

Stefan Banz – Zen in the Alps

Stefan Banz's work proves to be as consistent as only that of a self-confessed devotee of Derrida can be. So what, in this instance, do we mean by "work"? Banz is a photographer, an installation artist, painter, curator, theorist, video maker, publicist, writer, art historian, book designer, sculptor and cultural politician. These diverse fields of activity are neither a sign of postmodern randomness nor an expression of an attempt to recreate a lost wholeness, even if – perhaps *à contrecœur* – a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is coming into being; one which does not succumb to the illusion that it has – to come back to Derrida – overcome "dissémination" and "différence", but accepted them as fundamental premises.

Banz has the various discourses at his command, and moves pleasurable, provocatively, and always reflectively, amidst the most diverse positions of the art system. He is interested in the entire field of cultural expression, in regional phenomena and mentalities as much as the power mechanisms of the global art business. He investigates pornographic pictoriality with the same means as Bacon's existentialist paintings, his declared favourites are Muhammad Ali, Frank Zappa and Bruce Nauman, a strong trio, not least because of their effect-oriented attitude.

His latest work certainly comes as a surprise but, in view of its adumbrated background, it is not necessarily astonishing: a rice-covered mountain rising from the middle of a Zen garden. This is *La Dent Blanche*, at 4,357 metres above sea level one of the highest peaks of the Alps, from the mighty peak of which four ridges run precisely along the four compass points. Banz was captivated by the sublimity of this mountain, and an interest in the adventurous life of his partner's grandfather – a mountain climber, architect, one of the builders of the *Cabane de la Dent Blanche*, survivor of a fall into a glacier crevasse – rekindled that already living fire. But Banz would not be Banz if he were guided solely by his enthusiasm. The mystery of the mountain, as a phenomenon, becomes the object of his investigation. And in return, alongside countless photographic approaches, the mountain also seeks to be grasped in terms of its volume: *La Dent Blanche* now stands in the exhibition space in the form of a scale model, 2 metres high, the ridges running into a strictly edged rectangle, 6.8 x 4.6 metres, on the floor of the space, leaving a narrow path free at

three sides. And it must undergo all kinds of additional transformations, because the installation has a solid surface made of rice. An alpine bonsai peak in the middle of a Zen garden – no, the picture doesn't quite fit, this *Dent Blanche* isn't all that *miniature*, it almost seems to burst its edging.

Banz has always been fascinated by garden landscapes and their implications. Whether they be petit bourgeois front gardens, flower beds and vegetable patches, 300-metre shooting ranges located in the central part of Switzerland, which actually only monopolise the airspace of a piece of nature, or the installation of a garden in a museum in order to cultivate it, Banz always questions the subliminal symbolic content and the way it achieves its effect. Small wonder that he brought not only city photographs from a trip to Japan, but also impressions of a highly cultivated, symbolic horticultural art, one so highly codified that it possesses almost linguistic qualities. This led in 2004 to the exhibition *Tokyo Bites* which, apart from the photographic works, included a spatial installation with a *Japanese Garden*, from whose rice floor, raked into precise parallel lines, there rose a symmetrical truncated cone, similarly made of rice.

A daring piece of bridge-building, then, when the Japanese Zen garden meets the rough world of the Swiss mountains. Nature, forced into a strict cultural form, nature, wild and untameable. Two philosophies, two attitudes to life, two identifying symbols, two places of contemplation. And yet the soft coating of rice grains strips both characteristics of some of their radicality, blurs and veils them as well, as though the artist were deliberately seeking to counter the illusion that art is capable of providing a precise representation of reality. “Paradox” is a word that Banz uses often, and the acceptance of the paradoxical, the contradictory, even perceiving them as an enrichment, is part of his fundamental attitude. And alongside this the size of the work grants the art a dynamic of its own, what might be called a transformation of the artwork, based in a reference to reality, into the artwork as “a paradoxical, reality-influencing, reality-constructing and simulating medium”¹. In Banz's work, fascination with this phenomenon is joined by a playful interest in empirical research and a great deal of love of the motif. In this sense his work has “non-linear” qualities, or, in Banz's own words: “paradoxical”, “chaotic”, “natural” and “in a sense a synonym for life”².

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¹ Hermann Korte, “Beobachtungskunst: Texte und Interviews von Stefan Banz”, in: Stefan Banz, *Komplexes System Kunst: Texte und Interviews*, Münster: LIT, 2001 (Aktuelle Kunst und Literatur, Bd./vol. 1), pp. 237–238.

² Stefan Banz, “Näher an der Wirklichkeit: Muhammad Ali, Frank Zappa, Bruce Nauman”, in: Stefan Banz, *Komplexes System Kunst*, op. cit., p. 25.