

Placing Truth in the Work of Art

The artist Josepha Gasch-Muche (GM) in conversation with the director (D) of the Glass Museum Shanghai.

D: When going through your works, I found your personal signature to be so unique. What is the source of your inspiration?

GM: Many things in my life have inspired me, and continue to do so. These can be people and objects, but also literature, music, landscapes, journeys. What was important for me as an artist was encountering my teacher, the perceptual psychologist and Bauhaus artist Boris Kleint. He worked as Johannes Itten's assistant at the Bauhaus before he became a professor. His lessons opened my eyes to the fascination of material and encouraged me to explore it. Any material, whether natural or industrially manufactured, has its own character and a specific structure. All of the potential for shaping it are therefore inherent. I also learned from Kleint that material does not show its true face until it has been destroyed. That means that as an artist, one has to reach into its depths in order to get to the bottom of it and then piece it together again. What was also important for me was encountering works by the American Minimal artists Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Agnes Martin. Their search for ultimate forms and forms in art and their emphasis on primary geometric structures had a major influence on me. Yet my occupation with Martin Heidegger's philosophy also deeply influenced my understanding of art.

D: You began as a painter. Why did you turn to glass?

GM: I was particularly interested in the visible world early on. But as a painter I increasingly had the feeling that with my paintings I was remaining on the surface of things instead of understanding what, to borrow from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, holds them together at their very core. In this situation, I admired any attempt to unravel the world and reality by means of physical experiments and evidence. I was especially captivated by the pendulum experiments by the French physicist Léon Foucault with which he proved the rotation of the earth in 1851. This led to my attempts to reproduce his experiments myself. At the same time, this was my first step toward sculpture. I subsequently produced a series of wall

objects with wire on Plexiglas in which I explored the creative potential of light. As far as the display glass is concerned that I work with today, I do not think that I found it, but that it found me. I say that because I am so extraordinarily **satisfied** by the close symbiosis in which I work with it artistically. The material I use is an extremely thin glass that was specially developed for cell phones. It is manufactured in a glass factory near my studio. The glass I use for my artistic works is waste glass that accumulates during production and is regularly recycled. After experimenting with it for some time, I realized that I could paint with the irregular glass shards and the light that struck them completely without pigments. I had thus discovered my path.

D: Is your preference for glass related to your life experience or your personality?

GM: I believe so. I belong to the generation that grew up in Germany after World War II. These were years of restoration. People were ashamed of the atrocities and crimes that **had been** committed by the National Socialists and the Hitler regime; they suppressed everything or most of which had happened as well as they could and plunged into reconstructing the country. Gestural abstraction in postwar art also marked a withdrawal. It was not until the founding of the ZERO group by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, which Günther Uecker later joined, that a genuine fresh start was made. In art, one wanted neither the old illusionism nor a new escapism, but ventured to find new paths to truth: by means of a purist aesthetic, ZERO strove for the reduction of the figurative and the purist concentration on the clarity of pure color and the dynamic vibration of light in space, out of which they developed a new form of kinetic light art. The ethos of truth in this art, which can also be found in American Minimal Art, is a crucial maxim for my own art. As an artist, placing truth in the work of art without misappropriating the illusion that life permanently holds in store for us is a **demanding** aim. Glass provides me with the means to do so.

D: What is your work *The Beauty of Danger* about? How would you describe this work to the public? What is the story or meaning you want to communicate with it?

GM: Good! However, I must begin by saying that the title *The Beauty of Danger* does not stem from me but from you. It gives the work a narrative dimension that is in no way inherent in my title. It is my custom to give my works titles that consist

solely of numbers that make reference to the day I completed them. The original title of the work being shown in your museum is *13.11.13*, which indicates that I finished the work on November 13, 2013. However, I have nothing against your renaming my work. On the contrary: the new name expresses your understanding of it, how you react to it rationally and emotionally. That is what it comes down to when I give my works such sober titles, which are only for bookkeeping purposes and have no meaning in terms of content: that the viewer can take in the work completely undistracted and uninfluenced by me as its author. It is unnecessary to describe it, because it is immediately evident. It is what it is. Or, with the words of the American artist Frank Stella: "What you see is what you see." Whereby what is interesting about this tautology is that everyone sees something different in art, even when what they see does not change in front of their eyes. However, one can hardly maintain this about *13.11.13*, because the work constantly changes its appearance with the alternating incidence of light, to which one can naturally again link a story. If you will, a philosophical story of becoming and passing away, of permanence and contingency, and so on. Your title picks up on the beauty and the danger of the work that find direct expression in the sharpness of the glass and in the beauty of the Platonic circularity. Other viewers will see other things. And that, I repeat, is precisely in my interests. I am concerned with the viewer's freedom to see what he or she wants to see in my works and not with forcing a specific story or meaning on them.

D: Most of your works are black or white. Is that a conscious decision you make, or is it accidental?

