

Social Sculpture re-visited

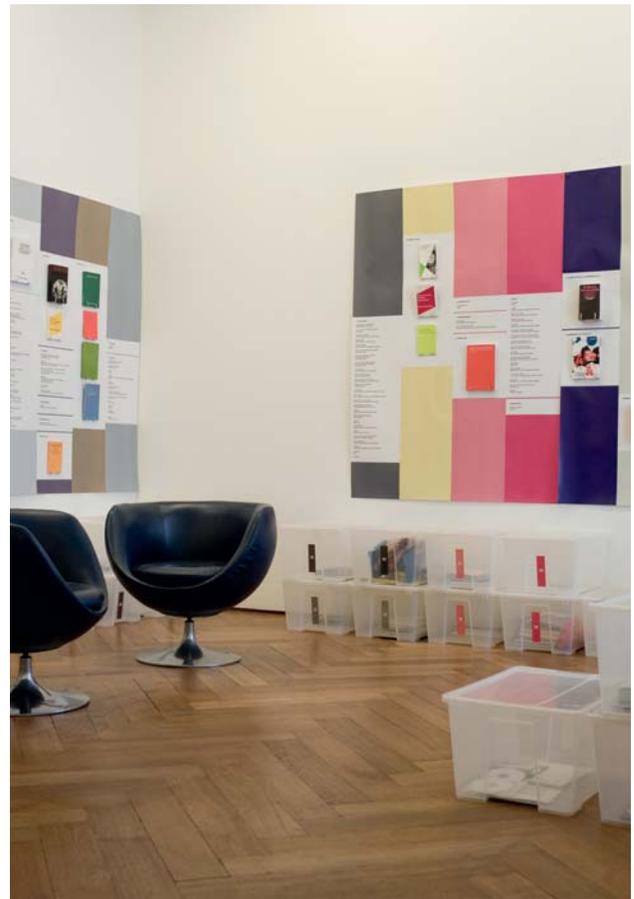
by Dorothee Richter (part 1) and Michael G. Birchall (part 2)

Part 1

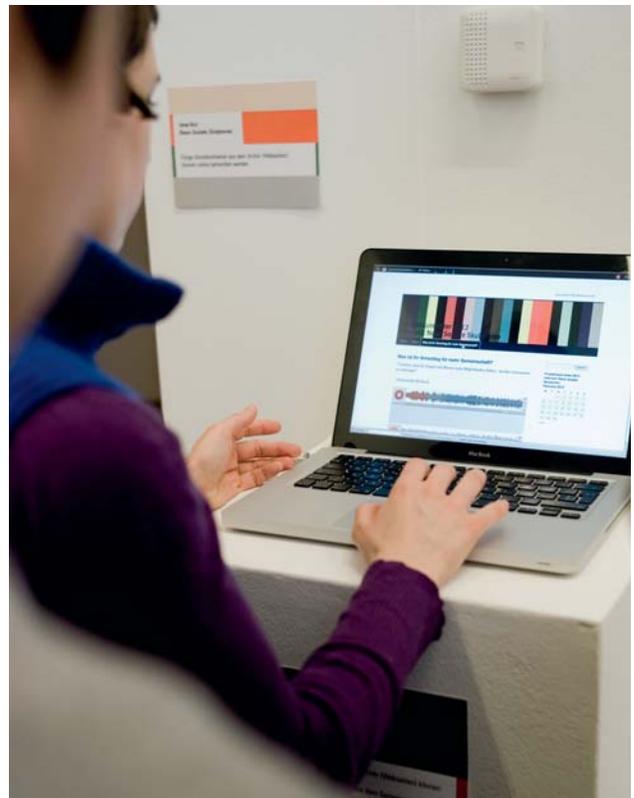
We share our interest in Social Practices in the arts. Therefore I initiated a curatorial project for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK, Zürich around the topic of Social Sculptures. The project took place in four different steps over a period of time of one and a half years, the curatorial concept was changed and further developed and produced by the artists, students/ participants and lecturers. The first step was to initiate an archive on artistic practice which an interest in communities, which was shown twice, once at the White Space, Zürich and secondly at Kunstmuseum Thun. The archive was curated by Karin Frei Bernasconi, Siri Peyer and myself, with the cooperation of the students of the programme. From this convolute I invited three artists to work with the students for projects related to the notion of Social Sculpture: Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen and Pawlo Kerestey), San Keller and Jeanne van Heeswijk. Each of them developed the projects in workshops with the students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating over a period of about one year.

