

I use myself as material ...

Interview with Zenita Komad by Gerald Matt

During the term of the exhibition Living and Working in Vienna II in the main exhibition room of the Kunsthalle Wien, you gradually let a project develop, which was connected – in more ways than just its subject matter – with The Legend of the Grain, concerning the invention of chess: beginning with an empty chessboard measuring 8 x 8 metres, Operation Casablanca grew exponentially, so to speak, in several directions, not only climaxing in a chess opera but also generating a whole series of events relating to chess – including a grand masters' tournament – a video, a cubic catalogue, multiple games and, of course, 30 sculptured chess figures. All this “was realised” within clearly defined time and budget limits. What secret strategy was behind this “operation”?

I can best describe that by using a snowball system. The foundations of this work were basically laid in my childhood. Chess and music were and are of existential significance in my musician-parents' home. I have spent many, many hours watching my parents and my grandfather play chess. My mother often told me The Legend of the Grain when I was a child. My approach to chess-and-music was originally irrational, biographical and subjective but my triumph was to come in working out the story ... as a child I felt a huge, almost unconquerable respect for chess and music. My intuitively based mind turned towards rationality only from a distance. In the course of working on the piece I became aware that a chess player per se has to act in a highly intuitive fashion. Lothar Schmid told me about the famous game “Spassky versus Fischer” in Reykjavik, where he acted as referee. He was deeply concerned not to think the game through in order to avoid any possible transference of thought. Again and again I have come across spiritual moments of scientific dimensions. I love and admire the work of the composers Bernhard Lang and Nadir Gottberg, and so I approached them both with a request to compose music to my libretto. And the snowball grew and grew. Stefan Löffler was willing to organise a grand masters' tournament. The youngest chess player, Arik Braun, was the winner. Regina Pokorna played blindfold against you, where my objects were really chased all around the field ... and the snowball went on growing. I had a fabulous crew and a totally fantastic team. The rest is a matter of hard work, powers of endurance and a strict denial of doubt. The budget was extremely tight, and so one can see that an iron will can sometimes move mountains, for creating a ship does not mean hoisting the sails, forging the nails and reading the stars but arousing joy for the ocean.

Improvisation clearly plays an important role in your artistic work and the word improvisation conceals the Latin term *proviso/providere*, meaning pre-vision. Is there a “pre-vision” in the course of (artistic) actions?

I work out my productions very precisely in advance. An extremely strict action framework is developed during intense rehearsals. I do not improvise. If some moments want to make that impression with a certain lightness, every step has been planned and worked out with absolute precision. Precision opens up certain freedoms for the actors, because their roles fit them like perfect custom-made suits.

At the chess opera project mentioned at the beginning, it soon became clear to me that Zenita Komad does not “only” live and work in Vienna but also in what you call “Zenita

City” – a virtual city with a large number of real inhabitants and clearly an excellent communications system. How is Zenita City managed and administered? Who acquires civil rights and who has to leave and why?

One feels like a released prisoner who perceives in astonishment the endlessness of the ocean. Zenita City accommodates souls and intimate friends, freaks, thinkers, enlightened beings, word specialists and thought doctors, providers of joy, builders of castles in the sky, inventors of jokes, laughter muscle masseurs, total art workers and many more, not to forget that Zenita City was made up of Liebien (Lovia) and Nettland (Niceland).

In that case, something you once said – “I doubt everything for ideological reasons” – also applies to “politics” in Zenita City, and it is reflected in a form that can be directly received in your text-images, which often consist of combinations of quotations from various sources formed into a kind of visual poetry, in that they are often interlocked in contradictory ways. For example one says: “Religion is dangerous, those who don’t resist end on the cross,” or: “God is (not) nothingness.” And then again, sentences emerge that have a whiff of ideology, even if it is only something pacifist: “Stop Word War,” or: “How can we dance when the World (is) burning” – while in the last image the word “burning” could also be read as “boring,” or, more precisely, as both. That almost looks a bit cynical, even though I would not view cynicism as a major component of your work and your utterance. What is your attitude to our society and, in particular, to the society of art? How do you find your text fragments and quotations? Deliberately looking for them or spontaneously finding/inventing them?

I agree with this observation: cynicism doesn’t suit me very well. I have an undogmatic attitude, looking for insights and aspects of the real: one aspect contradicts another. But in reality as a whole all these aspects are accurate; they mix with each other and become one. A dogma has to be self-consistent. I don’t want to convert anyone to a particular belief. I want to convey a vision, not dogmas.

Recently trunks and eyes and aerial roots have been sticking out from your pictures, growing into the room. The psychologist August Ruhs calls these works “root sculptures”, and in his opinion they don’t only take the root topos with its various connotations as subject matter but they also point out “that the artists” subject is always also themselves, parts of their own selves or else manifestations of their desire deposited in their visual designs. The urge to secure their identity and their anchorage in the world, in other words their urge to be at home somewhere and put down roots, is doubtless one of the primary needs of mankind.” The topos of the search for identity now goes through all the arts and contemporary reflections. Are your “root sculptures” (for example) a contribution to that from your point of view?

