



Sonic
Sonsbeek 9
Concrete, paraffin, wool, 2001

Your contribution to Sonsbeek 9 is partly dictated by Westfälischer Friede, the work that you carried out a few years ago in a church in Hagen am Teutoburger Wald. The project you're presenting in Sonsbeek harks back to it in many ways. Can you tell us a bit more about this "Westfalian blueprint"?

The impulse for the project in Hagen am Teutoburger Wald – in a church that, like the Eusebius Church here in Arnhem, has long ceased to function as a place of worship – was actually *sonic* in nature. Very concretely, it involved the sound of an old organ pipe – so in fact it was partly a *sound installation*.

Anyway, my work in Hagen am Teutoburger Wald was literally site-specific in the sense that I let myself be inspired very concretely by the space of the church. In my sculptural installations I always pay a lot of attention to the *floor*, on the floor is where you stand and where you experience the space around you. But in this church it was not so easy to experience the floor as such, and it was this conclusion that formed one of the starting points for *Westfälische Friede*. Besides this, there was also of course the inspiration of the totality of the space – I like to work with the four sides of a given space. So the idea gradually arose to cover the entire space of the church as it were with a "total sculpture", to provide it with a certain rhythmical relief.

Another important point of reference was of course the pregnant issue of the Thirty Years War. Hagen am Teutoburger Wald lies right in the heart of the Westfalian battlefield, and it's impossible to avoid this presence. But how can you comprehend something as colossal as a *thirty years* war, a catastrophe that overshadowed the lives of at least two or three generations? A war that in one way or another affected three quarters of the European population at the time, or involved them more or less directly, that's something unimaginably huge. And then to broach this theme as an artist It's not exactly self-evident, is it? That's why I finally decided to work with sound, in particular the tone of a pipe organ as it would have resounded in the church at the time. Only the organ in the church had not been working for a long time, and there were just a few old organ pipes lying around here and there – not the original pipes from the period of the Thirty Years War, of course, but still So then I went in search of an organ builder who could help me with original, seventeenth century pieces – actually they're very simple instruments: its enough to simply to blow through them and you immediately get a very orchestral, full tone. If you just concentrate on that one tone it seems as though a whole universe of different types of sound opens up before you.

The third line of approach was also the spatial experience that churches traditionally evoke. Normally speaking, you enter a church or a cathedral and you immediately look up, until your neck or back really starts to hurt. Well, I wanted to turn around this "vertical" experience by installing 166 beds over the whole width of the church so that the visitors could lie down and relax and enjoy the view of the vault. In addition, you hear differently and better when you're stretched out, so the sonic aspect of the installation also came over better. A total audio-visual experience which you could also experience, on the other hand, by walking *through* the whole installation: different

stages in that trajectory open up very different ways of listening

Actually I saw the image of those 166 concrete beds more as a sort of field hospital.

That's possible too – at times of war churches did indeed often serve as improvised sickbays, as real hospices in fact. But the 166 beds could just as well have been graves. And so there are several possible interpretations.

*Anyhow they have a certain “household” quality. And this brings us to the five-part series of *Tische*.*

The idea behind the first four “tables” I did had to do with “visiting” four different places in Europe and creating a piece there on the spot – the places were Switzerland, Skagerak in Sweden, a spot on the banks of the Weser not far from where I live, and Andalusia. The theme of the table was originally little more than a motor; it was not that I had thought out a well-defined sculptural concept for each place separately – I would have certainly found that very boring in the long run, especially with a project that was meant to develop over several years. I allowed myself rather to be inspired on site. It was also important that I made my way to the places *alone*, and stayed there and worked completely on my own. So on the one hand there was the idea of a journey, of travel and relocation, and on the other the notion of isolation. When you're completely alone in nature, your perception is dramatically sharpened: you hear your own breathing, the rustling of the trees in the wind, there are no voices to be heard Certainly when you're alone for a long time, or sentence yourself to a long period of silence, your senses become completely acute. It means that you open yourself completely to your surroundings and then you learn to discover certain things – you *find* something, that “something” finds you, you look at things differently, and the things return the gaze. An instructive relationship.

