Karsten Müller
Red Tree
Karsten Müller in conversation with Mariella Mosler

KM Roter Baum or Red Tree: a bronze sculpture lacquered orange red, more or less four metres high, for the sculpture garden of the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart on the Kleiner Schlossplatz. Up till now your work was known for the way it combines the theme of ornament with the principle of seriality and pattern repetition – in convolutions of quartz sand, rosettes made of human hair, arabesques of fruit gum or a labyrinth made of lametta tinsel. And now this solitary sculpture: have you altered your approach?

MM There was a sketch for a labyrinth made of mirror glass or polished steel based on the layout of a fractured meander structure, similar to the sculpture in Iris Wall. In terms of materials and structure, however, the piece would have offered a very affirmative response to the architectural surroundings of the Kleiner Schlossplatz.
The idea of a natural garden or park then evolved into the imitation of a garden, and I initially thought of producing a highly realistic-looking artificial tree. My reaction to the square's somewhat unfortunate architectural design: a yearning for Arcadia. But a garden – whether real or deceptively lifelike – would have corresponded to the concrete urban planning situation like a soft-focus lens. That's how the concept shifted from imitation to artefact.
With the idea of an artefact or a baroque folly in mind, I began looking at various kinds of "wunderkammer" (cabinets of curiosities or wonder rooms), Paradise Gardens and coral trees. This led to the design of an abstracted lake of polished steel or mirror glass, which would have reflected the sky and was to be surrounded by a grove of silver trees. I also developed several amorphous elements as an allusion to landscape.
One of these amorphous forms was developed from a simple sculptural process – the imprint of a hand. It's an ironic retort to the "creative" sculptural gesture and the artist's signature, a response to the idea that the very act itself of handling material will spawn an adequate form. Similar procedures have been adopted by numerous artists, like those of the Arte Povera. Le Corbusier also set an amorphous form on the roof of his Habitation in Marseille as a reference to nature, alongside a column as a basic figure of architecture.

KM How, in your view, do your amorphous elements correspond with such "precursors"?

MM For me the stone objects were important as a means of evoking the idea of a landscape or park – even if it's now become a kind of anti-garden, as if from a distant planet. A tree on its own would have been a Romantic solitaire, like in a Caspar David Friedrich. The tree of souls as a projection of the solitary individual and artistic genius, defying the storm of approaching modernism.
Of course, there are various references: Dalí used stones as foils for projection as part of the paranoiac-critical method he employed in the process of establishing and monumentalizing the self. Moore, on the

other hand, first engaged with stones through naturalistic drawing before abstracting them into anthropomorphic figures.
I was also interested in the utopian-socialist strategies of the Italian Radical Design movement, which, parallel to the English group Archigram, explored functionality from an ironic perspective and criticized industrial mass production. Of course, they were influenced by Pop Art and Arte Povera, as in Up 5, the furniture line created by Gaetano Pesces in 1969, his statement on the role of women in a misogynous society.

KM You did a series of preliminary sketches in markedly different colours. Although you had already decided on the form, you were still alternating between the idea of producing an ensemble of tree and stones painted black and purple or one in green and brown. Do the different colour schemes denote different levels of denaturalization?

MM From the very start I had envisaged the tree being red – corals, flames and blood! – but I played through other colour variations to explore their respective connotative dimensions. Within this spectrum, the orange red surprisingly occupies a median position – it feels neither natural nor overly artificial.

KM On the whole, you work with a very limited, very consciously chosen set of materials, while at the same time using a huge range of ornamental forms. For the Red Tree project – in other words for a temporary presentation on Stuttgart's Kleiner Schlossplatz – you decided for the first time to use the "timeless" material bronze. Although only a minority of viewers will suspect that the sculpture is actually bronze since it has been lavishly lacquered as if it had been airbrushed. In fact, the sculpture's outer skin is not dissimilar to the glistening sugary surface of your fruit gum work in the elevator of the Akademie Schloss Solitude. What are the differences and similarities between these materials?

MM Working on a sculpture for a public space, you quickly come up against constraints. Of course I could have produced an enormous sculpture made of sugar or a similar transient material. But that would have disappeared within a very short time – through weather or vandalism. Since the sculpture is meant to last for a period of at least four seasons, it was soon clear that I could only employ materials that are conventionally used in public spaces and require little maintenance: metals, glass, concrete and stone. When it transpired that the tree had to be cast in bronze, I was reminded of all the monuments that have turned green and felt very uneasy. I feel quite spooked even by the very idea of permanence, and by the usual ideological connotations the material has in battle monuments, national symbols and war memorials.