I find August Ruhs’s interpretation very interesting. This cycle of works came about in a dispute with the regions of existence that are invisible to us. One theory says that every living being has invisible root canals into other spheres. This idea appealed to me because it comes before the need of the earth’s dwellers to put down roots.

A young tree that is exposed to strong winds will grow strong roots. With its roots the tree draws water and nutrients into itself so that it can put out blossoms and fruit. The deeper its roots go, the more stable it is in the world. It is an attempt to make the invisible visible.

You grew up with theatre; your mother is an opera singer; you yourself sometimes work as a director. What is the meaning of “staging” to you, especially in relation to directness and therefore “truth”?

Sadly my mother has not sung for a long time. I have vague memories of her Schubert and Mahler songs ... she made it possible for me to have a wonderful childhood: as a child of the theatre to go to rehearsals and performances, to look down from the fly loft, to inhale the smells of the make-up room – all that was much more exciting for me than going to kindergarten or school. To get a beer coaster with the words, “Oh you precious child, not yet at your zenith” scribbled on it by Lampersberg; to travel through the sky with poets in flying rooms; and to get a direct link to the Easter bunny from the conductor in the orchestra pit made my childhood years very entertaining. When I had to enter adult life by force of necessity, it was rather the un-staged things that were unfamiliar to me, and sometimes even incomprehensible. The truth ... I strive for intensity and lots of little truths bound together go to make quite a big one. For nothing is truer or less true. Only more or less effective.

You once said that you have an affinity for Viennese Actionism and that you also know some of its representatives well. For you, is Viennese Actionism a historical matter or do you find intentions located there that are still relevant, and, if so, what are they? Has your active interest in actionism been fruitful for your work? Do you see any new actionist tendencies in the contemporary field of art?

At one time I thought that everything had already been said. (Fortunately that is never the case.) And then I discovered that the more knowledge one acquires, the bigger the field on the unknown and the unsayable or unknowable becomes (one of my text-images: Wissen ist eine komplizierte Sache – Liebe auch [Knowledge is a very complicated matter, and so is love]). Actionism is a form of psychic and physical cleaning through effective shocks. There the post-war misery, the pain, the desperation and the pressure of suffering are strong features of the act of liberation. And they did a good job, right! My generation developed a completely new approach, which, of course, has its origins in this historical tradition. The pipe has already been passed on. After Actionism came Operationism. Perhaps we are ready for a forgettism of isms. Ginseng to Actionism! Your health!!!

At the exhibition Superstars, where you took part with a photo booth called Zenita City in the Kunsthalle Wien, you said in an interview: “I don’t want to stand in the centre of things,” and: “Perhaps the real goal is to get away from the ego. Good art should have nothing to do with the artist.” How do you reconcile this personal attitude on the one hand with your artistic career, which brought you to international art fairs and famous exhibition halls at the age of 27, and, on the other hand, with your private and artistic surroundings – such as in Zenita City – where famous names walk in and out of the best salons?

Of course my work is meant for an audience and should be seen, be present and have an effect. I think strong work lifts itself out of the accustomed patterns of thought and perception. Cutting the umbilical cord from a work of art is what enables a masterful control of material. From the moment it is finished, the work is autonomous, and my job is then to ensure the best possible “administration.” And to take responsibility ... and, of course ... to carry on. ... As far as that is concerned, I have to draw a strong dividing line: my work has to stand at the centre of things, not me. I believe in a power much higher than me is a written image that arose in this connection.

Even so, you also seem to stage your appearance in public. To what extent do you work in your role as an artist with your outer appearance as part of your artistic attitude?

The fact that even people who know me reasonably well sometimes don’t recognise me because they think I have changed so much has often puzzled me. I suppose my thought

processes, moods and conditions become visible very quickly.

However, I use myself as material and slip into thoughts as if into roles. And then there is usually the matching dress, the matching shoes, and a hat is usually necessary as well. I like transformation; transformation is something extremely pleasant and refreshing. "Disguises" are very helpful in releasing playful energies. I think that has something to do with the joy of life and the need for beauty.

What are you working on at present? What are your plans for the immediate future?

At present I am Artist in Residence in the MAK Schindler House in Los Angeles. I am in an exciting development phase, working on an objects, pictures, drawings and formulae.

MY WORK COMES FROM MY HEART. MY RESOURCE IS
INSIDE, THE INSIDE INCLUDES AND DESCRIBES THE OUTSIDE.
THE POWER GOING THROUGH ME DOESN'T ASK, IT DIAGNOSES,
DECIDES AND DETERMINES. (D-D-D)
(WE DEFINE THE FUTURE THROUGH OUR THOUGHTS AND
ACTIONS. $F=T+A$) NOW IS THE KEY!

Zenita Komad in conversation with Gerald Matt in August 2007. The artist participated in the exhibitions Living and Working in Vienna II at Kunsthalle Wien in 2005 and Superstars. The Celebrity Factor. From Warhol to Madonna at Kunsthalle Wien and BA-CA Kunstforum in 2005. Zenita Komad, born in Klagenfurt, Austria in 1980, lives and works in Vienna.