

Projected Nature

Nicola Schrudde makes sculpture. But she is also a painter. And a video artist. What she presents to us in her exhibitions usually fills whole rooms and would normally be called “installation”. The starting point of her work, also in a genealogical sense, is making – indeed modelling – sculptural objects. A nearly constantly recurring element to this day is a sculpture that oscillates between the figurative and the abstract. It has a somewhat irregular ellipsoid rounded shape and the diameter of each piece varies between a half and a good meter. These entities seldom appear on their own, but mainly in smaller or larger ensembles, which are almost always placed directly on the floor. They are modelled in clay: at first unfired, but later also ceramic or terracotta. Even if no explicit representation is intended nor orientation towards specific things the external shape is reminiscent of forms in nature such as acorns, cones or buds. The surfaces of the objects, on which tracks made by fingers during the modelling process are always identifiable as such, bring to mind the natural surface textures of bark or nutshells, etc. On account of their size, the sculptures also remind one of the boulders that lie on mountain paths or at the wayside.

The physical weight of the objects can hardly be sensed by the viewer. An impression of floating weightlessness is evoked, not least by the colouring. To begin with, this is created with pigments applied like watercolour in pastel shades, which are highly responsive to different lighting conditions. If the objects are coated with a shiny ceramic glaze, their impact is even more monochrome and solid. Metallic shimmering paints may also be employed. The subtle use of different paints, hues and lighting clearly demonstrates that influences from the history of painting play an important role in Nicola Schrudde’s sculptural work – even if there are no direct quotations or references. The possible ways to capture the changes in the impact of colour resulting from exposure to light in a painterly mode are “spatialized” by her, one might say, mainly through the choreography of the way light falls onto the sculptures, modifying the appearance of their surfaces time and again along with their

respective colours. Nicola Schrudde only works with paint directly on the surfaces of the sculptures. The colour radiates out from the objects into the surrounding space, whereas Katharina Grosse, for instance, spreads paint across the floor and all over the walls in a gestural idiom. A “painterly” approach to space in Nicola Schrudde’s practice always involves the impact of light as well as the lighting setup, so it would be correct to designate her as a light artist too.

Accordingly, the installation “Black Density” at the Centre for International Light Art in Unna was on show in 2018. It was situated in an elongated room with barrel vaulting, which was only lit by the video projections and a row of small floor lights. These twinkling spots appeared to structure the darkness, corresponding with the glitter of the black ceramic sculptures. One could only peer into the installation space from one side, as if down a tunnel, and yet could also look around a vast expanse, as if one were standing on an observation platform. Some other installations could be traversed completely, such as *Where Ochre turns to Violet* at the Caledonian Hall in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in 1996; or they were passages that were not directly accessible, such as in “The Brilliance of Night ” at the Lehmbruck Museum Duisburg, or to be circumambulated, like the large daylight installation [CUFH] *A Staged Painterly Landscape* in the Flottmann-Hallen Herne. (1) In the final analysis, for the artist it is all a question of spatial interrelationships: as she puts it, “within and opposite” along with the visual range of “near and far”.

The term installation is not used by Nicola Schrudde as an umbrella term for this publication, which is divided into different sections instead. She describes the complex, space-filling arrangements such as all those already mentioned as “Spaces”. Single objects or any interventions which also may be placed or carried out in the open are termed as such: “Interventions” In the “Spaces”, video films often play an integral part, as in Unna, and these also provide sources of light for the lighting choreography. The films are mostly projected onto freestanding glass panes and show large format close-up takes of nature, often individual leaves, finely-tuned into an almost monochrome black and white. Since 1999, short videos have been recorded at very different sites to become the archive “Collection of LEAVES”, which is a resource for the films screened in the installations. As in the objects that are physically present, here too, the effects of light on surfaces come into focus, as in the shimmering pendulous droplets of water on the leaves, for example. The film motion made up of a succession of individual stills is sometimes deliberately slowed down or accelerated. Interestingly, it is precisely these manipulations of the time-axis which suggest an approximation to natural processes, guiding our sense of space and movement, like the rhythms of a natural environment.

