
From Volkskunst to Kunstwerk: the Eckenlehnerin

On the art of Maximiliane Baumgartner

2020

Maximiliane Baumgartner was born and raised in a small town bordering the Alps in Southeast Germany, not far from the Austrian border: a place of periphery, a place where the regional supercedes the national. The absence of centrality (and the hegemonic discourse and narratives generated within it) informs a great deal of her approach to art, pedagogy, and socialization.

In that Bavarian region, traditional buildings such as houses, farms, or sheds, are roofed with a recognizable, quaint, scalloped wooden shingle, known as *die Schindeln*. A new building is recognized for its fresh and bright, raw wooden surfaces adorning the rooftop, before the wood begins to darken with age, developing its patina from humidity and exposure to other natural elements. In practical terms the layered shingles compose the roof of a house, keeping it insulated, safe, and secure. This particular technique in the Alps has been passed down through generations, and —as is typical of construction and craftsmanship in a majority of western cultures— a project completed by the men of a community. Decades later after leaving the region of her childhood, Baumgartner re-evaluates this particular *Volkskunst* motif by removing its function, and bringing attention to its form, almost as if it were a weaving or a textile work.

In *Eckenlehnerin*, only a small portion of the shingles are selected: the exact ratio of shingles is not determined by the shape of the building, but rather determined by the artist, shaped in the format of an equilateral triangle. While the shingles are orientated to point upwards, the triangle is orientated so that it is pointing downwards, symbolizing the triangle as a form of the feminine. For millennia, this orientation of the triangle form has stood to represent the 'sacred chalice', a pubis, or the womb.¹

In *Eckenlehnerin*, the wood used remains young, bright and fresh. Its condition of course will change over time, yet imperceptibly. Labeled, treated, preserved and exhibited as not only as artifact, but as Kunstwerk, it will never bear the burden of protecting a domestic edifice, battered by weather and the natural elements. While *Eckenlehnerin* is made from a material traditionally used for a facade, it is subverted here by its display inside. Baumgartner takes the simple carpentry form from the hands of a traditionally male-fabricated craft and reappropriates it on feminist terms. Thus, this subversion enacts a transit from the certain exteriority of a social function into the radical interiority of an artistic statement.

The title, *Eckenlehnerin* —literary translated to "corner leaner"— also harkens back to a period of the 19th century, referring to a gesture and social posture that young men took in the years before the failed 1848 revolution in Germany. The male counterpart to this term, an "Eckenlehner" was someone who spent time idling in public space, not doing anything economically viable, but hanging around and commenting upon political circumstances. This figure takes roots throughout Europe in the *flâneur* and later on, the dandy². In important aspect to note here is that the [plural] "Eckenlehner" of this time were indeed men: women were not actually allowed to be on their own in public spaces. In Baumgartner's artwork, it hangs alone, in a semi-public exhibition space. Although simple gesture today, it alludes to a radical positioning in opposition of traditional gender norms. This semantic reference informs the social space that is of most interest to Baumgartner, fully explored in her 2017-2019 community pavilion and action-oriented work, *Der Fahrende Raum*, where another downwards-facing triangle painting hangs on its facade.

ART IN THE THIRD SPACE: *Der Fahrende Raum*

Baumgartner's painting practice is both geared towards and cohabitates within a practice of community-oriented play and activity, which she terms as an 'actionist pedagogy'; one situated in a liberated field, autonomous from the conventional contemporary educational system. Here, Baumgartner's artwork become transitive; actions and agency pass onto and over these objects. This is perhaps most evident in *Der Fahrende Raum*, the mobile art project and action space presented within an urban outdoor park in Munich's Freimann district, established in collaboration with artist Jochen Weber, whose intended audience and purpose was a space for free pedagogy and artistic action for children, adolescents and adults, alike. Structurally presented as a free-standing pavilion adorned with paintings and ornament made by Baumgartner, the *Fahrende Raum* was also established with the purpose to invite other artists, architects and performers to lead programs in dancing, crafting poetry, painting, staged performances, puppet-mak-

ing, and much more.

The establishment of a nexus point unto which the painting practice makes a transitive passage out onto a social network was the goal of the pavilion. With great clarity, outlined through self-generated discourse (written by Baumgartner and others involved in leading or supporting the programs³) distributed as zines or pamphlets, Baumgartner asserts that her intended network is within the Third Space⁴; in defining this space, there is a more narrow emphasis on the unconventional sociocultural space created at the intersection between non-familial adults, children and adolescents.

MAKING BELIEVE

In many ways, Baumgartner is focused on creating spaces to facilitate “make believe” or pretend play (that is after all what children specialize in). The etymology of the term “make believe” is however quite ironic considering the use of the transitive verb “to make” (to cause to exist, occur, or appear) paired with the verb “to believe” (to accept the word or evidence of; to consider to be true). To make believe is to cause an action which affects an opinion. At the scale of play or politics, this can have enormous consequences. We accept “make believe” play readily, but “make believe” rhetoric warily. This is perhaps one major difference between casual relationships between children, and causal ones between adults⁵; one which Baumgartner seeks to break down.