KM Red Tree is a highly visible work – and your first commissioned piece for the public domain. What does this shift towards a work signify, which is not only meant for contemplation but can also be used as something one can leave one's mark on?

MM For me, the public space aspect was crucial; museum has always been defined as a protective sanctuary. In the outside world you can't avoid responding to concrete architectural or urban planning conditions. You have to engage with an entirely different sensory context and face enormous competition from all manner of visual and acoustic stimuli, whereas the museum as a classical "white cube" acts as a kind of sanitary enclosure for mental hygiene. Achieving perfection here is equally as important, but in the outside world marks and blemishes can't be avoided. Nonetheless, I would not say my work can be "used"; it makes an offer, as works by Carl Andre do.

KM When we begun our sculpture project, the Kleiner Schlossplatz had been a massive building site for quite some time already. It was impossible to predict how the planning situation would develop after the Kunstmuseum's opening and whether the public would actually take to it as a square. Were you seeking to set up a basic communicative situation with Red Tree?

MM In 1993/94 the former building of the Kunstmuseum was still standing. The front steps were very popular and served as a kind of democratic counterpoint to the castle vis-à-vis. It was one of the few places in the city centre where large numbers of young people could meet and talk without having to spend money. To me the Kleiner Schlossplatz always felt abandoned, completely lacking in spiritual bearing or centre. The idea of a park formulated in my designs shows that I was concerned with a communicative gesture from the very outset, but without suggesting that it's art role to compensate for the square's architecture. Of course, this is now precisely what it does do, except in a highly ironic manner, since the idea of compensation has been taken to absurd lengths by the artificiality of my "natural composition".

KM At a very early stage you refrained from incorporating hydroculture plants or other kinds of natural vegetation – in other words, you decided against using greenery as a soft-focus antidote to the graceless architecture. Instead, your tree asserts itself in gleaming, ostentatiously mannered artificiality, like a visual irritant in the midst of its cubic environment. Given this, it is astonishing how soon it came to be seen as a kind of feel-good furniture. On the one hand the sculpture formulates a critical stance towards its surroundings, on the other it is a pleasure to the eye – is this a contradiction?

MM Ornament and décor always comprise facets that stand at loggerheads to the classical position. Remnants of this re-emerge in popular mythology, but reduced of course to nothing more than signs of non-compliance or symbols of a certain kind of spiritual resistance, as in the fashion of tattoos and their allusion to tribal culture.
There are few examples of successful sculpture in the public domain. On the one hand, you cannot expect art to solve all the problems that occur in public spaces, which also tend to have a complex social background, and on the other you cannot always makes excuses by citing outside constraints. Either something turns out well or it doesn't. A work that manifests the circumstances hampering it is seldom a

successful work, unless its aim was precisely to articulate these constraints. The planning processes affecting public space simply rule out a great deal of possibilities.

KM But you also embrace limitation voluntarily. And you don't seem like someone who would adopt a different material for each new project. Your choice is restricted and rigorous in relation to industrially manufactured or at least processed naturalness. You use bleached and dyed hair, purified and sieved quartz sand, fruit gums with their natural colouring and nature-identical aromas. Is there any limit to what is conceptually possible?

MM Everything is possible – if life were indefinite (laughs). But, again and again, it is the constraints imposed by spatial situations that call for different materials or new concepts even.
I'd never have thought that I would one day be working in cast metal, since I was never at all interested in its iconography as a material. When asked in an interview once what I would be doing in ten years hence, I jokingly replied I would be working in bronze. At that time the idea seemed quite absurd to me.

KM Red Tree appears to be an emblematic work capable of opening up a complex cultural horizon and offering the viewer a plethora of connotations. Could one describe Red Tree as a three-dimensional ornament?