“Social Sculpture” – the German notion even downplays this term as “Soziale Plastik” was coined by Joseph Beuys, as new form of creating art, and influencing society, his expanded notion of the area of the arts was initiated by the confrontation with Fluxus practices, when he hosted one of the first Fluxus Festivals in Düsseldorf. Beuys became involved into the events and could be seen for a very short time as a member of the Fluxus movement.¹ Joseph Beuys and Bazon Brock introduced concepts such as “direct democracy” or the idea of “Besucherschule” a school for visitors in order to expand the discourse about art into a discourse about art in relation to society.² Beuys’ notion of a social sculpture involved elements of an abstruse mysticism related to Rudolf Steiner; on the one hand he wanted direct democracy, but on the other hand he envisioned it as being subordinated to „experts“. These approaches were nevertheless part of a social transformation that shifted and re-arranged power relations. In the case of Beuys the subtext of his artistic production was concerned with the reformulation of national identity by converting semiotic fragments of the National Socialist past into the identity of the new federal republic.³ We will not exaggerate the discussion about his work here, in spite of the problematic aspects of his re-using nationalistic symbols or fragments of an ideology, the notion of a social sculpture is still interesting and worth to be reconsidered.

Fluxus and the Situationists also re-defined their respective relationships to society, struggling among themselves to articulate positions and make political statements. Especially Fluxus interesting approach was to make the differences and fights public in the newspapers and newsletters they produced.⁴ The aim of a social sculpture is to create an “active space”, which functions as a social center, as a laboratory of the communal and as site for aesthetic experiments. Therefore the visitors are active participants, involved in knowledge production, design processes



Archive of Shared Interests – Temporary Life – Temporary Communities, Thun Edition, Kunstmuseum Thun with students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating



and discussions. In that sense the audience and communication is positioned within a much wider framework than in any conventional concept of art, which is still related to the notion of an autonomous artwork.

The first step we undertook was to bring together an archive of artistic positions and of publications related to the notion of community, or more precise, to show the direction the work did develop: the problem of being singular/plural. The first round of artists we invited to the "Archive of shared interests – contemporary life – temporary communities" were: **Marina Belobrovaja / Ursula Bie-mann / Corner College / Jeremy Deller / eggerschlatte / Finger (evolutionäre zellen) / forschungsguppe f / Heinrich Gartentor / Hanswalter Graf / Fritz Haeg / Christina Hemauer & Roman Keller / Michael Hieslmair & Michael Zinganel / interpixel / Martin Kaltwasser & Folke Köbbling / San Keller / Pia Lanzinger / Michaela Melián / metroZones / Peles Empire / Frédéric Post / Public Works / Alain Rappaport / raumlaborberlin / RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co) / Oliver Ressler / Shedhalle / Erik Steinbrecher / support structure (Celine Condorelli and Gavin Wade) / Szuper Gallery / tat ort / Jeanne van Heeswijk / Markus Weiss.**

Our first physical archive is also documented briefly in OnCurating.org Issue 8, it was developed in the space in cooperation with Jesko Fezer.⁵ There is also the list of publications, which formed a project apparatus and functioned as a part of the archive. The issue of community related work that would be situated beyond any notion of relational aesthetics in a political sphere was and still is important for my curatorial practice and the input on the education of future curators, art educators and gallerists. In Issue 7 of OnCurating we published also articles which are related to the topic, titled "Being-with community ontological and political perspectives".

After being invited to Kunstmuseum Thun we wanted to activate the (still unfinished) archive. Communities are defined by artists, scholars and urbanists as an antithesis to general society and its constraints, but they differ widely from one another in the roles they play. Whether the community is thought of as a secret utopia or as a threat to the individual, whether as a cooperative, a neighbourhood or a societal group, and whether or not the respective community is to be dissolved – every time, a certain artistic, architectural or theoretical concept of community initiates a subtext directed toward the public. Certain actions are implicitly designated for the visitors, the users, the readers; the public is revolutionized, integrated, informed, instructed, involved or controlled. The archive is conceived as a project apparatus on the broad theme of "community," an apparatus re-presenting different and contradictory approaches and points of view on the basis of which "community" can be discussed. The archive will serve prospectively as the project apparatus of a research project and is constantly expanded.