When viewing a painting or an artwork in naturalistic terms —as a child might— the viewer may render the figure, narrative, or illustration depicted within the work of art as art’s reality⁶. A child is more likely to view a portrait as a real person, to view a landscape as a real world, or to expect an illustrated scene to spring to life at any moment, and so on. It is this childlike suspension of disbelief, this gesture towards imaginative play, that she evokes in her paintings. Whilst Baumgartner works in a wide variety of media from found and fabricated objects, community-oriented architecture and programming, as well as forms of written discourse and their DIY distribution networks, it is the paintings that continue throughout each exhibition context and thus tie them together as a holistic practice. Here I would characterize her oeuvre as a sort of polyptych-tic montage, combining objects, paintings, architectures, constituencies, and actions in an integrated ecosystem.

Art historian David Joselit defines transitive painting as its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it⁷. Whilst the narratives and figures depicted in Baumgartner’s painting are indeed still (static), they exude a notion of animation, almost as if the edges of the painting itself do not bound the figures and subjects by their frame. A viewer’s capacity to return to the naturalistic tendencies of a child’s eye are heightened.

PAINTING ON THE PERIPHERY

Baumgartner’s paintings transcend from the traditional form: they are rarely executed on canvas or linen, and they are rarely quadrilateral. Platonic forms are resisted and rejected, in favor of polygonal figures and indecipherable, morphic forms, with no inherent sense of top, bottom or side⁸. Some utilize transparent surfaces, synthesizing the illustrative subject painted upon the transparent material as co-existing with the background, and thus creating an optical ‘third space’. Other paintings fold around architectural spaces, molding themselves into corners of the room, or even extending past the material frame of the wall, rigidly hovering out into the space, occupying the room, claiming sovereignty from the confines of their traditional exhibition structures. These containers for painting enact postures (or even, attitudes) that suggest a departure from painting itself. Each painting is a character in this “make believe” play.

The unorthodoxy of the form and frame emulate the peripheral. This, when posed in relation to human vision, mimics the elusive shape of the periphery of the visual field, which is literally the information absorbed by the visual organs (eyeball, retina, etc) and processed by the human brain in the areas outside of the so called ‘point of fixation’. Precisely, Baumgartner is not interested in the points of fixation, or in other words centrality: instead, her strategy is to deflect the notion of focus or locality altogether. There is a sense of fluidity, or an urge to keep all things moving, in a constant state of flux. The paintings are notational and gestural. They are not accumulative, and they are certainly not illusionary. This is further enhanced by the many paintings completed upon a brushed, industrial aluminum, which creates a mirror-like surface. The viewer thus projects themselves into the artwork, while simultaneously being reflected back. The incorporation of the viewer’s own body, coupled with the strangely peripheral effects

of the shapes of the painting surface, create a sort of panoramic field, one into which the subject of a painting is not bound by its frame, but becomes a component in a larger collection of paintings, themselves in turn extended from the private into the public sphere.

There is an attitude of “roaming” or “wandering” inherent to the work, which points to the influence of the enchanting figure of Gusto Gräser, whom Baumgartner often cites as a significant source of study and inspiration. Gräser was a wandering poet, dancer, “natural prophet”, pacifist, and painter whose life was symbolically and figuratively always in motion: in other words, a transient. In different forms, her practice is an attempt to emulate his pedagogic form of *Herumstreifen* (or roaming), which she feels contrasts with the lived experiences of people today, especially children and teenagers. In this sense we could pose the deliberate reallocation of her practice in the 19th century as an anti-technological, anti-algorithmic stance rather than simply esthetic nostalgia.

PERIPHERY AS POLITICAL POSITION

Baumgartner self-publishes series of freely-circulating pamphlets that explore these interests. In one text sub-titled “Reflections on the Political and Aesthetic Dimension of Materiality in Public Play and Learning Settings from an Artistic Perspective,” the artist lays the groundwork for her intentions within the *Der Fahrende Raum* program and her practice at large, outlining the contemporary educational standards as mandated by the German government in relation to European standards of the 20th century, pontificating how this contrasts with views on education and play in the previous centuries. Baumgartner is wary of risk-assessment and controlled-play as it relates to young people today: her work is meant as an experimental antidote, a countermeasure to the hyper-constructed realms that children and families inhabit within the public sphere. Throughout the text, and thus *Der Fahrende Raum* project as a whole, Baumgartner revisits the *Skrammelegepads* (junk playground) that were developed early in the 20th century in Scandinavia —and eventually sprung up in neglected spaces throughout Europe, and Germany. She is fascinated by their complex use of material language, and the situations of play that arise from adult contexts:

“Interrogating the materiality of play and learning settings with regard to their political and aesthetic dimension and critiquing the underlying power structures creates new fields of action, especially for art. This interrogation refers to historical examples on the one hand, as well as to the imagination of new emancipatory approaches within the urban space on the other. This image came to me: perhaps every neighborhood ought to have a junk playground where the discarded junk of each decade can be explored by children and young people through play and can also be “played to pieces” in a kind of cathartic process. What could such a city look like? What would it be like if children could have a say about these places, and about what kind of grown-up junk is carted in to them? These playgrounds could act as a kind of urban memorial of everyday culture and initiate new ways of looking at materials and the (environment) across the generations.”

