

## Free Seating

### The Stadium Designs of Kai Schiemenz

How architecture affects people is the central theme in the works of Kai Schiemenz. The functions and commands that built surroundings emanate determine our actions. They give rise to movement patterns and form lines that coalesce into narratives of everyday life. Providing information about these effects – based not on maps, but in experiments, in experiencing space in a model-like way – is the essential motif of the architectures of Kai Schiemenz.

*Untitled (Arena)* in 2003 was the first of a series of sculptural architectures that were inspired by the question of how it is possible to involve viewers in the space. The work sets a milestone in the artistic work of Kai Schiemenz and is an initial inspiration for a whole series of works posing similar questions. This first model arena was created within the framework of a series of exhibitions at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, in which art critics appeared as guest curators. Under the title ‘Critic’s Choice 1: 1:1’, the culture theorist and art critic Knut Ebeling invited Kai Schiemenz to the kick-off of the series. The approach of the joint project was to stage the coming together of art and criticism as a kind of show match in the exhibition space and, beyond this match, to establish a place for encounters and exchange. The expansive centre of this exhibition was formed by the 600-by-550-by-320-centimetre sculpture *Untitled (Arena)*. The stadium arena opened up in a U-shape in the exhibition space, while simultaneously complicating access to it. Schiemenz’s arena was both present as a stand-alone sculpture and was also usable as architecture. It served as a forum for a series of event formats such as a podium discussion, a slide presentation, and performance.

With the striking columns supporting the tiers that expand upwards along the outer track, his arena is oriented formally on the architecture of Yankee Stadium, which was built in the Bronx in 1923 and demolished in 2010. The three tiers inside the model arena – made from recycled plywood and particleboard – correspond to the three roofed-over spectator levels of the stadium in New York. The decision to take a baseball stadium from the twenties as a model for his arena consciously counteracts a narrowing of the stadium discourse to the ancient

Olympic and Roman tradition of such structures. The name 'arena' still makes reference to its origin as the sand-strewn battleground of an ancient Roman amphitheatre. With Yankee Stadium, however, the artist selected an icon of contemporary American sporting events. The semi-open structure with its three different curves also provides a fascinating blueprint from formal and aesthetic perspectives. The colours of the tiers, the inner walls and the roof of *Untitled (Arena)* are based on the colour coding of the rows of seats and price groups from the site plans of the stadium for visitors. Kai Schiemenz therefore makes reference to the hierarchical and regulating function of this architecture, hence providing a more accurate picture of the spectators that gather there than does any stadium, which gives rise to the illusion of a unified mass by concealing differences.

The reconnecting of community and the individual that Kai Schiemenz carries out with his architectural designs distances his arena from the authoritarian essence of stadiums, since a stadium forces the masses into a form based on its dimensions. For the Greeks, stadium (σταδιον) meant 'measurable distance', a distance that has space, in the sense of the Latin *spatium*, an interspace, made for it by 'bare positions', as Martin Heidegger asserts in his lecture 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (1951).<sup>1</sup> This interspace corresponded to the distance of the race for the purpose of which the first stadiums were built. If the athletes previously ran defined distances but of differing lengths, the rounded, horseshoe-shaped structure for the Olympics in the eighth century BCE put an end to the arbitrariness of distances.<sup>2</sup> The initially only simple depressions in the terrain not only facilitated a better view of the race and assessing it from the stands; as a marking of distances, they also introduced a unit of measurement for space.

In this way, the stadium provides the measurements for a competition and provides the stage for it at the same time. Within the boundaries of this interspace, a self-referential, entire organism that lives from the gazes, sounds and

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York, 2001), pp. 141–60, esp. pp. 153f.

<sup>2</sup> The distance established corresponded to round 192 metres. On the cultural- and media-history implications of stadium construction, see Knut Ebeling, 'Die Flut des Raums: Eine Archäologie der Masse', in Knut Ebeling and Kai Schiemenz, eds., *Stadien: Eine künstlerisch-wissenschaftliche Raumforschung* (Berlin, 2009), pp. 107–58.

movements that circulate within it arises as a result of the interplay of architecture, actors and observers. Siegfried Krakauer means something similar when he describes the dance performances by the Tiller Girls taking place in the stadium as 'ornaments . . . composed of thousands of bodies', whose pattern is cheered by the 'masses, themselves structured by the stands'.<sup>3</sup> This autopoietic system, which is defined from its periphery and causes what it excludes to be forgotten, is the ideal venue for a 'society of the spectacle'. In the final analysis, it is unimportant which scenario is fed into the stadium, whether a competition, game or military parade. The mass observes itself and produces its own spectacle about it in the intoxication of its presence being made visible. In the oval of the stadium, the mass presents itself as self-contained and inevitable. Its gazes and calls circulate through the ring-shaped structure like the Mexican wave.