Our first step consisted of a spatial re-interpretation by the students of the postgraduate programme in Curating, also we added Thun based artists and students/participants of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating engaged in a series of interviews with inhabitants of the city of Thun, a small city with a lot of military based there. The inhabitants were asked about their community, the city of Thun and what they liked or would have liked to be developed or changed. The interviews could be heard in the exhibition space and more comments could be added. Surprisingly for us was that many interview partners seemed to be quite content with their local community, sometimes they would have liked more nightlife for young adults or more playgrounds. But all in all they expressed a lot of positive feed



Interviews with citizens of Thun led by students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating

back, for examples a veiled young woman talked about the possibility to wear a scarf in contradiction to her country of origin as a important freedom of choice.

As a further development I wanted to give three artistic positions the possibility to develop their approach in a project and I chose Szuper Gallery, San Keller, Jeanne van Heeswijk, as they were long time collaborators with a focus in their approaches on social questions.⁶ All of them have found new ways of collaborating with visitors in the aesthetic arena and the respective work approximate a conflict-oriented, sometimes ironical quality of a social sculpture: The needs and concerns of the respective communities should have been included; the answers may have brought surprising twists with it. To enable a long time intensive dialogue I established a pre-production phase with a meeting in Thun between all involved artists and participants of the programme. As it was, the projects did in a way nearly blow the boundaries of the institution, therefore we developed the last phase in Zurich.

The first project was developed by Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen and Pawlo Kerestey),⁷ and their short concept read as follows: "What is the impact of the permanent state of crisis? What do mountain gorillas have in common with early 21st century city dwellers? What are the connections between the utterings of a recovering stroke patient and a group of children lounging in a gallery? These are some of the elements—physical and conceptual— that make up Szuper Gallery's new project. Economic crisis, global warming, nuclear winter, we are permanently reminded that we are imminently facing a catastrophe. Considering the changing states and the surprising emergence of the normal as crisis, Szuper Gallery presents a multi-layered project in order to explore the notion of performance as social practice. The project includes an installation in the Projektraum (Projectspace "enter") and a new live performance produced in collaboration with Canadian actor and performance artist Michele Sereda, featuring Prof. Klaus Zuberbühler, zoologist, University of St Andrews, Scotland, Colonel General Hans-Ulrich Haldimann, Kommandant Waffenplatz Thun and 30 school children from 2 local primary schools."

Szuper Gallery and Michele Sereda worked with the children inside the museum for two weeks. Not only the children took over the museum space, but also the parents, many of whom had never seen the Museum from inside. The wild action of the children were in the actual performance contradicted with strange inputs by an military officer and a zoologist speaking about borders and about behaviour patterns of other beings, in this case closely related to our species, different apes. On a content level one might parallel the military presence in the city with primitive behaviour patterns of animals about protecting their space, on the other hand the taking over of the museums space by a bunch of children and their parents was already impressive as such and made the restrictions of an art institutions and the social production of space more then obvious.

The second cooperation with the artist San Keller began with a failure, he wanted to stay awake overnight with the participants of the programme and to talk and meditate about notions of art and curating. Nevertheless, the students/participants ignored this offer except one. The students of a postgraduate programme are older then BA and MA students, they often have families and a job, and they are studying as well. So the artistic approach and the actual, sometimes difficult living conditions of curating students did not come together. San Keller was disappointed and redirected his research on curatorial practices and communities towards an unforeseen direction: Instead of working with the students group he invited his earliest collectors, Marianne and Fritz Keller, who own his early work in its entirety (1974–1991). Already back in 2008, the two dedicated collectors converted their private residence in Köniz near Bern into the Museum San Keller



New Social Sculpture 1: Szuper Gallery, choreographer Michele Sereda, students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and pupils from Thun



New Social Sculpture 2: San Keller with curators Marianne and Fritz Keller and students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating



(www.museumsankeller.ch).⁸ In the project space, the Keller's presented a personal selection of drawings executed by San Keller during his childhood and adolescence, along with excerpts from his diaries. The exhibition provides very personal insights into the creative beginnings of an artist meanwhile known for his conceptual and ephemeral projects. San Keller often uses fictional persona in his works to contemplate means of taking action in society.

