

# Questions by Judith Clark

## Roman Kurzmeyer, 2021

**Roman Kurzmeyer and Judith Clark, Professor of Fashion and Museology in London, explore exhibition making and the double meaning of medium**

***Judith Clark:** You are an academic and a curator. You have written on Szeemann's practice before. We met at the Warburg Institute in 2016 when you were researching Warburg's methodology, his 'research as practice' that you felt had affinities with Szeemann's. For both of them a 'medium' has a double meaning, as conductor and tool for renewal.*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** Harald Szeemann the exhibition-maker pursued a two-pronged strategy very early on. On the one hand there were his historical and thematic exhibitions that turned on the visualization of an idea and that made liberal use of models, reproductions and a plethora of archival materials, then there were the pure art shows in which his primary concern—far more than in his thematic shows—was with the positioning of the work in space and with the experience of both the work itself and its architectural context. Szeemann owes his renown as an exhibition-maker primarily to these scenographic presentations of contemporary sculpture and installations. His popularity as a curator, by contrast, rested on the original content and—in most cases—spectacular presentation of his thematic shows, many of which reached a wide audience. The method underlying these exhibitions, which were more about culture as a civilizing process transcending any one period than about any single work, was similar to that of Aby Warburg, who as a scholar and historian engaged with the work of art as a formalized bearer of meaning and who, unlike Szeemann, was not interested in the aura of the original.

***Judith Clark:** How important is it to get the term exhibition-maker right? Do you feel that Szeemann meant something by it such that has/needs a precise legacy?*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** It was about creating the perceptual conditions that would enable the audience to have the best possible visual experience of the works on show, as art and as "hyperimage." That is the exhibition-makers's métier and that is what connects them to the artist.

***Judith Clark:** To what extent do you feel you have worked out what you mean through your collaborative work at The Amden Atelier?*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** Obviously no two years will ever be alike in such a long-term project, and not every collaboration will reach the same level of intensity. I've stayed in touch with some of the artists, whereas others have all but disappeared off the radar. What really matters to me is that we speak of the Amden Atelier not as a brief, one-off project, but rather as a process that has now been running for over twenty years. It seems to me that trying out experimental formats is a lot easier these days, even in institutional settings, with the result that

the aesthetic gap between what happened in the Atelier's early years and the most recent projects has narrowed. The book that I wrote about the Amden Atelier has become an indispensable part of the project, because in it I reflect on my actions as curator and my own relationship to the works on show. It's interesting to think that I've been treating a cowshed as a white cube all these years. The cowshed was the venue or place of performance for each new exhibition, yet despite its many shortcomings was never upgraded to accommodate its new function. Only in recent years, and through your own exhibition in particular, did the question arise of whether it shouldn't be preserved as a historical monument and to that end first transformed into a sculpture in which several different artists had a hand. I'm thinking here of the holes that Vaclav Pozarek drilled to supplement the existing ones, though of course I'm also thinking of your own work, the twelve wrought-iron nails modelled on hairs on the drawings by Niklaus Manuel Deutsch. Back in 2002, before I began working in this direction, Bruno Jakob painted the outside walls of the barn with water. It is these interventions, which although invisible were indeed carried out and can be rendered visible through discourse, that have turned this rural cowshed into an aesthetic construct.

**Judith Clark:** *You have said your project would “enable artists to create site-specific projects in a historically, culturally and topographically exceptional landscape while offering visitors to Amden a unique context for the individual and contemplative appreciation of art.” Based on your research into the artists’ colony that at the beginning of the 20th century formed around the Bernese painter Otto Meyer-Amden (1885–1933) and told in your book *Viereck und Kosmos* (1999), the project you started is situated within the incredible landscape above Lake Walensee, repurposing of the barn as an exhibition space. [Could you comment on its contemporaneity: ie. the almost obsolete peasant culture becomes within your project part of a new site of entertainment.]*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** Even after the very first exhibition of 1999, when Katharina Grosse, reflecting on her intervention, spoke of her impression of “a building [meeting] a picture of the same size,” the question we were all left with was whether the work, the exhibition and the exhibition space could be separated at all in such a situation. That the space should not possess any of the standard attributes of an exhibition space was of course central to the concept. The experience of the works in an environment utterly alien to them has been a common thread throughout the series. The building is just as visible as the work installed in it and yet it belongs to a reality very different from the work of art. Even now it is clear that this agrarian landscape will change rapidly in the coming years and that the meadows and forests will soon be redefined as a park and recreational area. At the start of my project the stall was still being used to keep cattle through the winter, whereas these days it is empty all year round and no longer has a function. It recalls an out-dated form of animal husbandry and the demise that we are now witnessing of a peasant culture that was once enormously important to Europe. I really don't know how long the fiction of a barn can be upheld. That is why I began asking the artists to work with the building itself and to transform it into a sculpture.

**Judith Clark:** *The original uses of the barn are still evident, it has not been restructured to create a threshold for the works of art, ensuring an engagement*

*with the site. The opposite perhaps to the idea of the white cube but as you say emphatically not an alternative to it.*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** The question of how to exhibit after the Performative Turn is one of the central challenges that I face as a curator; hence my view of the Amden Atelier as an attempt to answer that question on a “model scale,” as it were. Some of the works shown have been site-specific works, at least according to the artists. If, as a curator, I describe them instead as “exhibitions,” however, then I am shifting the emphasis away from their connection to the site and towards the spaces themselves through which they are revealed. This understanding of the exhibition is premised on the idea that art can be experienced even outside the canonical structures by which it is normally communicated. The question “Where am I?” that according to Brian O’Doherty is what we ask ourselves on encountering a spatial installation, will elicit a completely different answer in a museum or art gallery than in a space that was not purpose-built for art exhibitions.

**Judith Clark:** *You cite Dorner both in your introductory essay to the book that documents the first 15 years at Amden, and in your chapter on Warburg. What is it about his work that looms large for you? Is it about mediation? About the visitor? [Both rooms were intended to involve the visitor both physically and spiritually in the growing process of modern reality’, wrote Dorner.]*

**Roman Kurzmeyer:** The name Alexander Dorner and his museum concept stand for the desire to break down barriers, to open the museum to all comers and to foster an understanding of the civilization process itself. Dorner was interested in culture as both historian and teacher. Anyone actively involved in art today will generally focus on how best to communicate art—art education in other words. But museums also have curators whose work is geared to discursive programme formats that actively involve visitors. Whereas exhibitions are secondary to such formats, the role they assign artists is becoming increasingly important. Dorner’s ideas are still of the utmost relevance in this respect, especially on account of his conviction that reproductions can fulfil the same function as originals—as we have discovered during the pandemic. These days, the art museum is in many respects an ethnographic museum about art. Increasingly of interest to me personally, however, are the production aesthetics aspect and the image we now have of the artist. Many contemporary works of art are actually “artefacts about art,” as Goran Djordjevic put it. The meaning that individual artistic expression might yet acquire is a question that I wish to devote more time to in future.

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