When Kai Schiemenz constructs his arena more as a forum for chance individual encounters, he seems to give back the architectural form something of its social function. The provisional communities that arise there become aware of their instability in the room-sized wooden structure. His works emphasize the singular and the differences in the communal. They do not aim at representation, but rather at the visibility of every actor. These walk-in sculptures are defined by the self-perception that results from the circulation of gazes within the oval structures. Starting from this first arena, the artist subsequently developed a series of further works that also served as a forum for various event formats as well as staked out possibilities for enabling the mechanisms of seeing and being seen to be experienced.

The works of Kai Schiemenz accelerate gazes along their circular orbits. Their filigree timberwork evokes movement in circulation. His 'volumes' correspond to the etymological origin of the word from the Latin 'volvo': turn, wind, whirl – which, in the first instance, means 'everything that is rolled, wound', until it becomes scope and cubic capacity. Something is voluminous when it is wound full of

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<sup>3</sup> See Siegfried Krakauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p. 76.

curves.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore possible to structure his works, which can also be read as a series, into three formal types: round structures based on the circle; vortices and stairways of oscillating points; bodies of interleaved surfaces with multiple perspectives. *Untitled (Stadium)* (2005) transfers the half-open oval of the first arena to a double cone vibrating in ellipses. *Splendid Modernism* (2005) segments the circular orbits of a forum designed with strict simplicity. For *Commonwealth of Multitude* (2006), the same material is transformed into a parliament with the same layout. The building material used therefore also circulates through the temporary works of Kai Schiemenz. From 2003 to 2009, he thus constantly created new venues in which he developed the involvement of viewers parallel to the ongoing transformation of the form. A movability that also included him as a person. In the index for the image section of his catalogue on stadiums, the list of exhibition venues with the corresponding year looks like the tour plan for a rock band. The artist becomes the commercial traveller with a dynamic idea that he repeatedly realizes anew and brings into circulation with limited means. This circulation of theatres, cinemas, towers and huts also included historical wastelands. *The Empty Dwelling, the Vain Tower and the Mad Colonist* (2008) positioned a double-spiral vortex with viewing platform in the wasteland where the Berlin Wall previously stood, which has been converted into the project area of the Skulpturenpark Berlin-Mitte.

Kai Schiemenz time and again addresses the functions of politically charged and representative architectures and locations in his works when he crosses them with half-open and intimate spatial concepts and hence makes people visible again and invites participation. On a formal level, these projects are often also examinations of the politically motivated architectural designs of the Constructivists. It is therefore possible to recognize a citing of Vladimir Tatlin's utopian design *Monument to the Third International 0 10* of 1917/19, which remained only a model, in *The Empty Dwelling, the Vain Tower and the Mad Colonist* as well as in *Endeavour's Watchtower for the 4th International* (2006). Out

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<sup>4</sup> DWDS, Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache (Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin). <http://www.dwds.de/?qu=volumen> (accessed 22 December 2015).

of the icon of a modernism inspired by progress, he creates the double helix of an observation tower that is supposed to facilitate a view back into the future.<sup>5</sup>

The utopian element of his objects lies to a great extent in their character as a design that catapults models of possible realities from the space of the drawing into the present. Kai Schiemenz working process therefore consists of an ongoing transferring – Knut Ebeling speaks of transposition<sup>6</sup> – of his designs into other spatial relations. From the drawing to the walk-in sculpture, this process comprises developing models that design interspaces of the possible into the space of reception. Models are not a representation of reality, but rather designed possibilities of the real.<sup>7</sup> They make visible the design of an order that is not yet extant, but is declared as a possibility by the model. The space that Kai Schiemenz's usable objects keep open is the space of the experiment. Their active use wrests anonymity from his models. In his work, the design that has become architecture becomes understandable as a tool of self-perception that places the individual in a differentiated relationship to the other. The scene with which Schiemenz thus supplies his stadium models is a scene of the presence and visibility of one's own actions. His architectures control by mobilizing levels of action that remain faithful to the utopian.

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<sup>5</sup> The tower on the salt market of the city of Zamość, which was created in the fifteenth century as an ideal town, was supposed to facilitate the view from there of the prefab estate of the Neustadt (new town) two kilometres away. This was, however, not successful due to the summer tree growth.

<sup>6</sup> See Knut Ebeling in *Cahiers critiques 1: 1:1: Kai Schiemenz*, ed. Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, exh. cat. Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.