In this way the show did address the topic of a family as a small social unit acting within a larger social system. What is the relationship between the "public" and "private" sides of life? Do the works executed in a private context change when viewed through the new perspective afforded by a museum presentation? And does our knowledge of the artist's later success shape our perception of his "early works"? And is it typical for our new neo liberal working conditions that especially cultural producers have to rely on family connections and support? Alongside the exhibition opening with Marianne and Fritz Keller, San Keller presented "Artistic Family Recipes" and invited together with students for an afternoon of walking, swimming, eating – for artists and non-artists and their families. "Please bring bathing suits, a prepared family recipe (small kitchen available)".

The last project in this series of new social sculpture was produced in Zurich where I invited Jeanne van Heeswijk. Her projects distinguish themselves through a strong social involvement. With her work Van Heeswijk stimulates and develops cultural production and creates new public (meeting-)spaces or remodels existing ones. To achieve this she often works closely with artists, designers, architects, software developers, shopkeepers, governments and citizens. She regularly lectures on topics such as urban renewal, participation and cultural production. She was awarded the 2011 Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change and the 2012 Curry Stone Design Prize for Social Design Pioneers. She was also recently appointed as a fellow at Bard College. Jeanne von Heeswijk is also a long time collaborator; we started to work together many years ago, when I was curator at the Kuenstlerhaus in Bremen. Where van Heeswijk assembled about 40 different pieces of locally produced music, from classical concerts of professionals, to choirs for children, Rap and Rock music.⁹ Her wonderful projects are manifold, super enthusiastic and often huge.¹⁰ They not only promise or hint to social change, they directly change lives and living conditions. For our small project and very limited financial resources, this edition of "new social sculptures" Jeanne proposed a "Public Faculty", which would be the 7th public faculty she initiated. Public faculties are meant to create a public instant discourse on topics, which are viral in the respective society. They function with very little means and are created as ad hoc situations. Jeanne developed the realisation with a group of students, Alejandro Hagen, Anna Trzaska, Anne Koskuluoma, Annemarie Brand, Ashraf Osman, Charlotte Barnes, Chloé Nicolet-dit Félix, Gulru Vardar, Marlies Jost, Monika Molnar, Nkule Mabaso, Tanja Trampe, Tom Schneider and Silvia Simoncelli as the responsible lecturer for the organisational part of the project.¹¹

Their texts for the Public Faculty in Zürich reads as follows: "In this edition, the series comes to "Europe's Landlocked Island" of Switzerland to question the idea of borders, as well as notions requisite for the enforcement of this idea, such as security, solidarity, and compliance.

Switzerland has a history of strong borders and an established tradition of civil defines to enforce it. But what does that mean now in the 21st century, when borders have become virtual as well as physical? What is it that needs protection? People? Assets? Institutions? And what does that need protection from? War? Global crises? Science? The Internet? Have existing measures of Civil Defence become merely symbolic, only an image we need to feel secure? In this age of civil

airplanes as terrorist weapons, what are we willing to give up for our protection? Liquids? Swiss-Army knives? Shoes? Underwear? How about civil liberty? Privacy? Minarets? How far are we willing to comply? Is protection ultimately a self-inflicted trap? How about the other venerated Swiss traditions of neutrality and diplomacy? Are they not more relevant than ever before? Is there not strength in communities? Is protection not built on solidarity?"



The passers by were addressed directly: "We're sure you have something to say. Or ask. So come down and talk. Or listen. You can also follow the conversation online on Twitter (#pf7); a live Twitter feed of the event will be on display at the ZHdK Diploma Exhibition. Whichever way you do it, make sure you grab the chance to contribute to this Public Faculty!"