GM: No, my decision for the non-colors of black and white is not accidental. Over the course of my artistic career I also made attempts to work with other colors for the purpose of fashioning the object's background but then regularly scrapped them again. Because I am concerned with allowing the layers of glass in my works to develop their effect in an unimpeded way, any additional color is a hindrance, because it becomes too dominant. Besides, the prismatic quality of the glass breaks up white light into its colored components. Any additional color would only disrupt the balance. Moreover, the polarity between black and white is a universal one that automatically charges the works with meaning. You are familiar with this from Chinese philosophy: the opposing yet complementary forces in the form of

yin and yang. Yang is the masculine, light, hard, hot, and active principle, while yin is feminine, dark, soft, cold, and passive. In Occidental philosophy this is expressed in the search for the primary structures and primal grounds of the world in dialectics, which has saliently characterized Western thinking from antiquity to modernity. It is influenced above all by the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for whom it is a strategy par excellence for the purpose of describing the “action of the mind in its self-comprehension,” as it says in his *Phenomenology of the Mind*, necessary reading for any thinking individual.

D: Why is light so important for your work?

GM: Why is light so important for all of us? Because it is the source of life. In Christianity, the Creation begins with God engendering light. Let there be light, he spoke, and there was light. This is how it is written in the Bible. Human civilization begins with fire and light. Think of Prometheus, who stole the secret of light and brought it to humankind, and who was severely punished by the gods for having done so. Light has become a universal metaphor for what is good, true, and beautiful. Plato described the beneficial effects of light, and this is what European Enlightenment teaches us in the eighteenth century. To be filled with light means coming of age, thinking independently. In Immanuel Kant’s famous words: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.” In French, it is no accident that the age of Enlightenment is called L’Âge des Lumières, the age of light. Illuminating dark recesses means dispelling the ghosts of fear, depression, and prejudice. All great thinkers are eminent bringers of light. We also find this light metaphor in the works of Sigmund Freud. When he explains that where id is shall become ego, then this means nothing other than illuminating man’s “basement” so that he can go through life somewhat less neurotically and filled with fear.

D: When you make your large glass objects, do you work by yourself or with assistants?

GM: I work by myself, without any assistants. I disapprove of a conceptual understanding of art, according to which the idea is everything and the work can be executed by anyone in a position to do so. I perceive my artworks as intimately connected to me and my person. Do not get me wrong: I do not want to preach the

genius cult here. But the way I understand it, my works are a part of me, and I feel responsible for their execution.

D: How long do you need to finish a large work? And what is the most difficult part?

GM: I need about three months to finish a 200-by-200-centimeter work, provided that I work on it every day for several hours. But in no way do I find the time necessary to produce it burdensome, even though manual work involves repetitive elements. I often work myself into a mind-expanding state like the one Zen Buddhists refer to when they meditate. What is difficult about producing larger works is keeping the initial concept one has of them alive over a longer period. In order for the artifact to ultimately trigger enthusiasm in the viewer, as an artist one has to be and remain enthusiastic oneself.

D: Do you still remember your first work in glass?

GM: Of course! How could I possibly forget it?

D: Please tell us something about it.

GM: It was 1998 after stumbling upon display glass as an artistic medium. I used special pliers to break the glass into lots of small, irregularly shaped shards that I layered on a white canvas measuring 60 by 60 centimeters, securing them with white glue. I had arranged the shards in such a way that they all faced in a set direction and formed a homogenous structure. Their appearance nevertheless changed with the incidence angle and the intensity of the light that struck them, and of course with the vantage point of the viewer. I was fascinated by the difference in sameness. That something identical is at the same time different! What I saw rendered was something that is constitutive for all of us and what the poet Arthur Rimbaud once expressed in his now famous conclusion: "I is another."

D: What would you say has had the most lasting influence on your oeuvre?

GM: It has most certainly been the discovery of display glass and its means of expression within a set of geometric figures, whose eternal value was evoked for the first time by Plato. When one looks at it, the versatile and agile character of glass within the framework of a firmly established and fixed architecture leads to

ever-new, delightful visual collisions and fireworks of insight. Even though I, as the first viewer of my works, can easily detect that myself, these impressions are time and again confirmed by other viewers. Please do not misunderstand my description of my oeuvre as self-adulation on my own account, but take it as a description in which the signature of my works expresses itself and can be verified by anyone and everyone.

D: Do you have a favorite work?

GM: (laughs) A classic question. It is understandable that you do not want to leave it out. Years and decades ago, in West Germany there was a famous director and artistic director, Gustav Gründgens, who was asked a similar question in reference to his productions. And he replied that it is always the one he is currently working on. A reply to which I also subscribe.

D: Your works have earned a great deal of appreciation and recognition. Do you have a muse or an artistic idol?

GM: The recognition of my work is relative. As an artist, one probably believes it could be greater. But the appreciation I experience abroad is noticeably greater than in Germany. I cannot say why. In any case, this apparently confirms the old proverb that a prophet has no honor in his own country. "Muse" is a very old-fashioned word. The question boils down to what and who inspired me with respect to my work. I have already answered that question.

D: You recently visited Shanghai. What is your impression of Chinese glass art?

GM: Before traveling to Shanghai I had had little contact with Chinese glass art. It was not until I visited your museum that I learned that working with glass has a long and proud tradition in China. The artistic production of glass has flourished in China, in particular in recent decades, and it is absolutely on a par with works that were and are still being produced in the West. This becomes strikingly evident in your museum. This makes me all the prouder about being represented with one of my own works in your collection.

D: Do you have a message for all the students majoring in glass art in China?

GM: I can tell them that for an artist, glass is a magnificent material. But they will

already be aware of this; otherwise it would have never occurred to them to work with it. I would therefore like to congratulate them and all of those who have decided to devote their lives to art, and tell them that they have made a fantastic choice. Although life as an artist is not always easy, involving oneself with art