obliteration paintings, in which I erase the image that is underneath with industrial silver paint, are at the same time something totally superfluous and meaningless and an extremely attractive object in its ugliness. In all the works, there is a constant tension between a completely negative and destructive action and its final result, which is very attractive. There is also a shift between something conceptual and something expressive, but at the same time anti-aesthetical. The title Soap box is a direct reference to Glen O'Brian's book, 'Soap Box' (that obviously connects you with Warhol's 'Brillo Box'). I wanted to find something that was also a box, like my 'Black Box' in Kunsthalle Bern. I wanted to continue exploring the idea of a container, once again something completely useless, a package. Even the idea



of the soap box is a contradictory one, it is something utilitarian but, at the same time, soap is a very attractive element.

**FR:** Still about this idea of superficiality and decoration, Derrida discusses that the frivolous in the one concept which the dictionary cannot manage, since a serious definition of frivolity is literally the only idea which the fundamental institution of serious discourse can't contain. This impossibility and this contradiction is incredibly resolved in your work, and this seems to be the key to its value: either you understand this, or you're out of the game. What do you think of it?

**SB:** It is a curious sentence! If Derrida is talking so seriously about this concept, thus intellectualizing the notion of frivolity, he is already contradicting himself! However, in my work, there is always an issue of being in and outside two opposite worlds. If you think, fashion and publicity are one of the most frivolous and anti-intellectual things that exist! They are pure aesthetics and hedonistic pleasure, pure attraction, and that is why I like to mix them with more intellectual issues, to create a shock and a tension that can take the best out of each of these elements. Some years ago, I had some photocopies of a book of conceptual art, with reproductions of pure conceptual works, like An Kawara, and also texts of Roland Barthes, etc. For some reason I kept them inside one of those typical fashion magazines and when I saw them there, I realized that in

order to make people understand my ideas and read my texts, I needed to surround them with attractive images, which is exactly its opposite. I want people to be irritated when they see a photo of a model in one of my works. They are irritated, but at the same time they feel attracted by its beauty and then there is an empathy with the texts that are included.

**FR:** This is a question all artists hate. If you were to make a 'Best Of Stefan Bruggemann' with ten tracks, what would it include? (I was hoping to get a nomination of the artist's 10 favorite works, instead, he gave me the following playlist)

**SB:**

1. This Must Be The Place (Naive Melody)

Artist: The Talking Heads

Album: Stop MakingSense: Special New Edition (1984 Film)

2. Tinseltown In The Rain

Artist: The Blue Nile

Album: A Walk Across The Rooftops

**"AN OXYMORON IS A FIGURE OF SPEECH IN WHICH APPARENTLY  
CONTRADICTORY TERMS APPEAR IN CONJUNCTION"**

[www.stefanbruggemann.com](http://www.stefanbruggemann.com)

Filipa Ramos, Celeste Magazine, Issue 29 / Summer, 2008

3. Day and Night

Artist: Bryan Ferry

Album: Bête Noire

4. Trio. Recht gemächlich

Artist: Gustav Mahler

Album: Mahler: Complete Symphonies

5. Living On The Road

Artist: In Soweto

Album: Malcolm McLaren Duck Rock

6. Love Will Tear Us Apart (Permanent Mix)

Artist: Joy Division

Album: Permanent

7. Avalon

Artist: Roxy Music

Album: Avalon

8. Trois Gymnopédies I. Lent et douloureux

Artist: Erik Satie

Album: Piano Works

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9. Hey! Luciani

Artist: The Fall

Album: 50,000 Fall Fans

10. Stay (Remix)

Artist: The Blue Nile

Album: Stay (12in Maxi Single)

**FR:** Do you know what is an oxymoron?

**SB:** No.

“An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction”.

A conversation between Stefan Brüggenmann and Filipa Ramos.