The space of encounter was situated between Helvetiaplatz and the Kanzleiareal in Zurich where many segments of the public are to be found. Public demonstrations in Zurich originate there and, according to the city-tourism website, it is "Zürich's multicultural quarter". Interestingly, the area also happens to sit on top of one of the main bunkers in the city. The students/participants of the programme had in intense possibility to engage in a complex art work in the social sphere. Ashraf Osman did later produce a symposium with Jeanne in Rotterdam with the title "FREEHOUSE: RADICALIZING THE LOCAL". For my understanding of social sculptures or community based work I imagine that some emanations from the art sphere are trespassing the borders of the "discursive formation" of the arts. In the very moment when political agendas and perspectives in the arts form, what was once called a chain of equivalence, at least a temporary goal is shared. The interesting notion of being singular/ plural is, that the community and the individual are no longer seen as contradictory concepts, but the singular entity is based, even

literally produced by an plurality, be that the actual coupling of respective parents or more subtle the notion derived from Lacanian theory, of being spoken in advance, before one is even born. This theoretical approach offers as well the possibility of an influence into a plurality.

As a next step in the exploration of community notions in the arts, we took the opportunity to question more artists from the archive to research and present a diversity of projects and viewpoints and to use the publications to develop a temporary glossary on community issues, the outcome you will find in this issue.

Part 2

In considering the notion of social sculptures, this issue of *On Curating*, reflects on the projects encountered by the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, and explores this topic into an international context of artists working with social change, housing, politics, food and economics. The range of interviews and essays presented here are reflective of the dynamic range of practices that exist in the social sphere. Many of the projects presented here exist beyond the art circuit, and enter the social consciousness of the spaces they encounter.

Social sculptures may operate outside the boundaries of legality, and beyond their original intention by the artist or designer. Joseph Beuys defined social sculptures in which “every living person becomes a creator, sculptor, or architect of the social organism”¹². It may be argued that the relationship between the designer and the user constitute a social organism, in the Beuysian sense they are intended for political action.¹³ Thus, we see social sculptures emerging between activism, social change and indeed social work. In **Agustina Strüngmann’s** essay on **Martin Schick’s Learning Centre/Not my Lab (2012-)**, an anti-capitalist and alternative learning centre is discussed, with particular reference to the utopian vision - detached from any practice that would relate to an NGO - as well as projects that work in conjunction with government agencies and community activists. The visionary project from Schick has a long life span, and will evolve with the changing economic and political climate, as well as the utopian vision set out by the artist.

Dorothee Richter’s essay undertakes to situate artistic and theoretical approaches in a political space and discusses under which conditions political effects can be achieved.

My own contribution outlines the history of socially engaged art since the 1990s, with particular reference to the shifts that have occurred in this decade, especially to more radical ideas of socially engaged art, which share a long history with new genre public art and site-specific art. The essay places the function on exhibitions during the 1990s, such as Mary Jane Jacob’s *Culture in Action* (Chicago, 1993-1995) and Valerie Smith’s *Sonsbeek 93* (Sonsbeek 93, 1993); the history of social practice can indeed be framed through exhibition histories, rather than individual practices.

Adriana Domínguez Velasco interviewed **Beta Local**, a non-profit organization, which functions as a working group, and a physical space based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In their interview they discuss the public programme, and how it operates as an experimental education project and a platform for critical discussion, which is immersed in the local reality of San Juan. **Agustina Strüngmann** interviewed artists **San Keller** and **Martin Schick** in relation to their learning centre project: a modest wooden structure in Fribourg, Germany that provides a space to

think collectively about alternatives to capitalism. Schick invites participants to engage in workshops to imagine and practice a life without capitalism. The interviews explore the meaning of the centre and how it becomes an open stage for possibilities.

Anna Fech's interview is with **The Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg (Germany)**. Based on the idea of the social sculpture, this hotel accommodates refugees, artists, musicians, and travellers under the same roof. Unlike in ordinary asylum seeker homes, this model provides an alternative solution of how refugees can be integrated into social life rather than live completely isolated from society. **Dina Yakerson** interviewed Eyal Danon, the director of **The Israeli Digital Center**, Jessy Cohen Neighbourhood, Holon, Israel. Focusing on the outreach at the centre, the interview discusses the transformation of the neighbourhood and how the institution dealt with a new generation of audiences. The Jessy Cohen project has altered the curatorial nature of the centres programme and allowed them to work the social and political context of the area.

