

Seizing Language, Art, and Word

Thoughts on the Work of Anne Schülke

Christina Irrgang, translation Uta Hoffmann, 2023

The media artist Anne Schülke studied literature and philosophy before embarking on her artistic work and has written a doctoral thesis on autofiction in the work of the art historian and writer Paul Nizon. For Anne Schülke language and art were already interwoven before she herself began to formulate works of visual art, she writes constantly and in doing so, examines the content of the work of other artists; in her own projects, she encourages people to find forms of self-expression through writing. Since 2012, for example, she and Detlef Klepsch have together published the *zat. magazine for interdisciplinary art*. In the first issue they began directly with an examination of image-text relationships: “Photographs, video stills, and drawings enter into a dialog with essays, prose texts, and poetry,” it is “[...] the breathing of two independent forms of expression that are in contact with each other.”¹ The possibilities of establishing contact between language, artistic object, and the human body are central to Anne Schülke’s cross-genre works. She not only combines these entities as constants in her artistic practice but invites people to do the same: to interact, to investigate, to reflect, to communicate with each other and with themselves.

It was through this interpersonal form of contact that I first met Anne Schülke in 2019 at the NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf as part of her *Circle of Looks* project, which she had initiated together with the artists Thyra Schmidt and Carol Pilars de Pilar, and the social worker and educator Adwoa Adjei. This exchange between women of different nationalities – from Bangladesh, Germany, Ghana, Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Romania, Somalia, and Chechnya – on migration, inner emigration after strokes of fate, liberation from conventions, and unquestioned social customs preceded the exhibition and the presentation of a book accompanying the project. One of Schülke’s video works was also shown there, in which these women wear ceramic discs in front of their faces that they had previously made themselves: masked as in traditional Greek theater, the identity of the individual concealed in order to emphasize the word and the communal carrying power of what was said or sung. Then, in the exhibition space, these same women stood around a set table and facing each other, read texts aloud: in Farsi, Twi, Romanian, Urdu, German. In turn, they lent each other their voices, their language. What was spoken interwove to create a melody that unfolded symbolically beyond the need to understand words and encouraged people to overcome inner boundaries.

By initiating participatory artistic works like the one described above, Anne Schülke proceeds by taking the floor and in so doing makes a space for the enablement of polyphony. In his *Sacrament of Language*, Giorgio Agamben writes about the meaning of the oath and recognizes the special nature of language in this context: in the “guarantee of its truthfulness and its realization.”² In his analysis, he emphasizes language itself not only as an *obligatio*³, but also as a means to to recognize oneself in one’s *conditio*, that is, in one’s condition as a human being, as a “speaking being.”⁴ Language is thus an act of witnessing, through which it is possible to make certain of how we exist together as sentient beings in the continuous process of becoming. These aspects are significant for viewing and experiencing Anne Schülke’s art.

1 Zat – Heft für interdisziplinäre Kunst, No. 1/2012, Düsseldorf 2012, p. 3.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *Das Sakrament der Sprache. Eine Archäologie des Eides*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, p. 10.

3 Cf. *ibid.* pp. 11 f.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Memory and recollection reside closely in such symbolic and life-performing acts of language and are of equal significance to the artist. This is especially true for Schülke's collaborative long-term project *Parrots and Swans* – a series she initiated in 2020 that creates “situations for art, animals, and people”¹ within the urban and social infrastructure of Ratingen-West. In collaboration with various regional and international actors, Anne Schülke is now organizing exhibitions, readings, and talks at various locations in the district, which was founded in the late 1960s as a settlement structure for future-oriented living and in which the artist grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Sometimes based on site-specific questions, these artistic and social interventions deal with social themes that on the one hand refer to Ratingen-West itself, but on the other hand encompass the overarching perspectives offered and the problems encountered endemic to dystopian settlements of the post-war period from an empirical as well as an artistic-scientific perspective. The large housing development had been built by the Hamburg-based public-service building and housing company *Neue Heimat*, owned by the German Federation of Trade Unions. From the 1920s to 1990 – between the Weimar Republic and the still young Federal Republic of Germany, they had pursued the goal there as in numerous other German and international urban areas of establishing social housing in clustered urban peripheries in the form of so-called satellite cities. With her project *Parrots and Swans*, Anne Schülke examines in particular the results of real social development and the possibilities of cultural diversity between migration, different nationalities, classicism, and racism. Bearing in mind her own Ratingen-West experiences including for example when the band *Fresh Familee* was founded as one of the first German rap and hip-hop groups, and the notion of the functioning of a large housing estate with its inevitable social conflicts, Anne Schülke's series stimulates people to reflect on the future of living together and connects people in their diversity of existence and activities through versatile artistic and intermedial interventions.