MM The link between Red Tree and ornament is indeed related to the baroque preoccupation with emblems. I previously studied standard works such as Symbola et Emblemata by Joachim Camerarius or Nova Iconologia by Cesare Ripa and was interested in the equivalence of content and framework, in the idea of pictorial language: "emblemata" as precious gems mounted in the golden setting of ornate speech. What fascinates me about the tree is the unique status it enjoys in all cultures and its intensely symbolic and sacred significance. Mostly, it is a metaphor for spiritual and concealed realms, for time-transcending phenomena. For instance, in the pagan context of the pre-Christian world the oak was sacred and later became the symbol of the German nation and freedom, as well as one of the most popular motifs in Romantic art. In the diminutive Gardens of Paradise of the "wunderkammer", trees were fashioned out of coral and landscapes made of silver. Since the origin of coral was still unknown and thought to be rooted in Greek mythology, it was considered extremely precious and a much sought-after collectible due to its bizarre appearance and radiant colour. The idea of the "wunderkammer" as a collection that joined the two opposite poles of natural wonders and masterpieces of virtuoso craftsmanship, embracing naturalia and artificialia, strikes me as being quintessentially embodied by coral.

KM The paintwork on your tree is strongly reminiscent of the airbrush aesthetics in the biker scene. How do you explain the fascination for this particular realm of imagery and expression?

MM I felt uncomfortable about the oxidization process that naturally affects bronze. I always found the patina's ponderousness physically and metaphysically oppressive. To overcome this pathos I looked for a connection to everyday and popular culture. The airbrush aesthetics we know from the paintwork popular in biker or surfer circles seemed to offer the right solution for my tree. In Hamburg, with of its seafaring tradition, there are lots of tattoo studios. The various motifs – symbols of vanitas like fire, snakes or skulls – and their rendition are very similar to those done in biker and tattoo scenes. The practical value that ornament enjoys in popular ritual lends further connotation to the interplay of form and paintwork in Red Tree.

KM So does the tension between your "high culture" raw material and its coating of popular culture have a particular appeal for you? Did your decision also have something to do with the difference between depth and surface? After all, the debate about ornament in the 20th century has constantly focused on the criticism of superficiality and the call for artistic reflectiveness.

MM I certainly wanted none of that bronze pathos.

KM But perhaps biker pathos, nonetheless?

MM But that's performance, a sanctuary of romantic ritual!

KM In ornament you appear to be attracted by the subversive nature of decoration – its repudiation of functionality, the reproach of redundancy that constantly dogs beauty's persistent self-indulgence. What is the appeal of luxury comestibles such as fruit gums and of the ornamental repertoire produced by the confectionary industry?

MM A broad ambivalence is evident when it comes to confectionary. What is truly redundant, that which has no immediate, vital necessity, is often combined with a symbolic token of happiness and prosperity – but also seduction, menace and death. The instant moment of play and the symbolized urge in ornamental form is allied to an appetite for horror which can thus be orally eliminated or devoured.

KM But isn't the range of forms relatively manageable?

MM That's right. Besides its symbolic and figurative vocabulary, traditional confectionary was already producing free ornamental forms prior to any modern fashion for primitivism. In my childhood, for instance, I remember Christmas tree chocolate decorations – flowing lines, arabesques: abstract and asymmetrical forms, in other words free-style, irregular ornament. They resembled architectural décor, sweeping sections of low-profile stucco, Rococo cartouches or rocailles. A kind of anti-classicist programme in chocolate, a libertinage in delicate glaze.

KM A key feature to me seems the historicity of ornament. It is surely not possible nowadays to work on the theme of ornament without taking the history – and critique – of ornament into consideration. Are you also concerned with such historical correspondences?

MM Without an awareness of context, a work would be purely decorative. Within European and Western discourse the ornament debate was fairly limited, but for the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century the rejection of ornament was a crucial step – although it has frequently been ignored how much ornament contributed to the development of abstraction. In Adolf Hölzel's work, for instance, the boundaries between word and image, calligraphy and abstract arabesque are often fluid. Hölzel performed his exercises as a ritual way of life which refused to differentiate between craftsmanship and art.

KM You once said that your move towards working with ornament was also meant as a criticism of the functionalism debate of the 1980s. Did that also imply a repudiation of substance? The stylized Red Tree appears to be highly laden with content – with allusions to Medusa and the fall from grace, with the history of "wunderkammer" valuables and with art historical implications. Has this got more to do with specific references or rather with opening up the broadest possible frame of reference?

MM There is, of course, always a reference to historical context, there are biographical facts, contemporary accounts or statements made by the artist. A work of art either partakes in contemporary discourse and topical thematic issues, or it doesn't.