Baumgartner harkens back to counter-cultural and communal attitudes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before the horrors of World War II ravaging the landscape of Germany and Central Europe. The emphasis here is that counter-culture need not be radical or antagonistic, but it must provide alternative models that diverge from the dominant structures, here proposing imagination as a social and political tool.

Die vierte Wand der dritten Pädagogin III (2019) is a painting envisioning a scenario that deviates from the dominant, patriarchal ideologies of the 20th Century. In the tableau a nude torso sits atop a bench that houses a stack of educational literature, as evidenced by their thick binders and bold-worded mastheads [9]. Assorted titles read, “What are we gonna do about the rich?” and “Unsere stirn berührt den Himmel, unser Arsch fährt dritte klasse” (Our forehead touches the sky, our ass rides third class). Especially poetic and autobiographical is “Was war und was ist im Schein des wässrigen Pinsels,” (What was and what is in the Glow of the watery Brush). These are not titles of real books, but they represent the canon that should be (according to Baumgartner). While she wouldn’t necessarily consider to define herself solely a “painter”, this insistence on her role as a transitive, networked artist rather than a medium-specific artist can be situated as an attempt to degender her position (as the role of “painter” is historically a masculinist position) and thus to deny the material problem of the paintings generated. In closing, to return to the *Eckenlehnerin*, the inverted triangle (and inversion as a strategy) is a motif that continues throughout Baumgartner’s oeuvre, and signals the subtle feminist subversion inherent throughout the practice, at the

core of which is a rejection of centrality, and a resistance to the rhetoric of binary and patriarchal dichotomies. By co-opting the traditionally male craft of shingling, and bring the outside inside, topologically subverting it from practical to aesthetic purposes, these acts collapse into a clever, political feminist play.

1 It must be noted, an unfortunate chapter in the ancient history of the triangle as symbol is of course its use in Nazi prisoner camps, wherein a downwards-pointing triangle badge was attached to each individual along with colors that would designate their reason for imprisonment (prisoners deemed as convicts, criminals, homosexuals, mentally disabled, and also by their race, sex, religion, beliefs, and so many other atrocities and inhumane judgments). Originally intended by the Nazis as a badge of shame, the symbol was co-opted and reclaimed by LGBTQ communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a symbol of pride.

2 Today however, this role has transformed from a counter-cultural position to one that could be played prevalently by teenagers in first-world, economically-dominant countries.

3 Individuals who contributed to the collective discourse include Doris Koopmann, Jonas Beuthauser, Hasan Veseli, Martin Haufe, Vladimir Jerić Vlidi, Jelena Vesić, Eva Egermann, Karolin Meunier, Gerd Grüneisl, among others.

4 Referring specifically to the Third Space as a contemporary sociocultural term coined by Homi K. Bhabha, which designates a hybrid space within personal identity and community. Facilitated by media, the third space is an extension between the notion of the real (I; physical) and the virtual (the other; a concept), with the third space allowing participants to engage with and identify within social relations at a distance, be it physical or cultural. In physical terms, the third space can be a communal space as something distinct from home (first space) or work (second space), which allows the third space identity to manifest. This space can emerge through the form of a park, a sports arena, a public plaza, and so on, where an individual can transgress or transcend beyond their private (first) and professional (second) 'spaces' to meet one another in the third.

5 Here Baumgartner's work also embodies of mode of transgression: the adult taking interest in the children, insofar as generating a space in which non-familial children and adults can play in make believe, divided from any situation related to childcare, psychology, social or anthropological studies, and so on.

6 For further reading on a naturalistic perspective towards art, see Asger Jorn "What is an Ornament?", 1948.

7 Joselit, David. "Painting Beside Itself." *OCTOBER* 130, Fall 2009, pp. 125–134.

8 Here — in addition to Baumgartner's priorities on pedagogy within and without her practice— her forms bear allegiance to the signature heart figure to often used by Jef Geys: his deformed heart, like the rest of his projects, could not be easily defined, and oscillates between different literal forms and symbolic interpretations.

9 The bench upon which the figure sits is the iconic "Ulmer Hocker" designed by Max Bill in 1954 at HfG Ulm. Ulm is the town the Scholl siblings came from, notably Hans and Sophie Scholl whom the Nazis murdered in 1943 in response to their non-violent resistance movement against the war and dictatorship of Adolf Hitler. Post-war, the HfG was founded in Ulm to rejuvenate the Bauhaus spirit and to support the Anti-Fascist spirit of the town.