Eleonora Stassi's interview with filmmakers **Fabrizio Boni, Giorgio de Finis, Dario Bischofberger** and **Mirko Bischofberger** discusses the role of story telling and communities in the context of science fiction films. **Kenneth Paranada** interviewed the Manila-based curatorial collective **Planting Rice**. Working in a location, which often presents contemporary art production, their programme raises an awareness of this problem, by building partnerships with local organizations and discussing the notion of architecture, institutions, funding, and art education.

Nadja Baldini's interview with **Søren Berner** focuses on his current radio project with young students at a vocational school in Switzerland. In collaboration with the musician Balint Dobozi, they together produce sounds and interviews in which they reflect on their work and everyday realities and share their dreams, fears, and visions of the future. Berner is attempting to open up new ways of agency through collective action and the critical examination of the conditions and institutions that shape us. **Silvia Converso's** interview with **Altes Finanzamt** discusses the collective's practice in Berlin, and how they dedicate themselves to a range of mixed media practices and host weekly events for the community such as readings, parties, exhibitions, concerts, and film screenings.

The questionnaires features in this issue were developed by the students as a means of interviewing participants who were part of the first Social Sculpture project, their responses reflect the changing nature of community art in a wider context, and include contributions by: **Marina Belobrovaja, Ursula Biemann, ForschungsgruppeF, Oliver Ressler** and **Public Works**.

Notes

1 For more detailed information see Dorothee Richter, *Fluxus. Kunst – gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft*, (Fluxus: Art – Synonymous with Life? Myths about Authorship, Production, Gender and Community), only available in German, Zürich 2013.

2 Bazon Brock, *Ästhetik als Vermittlung. Arbeitsbiographie eines Generalisten*. Köln 1977.

3 I will not discuss this problem in detail but would like to draw the attention of interested readers to this publications: - Frank Gieseke, Albert Markert,

Flieger, Filz und Vaterland, eine erweiterte Beuys Biografie, Berlin 1996; Grasskamp, Walter, »Soziale Plastik. Schwierigkeiten mit Beuys« in Walter Grasskamp: Der lange Marsch durch die Illusionen. Über Kunst und Politik. München 1995; Beat Wyss, »Beuys, der ewige Hitlerjunge«, in Monopol, Nr. 10/2008, S.81-82, Berlin, 2008;

4 see Dorothee Richter, Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft, Zürich 2012.

5 see Dorothee Richter, „A Platform, some Projects, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, Zurich,“ OnCurating Issue 8, p.9-13.

6 New Social Sculpture 1,2,3, curated by Dorothee Richter/ Postgraduate Programme in curating.

7 For Szuper Gallery's work see also <http://www.szuper.org/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015; Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen, Pawlo Kerestey) (ed.) , Liftarchiv, Frankfurt a. M. 2007; Szuper Gallery, ed., Ballet, Zürich 2014.

8 See <http://www.museumsankeller.ch/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015. San Keller did also provide a contribution in OnCurating Issue, a transcript of a public conversation with curator Rein Wolfs about the budget of his upcoming project with the Fridericianum, where Rein was curator at that time, see On-Curating.org Issue 08, Institution as medium. Curating as institutional critique? Part 1, <http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-8.html#.VKxoq0jGrLZ> accessed Jan. 6th 2015.

9 See Dorothee Richter, Kuenstlerhaus Bremen(ed.), Programming for a Kuenstlerhaus, Institut für zeitgenössische Kunst, Nürnberg, 2002.

10 See <http://www.jeanetworks.net/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015.

11 (Public Faculty No 7 /New Social Sculpture 3) curated by Dorothee Richter/ Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK, and Jeanne van Heeswijk; coordinated: Silvia Simoncelli; Digital media & communication: Ashraf Osman; produced: Alejandro Hagen, Anna Trzaska, Anne Koskiluoma, Annemarie Brand, Ashraf Osman, Charlotte Barnes, Chloé Nicolet-dit Félix, Gulru Vardar, Marlies Jost, Monika Molnar, Nkule Mabaso, Tanja Trampe, Tom Schneider.

12 Jane Rendell, Art and architecture: a place between, (2006), London, I. B. Tauris. pg. 173

13 Ibid.