KM How do you relate to repetition – for instance, in terms of working on such a large-scale sand ornament as the one you did in 1995 for the Württembergische Kunstverein in Stuttgart? Here, the aspect of squandered time in a conventional sense apparently plays an important role, in other words the difference between the time required to produce a work and the duration for which it will be visible.

MM Precision is very important. It's not simply about the activity itself. Ultimately, an object of limited duration is being made, a circumstance that generates its meaning and that is borne in mind throughout the production process, a double paradox. My sand works require a great deal of time and are not channelled into the art market. All that remains of them are the viewer's memories and a few documentary photographs. In terms of normal production criteria the result is an extreme disparity between time and financial gain. The charge against ornament as a token of wastefulness is the theme addressed in the structure of the sand installations: it concerns how we deal with time, and how we relate to it. The process of observing ornamental forms, and of following their lines unleashes more energy than would the perception and distinction of form and anti-form, of what is formed and what is not.

KM What kind of energy can this process of contemplation unleash?

MM To answer that would be too prescriptive…

KM Clever riposte! What else should I expect…?

MM No, it's not my job, that's all (laughs). Well, it unleashes a kind of boredom, idleness – the source of all evil, so to speak.

KM To get back to ornament: is there a case that can still be made against the principle of ornament today?

MM The debate about ornament arose from ethical paradigms to do with appropriateness, integrity and commensurability – the assertion of economy and proportion. Today the credo of economy is still maintained even in the face of exploding capitalism, but only on the productive side…

KM Do you believe then that people have lost sight of the criminal nature of ornament as postulated by Alfred Loos in 1908? Especially since entire buildings could also be considered ornaments.

MM First of all, functionality has generated its own repertoire of ornament, as can be seen in ironic formulation in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. An enormous effort is invested into ornamentalizing things that have purely technical functions. Just think of car design…

KM I recently saw a documentary about so-called embellished jeans. Workers wearing protective clothing "burn" patterns into designer jeans with the latest laser technology. Sumptuous rhinestone and sequin embroidery also seems very much in demand in the high-end jeans segment.

MM A few years ago worker jeans coated with an artificially produced film of oil came into fashion – but this type of dirtiness didn't really catch on. It is telling that only the clean school of the "work aesthetic" has persisted and not the greasy-dirty kind. And that the production of all these torn and ripped items has grown into a big-time industry.

KM Nowadays the true rarities are jeans that are not torn, not bleached, not embroidered.

MM Things are drifting apart in diametrically opposite directions. The less physical the work we do gets, the more worn out and tattered clothing becomes. And more expensive too, since the process of artificial defilement requires so much effort. On the one hand, due to the time wasted on making it by hand, ornament was eliminated as redundant, while superfluity, on the other hand, became industrialized. Work has become a luxury, and its remaining traces are now ornament.

KM Is it not sobering that the status of ornament today means that you are now no longer working at the cutting edge but in the mainstream?

MM No, you just have to move on, towards metal – heavy metal and precious metal (laughs) – towards values that are not en vogue and have long since become scarcities on the global market.

KM And what's in store after your "bronze age"? What will you be up to in ten years from now?

MM I'll be painting probably (laughs).

KM From the cult of genius in the modern era to the cult of the machine in the present: you initially had the idea of accompanying the installation of Red Tree with a motorbike performance. But after lengthy consideration and planning you had to abandon this inauguration project with the promising title Burn Out. What would the performance have entailed?

MM At staggered intervals, five riders on streetfighter motorbikes were to do a burnout around the tree. You do a burnout by pulling the front brake while spinning on the bike's back tire. In a centric movement, round traces of grating rubber would have been scorched into the ground around the sculpture, thereby connecting the tree with the site. Smoke, screaming engines and the smell of burning rubber would have been elements of the performance. It would have been fun to do and would have made a great show. A burnout is a popular mythological spectacle involving natural forces, a romantic ritual, an archaic ceremony performed with hi-tech machines.

Instead, skaters have now integrated the sculpture into their circuit and replaced the planned performance with their own daily ritual. For me this is actually an even better solution: the skater course around the Red Tree as an ornament of pop culture.

This conversation took place on 17 and 18 August 2005.

Translated by Matthew Partridge