One could speak of a “harmony parallel with nature” (2), as Paul Cézanne once had in mind. Unlike Lois Weinberger, Wolfgang Laib or Christiane Löhr for example, Nicola Schrudde does not use any organic materials taken directly from natural sources like plants, earth or pollen. She “translates” a natural environment into an exhibition ambiance, as it were, whereby the elements with which she works always remain clearly visible. This also applies to the technical devices such as the projectors, or the power cables lying freely on the floor, running around the objects and the delicate glass constructions. In addition to glass, other materials play a part, such as composite panels, aluminium and copper. The industrially manufactured is often introduced in an improvised manner and relieved of its normal function – the artist herself uses the term “bricolage”. The clay sculptures dispersed in an apparently casual way confront today’s technical products with one of the oldest natural substances to be worked by the human species. Clay was probably one of the very first materials to be used in sculpture.

However different the elements introduced may be from one other, the idea of creating a staged landscape is always fundamental (as the title in the Herne exhibition states). This means that nature from outdoors – or rather, its *mise-en-scène* – is projected into the interior space. Spatial experience thus becomes a succession of different images, recalling the way the design of landscape gardens of the 18th century aspired to “vistas of nature based on calculated two-dimensionality”. (3) If Baroque gardens were characterized by a rather strict geometry and straight axes, from the mid-18th century the influential English garden style showed “an increasing orientation towards painting, whereby garden design now saw itself as a sister art. The landscape garden presented ideal nature in three-dimensional physically accessible pictures”. (4) In Nicola Schrudde’s landscape scenes in interior spaces the features of various types of landscape garden can be identified. The painterly and pictorial is linked to the architectonic, in the arrangements of the elements in space as well as with respect to the architecture of the exhibition hall.

A viewer entering Nicola Schrudde’s exhibition “[The Brilliance of Night / INSTALLATION for the Lehmbruck Museum]” 2012 in Duisburg might be reminded of the rectangular ground plan of Japanese Zen gardens, such as the Ry_an-ji Temple in Kyoto. The low elongated room could be entered from both sides, but the installation itself, which took up a good two-thirds of the whole area in length, could not: transparent glass panes, with films of leaves projected onto some of them, subdivided the demarcated zone. The arrangement of the vertically-erect glass elements – such as glass cross and glass angle – can be read as a direct reference to the architecture of the sculpture museum from the 1960s, with its walls and large windows at right angles to each other. Another integral component was a large projection on a wall, which thus became an imaginary window to the outside world, recalling

Nicola Schrudde's installation "untitled" for the Kunstfilmtag 2007 in Künstlerverein Malkasten in Düsseldorf. Here, the transparent window plane afforded a view through to the outside, but when it got dark it served as a screen for projections as well as for reflections, merging the installation optically together in the glass panes of the window with the surrounding park.

Window to or mirror of the world? This central issue is implicit in Nicola Schrudde's art – another pointer to painting and its history. For the Italian Alberti, who developed a theory of perspective in the early 15th century, a painting was a "finestra aperta", an open window, whereas for the painters of the Netherlands the surface of a picture was regarded more like an imaginary mirror, and mirrors were also depicted as pictorial motifs. A good example is the "Arnolfini Portrait" by Jan van Eyck, where the bridal couple standing in front of us can be seen again from the rear in the round mirror behind them on the wall. Schrudde's display of ingenious mirroring and reflections using light and film projections is reminiscent of the rendering of light and shine in the early modern period. One thinks of Fra Angelico – for instance – the way the plasticity and spatiality of the Renaissance was still interwoven in his art with the gold ground of the Middle Ages, making no distinction between the mystical as compared with natural secular light. It was probably not until the Impressionists that the depiction of natural light was finally extricated from religious implications; the difference between window and mirror was dissolved into flecks of colour and then by Cézanne into a kind of faceted structure. Nicola Schrudde's art certainly has something impressionist about it, in that it captures changing light reflexes. The round mirror floating flat on the likewise reflective surface of water in the Düsseldorf Hofgarten in her intervention *Untitled (Reflection of Shine)* could thus prompt direct associations to the waterlilies in Claude Monet's garden in Giverny, which the painter depicted time and again in his late work. Furthermore, an echo of Van Eyck's circular mirror reverberates here.