In 2021, for example, the artist and curator Roman Zheleznyak spoke about brutalist architecture, the history of the city district, and (electronic) music in a live lecture performance in the parish hall of the Versöhnungskirche, opening up an atmospheric space for reflection by means of an associative text-sound structure, which the composer, sound and media artist Claudia Robels-Angel followed up on the following year. In 2022, as part of an intervention by artist Katharina Maderthaler, children from the Berliner Straße Protestant daycare center sang songs of parrots and swans with cantor Martin Hanke, for which Maderthaler developed a stage situation – including posters designed as a collage from images of skyscrapers, created in collaboration with art teacher Karin Hanke, an art class from the Martin Luther King Comprehensive School, and Anne Schülke. They expressed contemporary visions of living together. Schülke also entered into a renewed cooperation with Adwoa Adjei, who led a discussion under the title *Friendship* with the anti-racist education consultant Emilene Wopana Mudimu and the Cologne spokesperson of the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland Bund e.V., Joanna Peprah, about life realities between anti-racist and intersectional discourses and lived everyday life.

Anne Schülke herself created the video installation *Westtangente* as part of her series, in which she artistically adapted memories of the spaces, designs, pathways, colors, and sounds of Ratingen-West, where she grew up. Photographic images of the surroundings taken with an instant camera, such as at the Swan Pond or where a Parrot House once stood, were combined with found objects to form an architectural installation that speaks associatively to what is remembered and imagined and is atmospherically accompanied by her voice and by sounds composed by Detlef Klepsch.

¹ <https://parrotsandswans.com/en>, last accessed on 03/31/2023.

Her work was preceded by walks in Ratingen-West, as well as research on urban planning concepts in the Ratingen Museum, the Hamburg's Historical Museum, and the Ratingen City Archive. In 2021, Anne Schülke showed her installation *Westtangente* for the first time at the Museum Ratingen, and in 2022, it was projected onto several displays directly in the urban space on Berliner Platz – framed by the high-rises surrounding it – after sunset.

There, illuminated in the darkness, shimmering with many colors, and reflected in the windows of the surrounding buildings, the work formulated a nonverbal dialog with the place and space surrounding the installation, resonating through, for example, color gradations and variations in the image with potential visions of life and actual existing versions of the condition of living.

In the context of an exhibition initiated by the painter Sebastiano Benegiamo and realized by the curator Angelika Stepken in the public space of Le Piagge, a suburb of Florence, Anne Schülke opens up her reflections on the utopias of large housing estates to southern Europe. Echoing *Parrots and Swans*, Schülke has now produced posters and T-shirts for her work *From the Suburbs*, presented there in spring 2023, that feature reproduced photographic images of high-rises from Ratingen-West. The images are enhanced by a QR code that provides access to a text spoken in Italian and English relating to Le Piagge, which subtly allows the interactions of architecture and people to be experienced on site – not least through the merging of hearing what is narrated, seeing the images, even wearing clothing and generally experiencing the space.

Anne Schülke, speaking with Agamben, is able to offer *ethical connections of words, things, and human actions*¹ and thus make them present from a collective practice. Even more, she makes it clear that there is a necessity to maintain such ethical connections and relationships in order to achieve a collective living together among people. This is how it might have been for Schülke in Ratingen-West many years ago. This is how we might act now.

Der Text darf ohne ausdrückliche Einwilligung der Urheberin nicht verändert werden; jede Nachahmung ist unzulässig. Jede weitere Nutzung durch Dritte bedarf der vorherigen Absprache mit der Autorin Christina Irrgang.

1 Cf. Agamben 2010, p. 88.