Secondly, there is the practical, communicative aspect of course: when I find myself completely alone in a strange environment, sooner or later I have to rely on the help of outsiders in order to get a number of things done, I have to talk with these “strangers” about my work, explain it to them – personally I find it very important that they often have nothing at all to do with art, let alone understand anything about it. Often there's a greater openness and much more authentic interest there than in the artworld itself; the right place means for me in any case the right people as well. And with each “table” there's always one person who's very important for the realisation of the project in question, such as that one shepherd in the case of the *Tisch der Wüste* that I made in Andalusia: I had been sitting already for a few days completely alone in the desert when suddenly a man appeared. Of course my first reflex was like “Oh no, I really want to be left alone”, since that was supposed to be part of the “concept”. But he was initially very reticent himself – an illiterate who had worked in France for years and who knew better than anyone else how annoying it can be when you don't speak each other's language. He knew how to make himself understood, and in one way or another I was able to communicate very well with him He gave me

all sorts of very valuable tips, like what sort of food I should take with me on such a long, exhausting journey – figs, almonds, salad Most intriguing of all, however, once my work at the spot was almost finished, was his remark that he had once seen something like it earlier, that this sort of intervention – my work consisted of an oblong hollowing-out of the existing rock formation – was a widespread phenomenon in Andalusia. This floored me, of course – as an artist you always think you’re doing something autonomous or unique In this case it was a question of recesses in rock formations which, in both the length as well as the breadth, were virtually the same as my own *Tisch*, and were carved out generations ago by shepherds in order to store rain water in times of drought. Too recent to be of historical, let alone archaeological or geological, interest, too old to have any value from an artistic viewpoint, or to be of importance for the people living there now – and this indefinableness is what I love. In the meantime the work has long disappeared from the landscape – two years later the Spanish government, with the aid of European money, drove a highway through it and the whole region has changed unrecognizably The same happened with the first table in the series, *der Tisch des Denkens*. And the fourth table in the series is now on the edge of an abyss in Switzerland and consists simply of a border of chives planted in the middle of ordinary meadow grass. This table too is in danger of perishing sooner or later

The nice thing about the metaphor of the table is that it also throws up a highly communal connotation. You always sit with two or more people at a “real” table, you could say. The table also crops up in a more subtle way in the work you made in Hann. Münden – and in your proposal for Sonsbeek 9.

The problem of the right location was the main thing I was initially faced with in the context of the Sonsbeek exhibition. Actually I’d really like to do something in the park, in the second place perhaps in the shopping centre – but under no circumstances in the church, because, certainly after *Westfälische Friede*, it would be simply too obvious. For various reasons I’ve finally ended up in the church, but at least in a closed chapel. After all, the church is not particularly interesting as a space, with that terrible floor and so on. And you know how much importance I attach to *floors* – and this is because the black stone floor in the Eusebius Chapel still has a certain original quality.

So then the idea arose to erect three large walls in the chapel, one made of concrete, one of wax and one of wool. At the start I was not so much concerned with the objects in themselves as with the space created in between.

There’s also a play with light and transparency.

And movement. Because in one way or another all these materials awaken a particular suggestion of movement and motion, of stability and instability: concrete is slow and rigid, wool airy and organic, and wax is a chemical residue, the product of a certain metamorphosis. In this way I hope to be able to redefine the Eusebius

chapel as space – a new space, which you can stand in the middle of. As though you are standing in the force field of a transformer. And then add to this the smell that will be disseminated by each of these products and you can expect a very sensory installation.

Of course the iconography of the classical, three-part altar piece – the triptych – plays a large role. And maybe there's also a connection with the metaphor of the *Tische*, or even better, the *Tables of the Law*.

Jan Hoet: Or Beuys's Tafeln.

Indeed. Somehow or other Beuys is just around the corner, after all.

Jan Hoet: In the spiritualisation of the material, for example.

And the "re-spiritualisation" of the whole space. Because the Eusebius Church could certainly use that

Susanne Tunn talks to Dieter Roelstraete

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