This is one of Nicola Schrudde's outdoor works, but most of her installations are conceived for interior spaces and for particular architectural locations (site specific). The correspondence with architecture arises in a particular manner, as when the closed structural shell of a modern building is opened up in favour of transparency, as is the case in parts of the Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg. The comparability of the conception of space in Schrudde's art practice to an architectural one can be elucidated by a lecture Frank Lloyd Wright held in 1952 on the development of his architecture. Wright argues that the reality of the building is no longer based on walls and the roof and that the walls can disappear, so that the interior space opens outwards and vice versa. (5) The systems theorist Dirk Baecker follows on from Wright to state that you only know "that it is architecture if you can go in and out and if by this being-able-to-go-in-and-out the situation changes, i.e.

something different happens and is to be expected inside than is the case outside.” In this way “architecture itself can be thought of as the difference between inside and out.” (6) My thesis is that the difference between inside and out that is always a theme in Schrudde’s work, and is scrutinised by it, is directly related to the difference between and the ambivalence of nature and architecture.

This is especially well demonstrated by the series of “Mobile Architectures”, as a chapter in this publication is explicitly entitled. In this connection, the [*House / Silver / for #7*] should be mentioned that Nicola Schrudde made for the Sculpture Park Cologne. This small structure, with all-round glazing on a square ground plan, is a standard greenhouse with a gabled roof that can be bought in a DIY store. Such small greenhouses for the house or garden can be used to grow plants or vegetables which would otherwise not flourish in the climate of our part of the world. In botanical gardens there are large greenhouses in which subtropical or tropical plants can be seen. But what does Nicola Schrudde present to us? Her ellipsoid forms with shiny silvery surfaces can only be hazily discerned behind the semi-translucent perspex as if through a mist: instead of “transplanted” nature we find an exhibition space.

In the exhibition [*Greenhouse*] in 2019 at Parkhaus im Malkastenpark Düsseldorf she positioned a similar greenhouse in an interior space. And two ellipsoid forms, one inside and the other outside, are placed so as to suggest that they could be a mirror replica of each other. And thus, the play with inside and out, with nature and architecture, is mirrored and multiplied several times. Outside is once again an interior, an exhibition space. And here too the theme of the ambivalence of window and mirror is addressed, reminiscent of the installations and pavilions of the American artist Dan Graham, who used so-called “spy mirror glass” to create disconcerting visual relations in space. He explored how architecture is bound up with political control and surveillance, defining the private and the public spheres.

Such irritations and ambiguities serve in Nicola Schrudde’s art above all to bring to the fore the process of perception as such. The playful handling of reality and representation, of physical matter and projection, tends to rob things of their substance and their weight. This amounts to an emphasis on horizontal relationships, which are often linked to increasing globalization and digital networking. The “vertical” connection to the earth and gravity may be expressed in very heavy materials, as for example in Anselm Kiefer’s use of lead. This is of lesser importance in Nicola Schrudde’s practice, even when the sculptural objects and other installation components are placed on the floor. In her work, the floor is more like a projection screen – like a reflective water surface – which is why the components of the

installation seem to hover, instead of appearing like a great load or something which even sinks into the ground. For ultimately, Schrudde's sculptural practice is not a matter of intrusion into the materials, but of the modelling and scene-setting of surfaces, which enter into the most varied spatial relationships via the light. And thus, with seemingly immaterial facility, perception itself is brought into focus. And doesn't such a view of nature, which in its intensity and persistence reveals so much without intervening directly, have a political significance, in the face of the ominous exploitation of natural resources?

Footnotes

1. For more on this installation, see the article by Sabine Elsa Müller in *Nicola Schrudde / Phenomena of Stillness. Gardens of Light*. Cologne: Intervallverlag 2024, pp. 182–184.
2. Cf. Paul Cézanne, "Letter to Joachim Gasquet, 26 September 1897".
3. Adrian von Butlar, *Der Landschaftsgarten*, Munich 1980, p. 14.
4. Ibid.
5. Frank Lloyd Wright *Schriften und Bauten*, Munich, Vienna: Langen Müller 1963, p. 228.
6. Dirk Baecker *Die Dekonstruktion der Schachtel. Innen und Außen in der Architektur*, in: Niklas Luhmann, Frederick D. Bunsen, Dirk Baecker, *Unbeobachtbare Welt. Über Kunst und Architektur*, Bielefeld: Cordula Haux 1990, pp. 67–104, here p. 83.

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