

MICHAEL BEUTLER

MOBY DICK

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HAMBURGER BAHNHOF – MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWART – BERLIN

EXCERPT FROM THE CATALOGUE

A bag closing machine, an on-site team, and a book about knots

By Melanie Roumigière

We're about to leave the studio when I notice a new construction in front of the elevator door. It's a kind of curtain frame. The curtain fabric, which is clearly intended to keep the cold air out, looks very heavy. The opening of the elevator door is accompanied by a creaking sound as a hinge on a wooden structure opens out, triggering a sedate automatic mechanism that allows a makeshift wooden frame and the attached curtain to open at the same time as the door. As I walk through it, I discover that the curtain is made of layers of fabric that have been sewn together. This makes me laugh inwardly and prompts me to ask, without expecting a reply: "Did you make the sewing machine too?" "No," he says, "but here I used the bag closing machine – it's perfect for these kind of things."

Michael Beutler is everything people say about him: he is an inventor, engineer, initiator, building site manager, captain, foreman, and craftsman. He is both an experienced artist and an enthusiastic amateur. He is a situationist, a sculptor, and occasionally an architect. An anti-conceptualist, perhaps?

Beutler's artworks can be described as interventions, sculptures, installations, and sculptural acts. They are ephemeral, process-oriented, space-related, provisional, handmade, humorous, situation-dependent, interdisciplinary, and sometimes also site-specific – or, as he himself puts it, "origin-specific."¹ His work is characterized by chance and permeated by a sense of playfulness. His artistic thinking is informed by the materials he uses, and the apparatus is his primary means of production.

In the exhibition *Moby Dick*, presented in the historic hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof, Michael Beutler demonstrates and at the same time challenges all of the above-mentioned attributions and categorizations. His exploration begins with the space itself. How is the mid-nineteenth-century architecture to be understood, and what structural elements shape our current perception in this space? What traces of the original and interim uses of the former railway building can still be felt today, and which ones have disappeared? What potential lies in the large white space that this hall has since become as a museum of contemporary art?²

As in many of his previous works, Beutler has developed his installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof in response to the given situation and the conditions of the space. The 'problems' arising from the specific features of the existing architecture thereby become crucial elements that he actually regards as 'opportunities' to develop artistic strategies and offer 'solutions.' In one of his previous projects, for example, he used materials from a museum's existing exhibition architecture to create new furnishings and a new spatial concept for the institution. Elsewhere, his work has involved creating a false ceiling to generate more display space for a group exhibition, and for another exhibition he developed a

¹ Michael Beutler, in Kim Einarsson, "The Exhibition Space as Studio (and the Interview as Logbook)," in: *Michael Beutler. Kottgubbar*, exhib. cat., Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, 2008, pp. 129–137, here p. 133.

² Having been built as a railway station in the mid-nineteenth century, the Hamburger Bahnhof was later used for administrative and residential purposes and went on to house a transport and construction museum in the first half of the twentieth century. After the railway station was closed down, a garden was laid out in the place where the station hall once stood. It was not until the early twentieth century that today's historic hall was (re-)constructed in the style of a station building for use as a museum.

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method of turning walls into ceilings that reopened the architecturally planned sight lines of a historical building.³ Michael Beutler uses industrially produced or processed materials such as wood, plastic, plaster, and paper, most of which can be obtained from everyday sources such as department stores, markets, or raw material suppliers. These materials are combined and subjected to further treatment with the aid of manual craft techniques, whereby they are repurposed and reinterpreted. Beutler often recycles materials found on site and integrates these into his constructions, and his artistic method also involves reusing elements from previous exhibitions.

Entirely in keeping with Daniel Buren's notion of art as a reaction to the conditions of a site at a particular point in time, Beutler's artworks cast "patterns over situations,"⁴ and in this way camouflage the existing limitations and possibilities. Like the great white whale Moby Dick, the 2,000m² space of the Hamburger Bahnhof's historic hall has to be "tamed." To this end, Beutler has developed a system that divides up the available space and simultaneously transforms the viewer's perception of it. He has reduced the hall to smaller, more manageable spaces and created an unusual, winding – almost labyrinthine – route for visitors to follow. By inserting two large curves into the central aisle of the hall, mimicking the shape of the walls and arches in the side aisles, Beutler has employed existing structural elements of the building and transformed them into installative constructions that evidently serve a dual purpose between architecture and sculpture. The three spatial zones generated by these constructions divide the exhibition into different areas for Beutler to present the diverse facets and forms of his artistic practice, and at the same time allow him to test these out in new variations. The material used to make the new curved structures is an industrially fabricated product called Pecafil, which consists of a metal grid covered in transparent plastic to create a closed panel. Such panels are conventionally used as formwork elements in the construction of foundations and other building parts. Michael Beutler has been using Pecafil for many years in a wide range of forms and contexts related to his artworks. The translucency of this material – which Beutler paints with milky-white greenhouse paint – in combination with its grid structure evokes the glass architecture which from the mid-nineteenth century onwards characterized densely populated public buildings such as railway stations, World's Fair pavilions, and the first large shopping arcades in Milan and Naples. The Hamburger Bahnhof still displays some of the characteristic features of this mode of construction. At the same time, however, the absence of the associated original features of the building becomes apparent. As a museum where visual art is displayed, the Hamburger Bahnhof must provide climate control and protection against light damage, as well as meeting other demands of a 'white cube' exhibition space. The architecture has therefore been adapted to suit its new purpose. Michael Beutler subtly draws attention to this fact by examining the building's origins from a contemporary perspective.

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Distributed throughout the hall are a number of the characteristic machine-like tools that Michael Beutler uses in the production of his installations, and are at the same time integral to his work as a whole. The apparatuses occupy the space like curious, unspecific experimental arrangements. These rather clumsy-looking contraptions are usually assembled from pieces of wood; on the one hand they represent Beutler the craftsman, and on the other they reflect an inventive spirit that re-imagines

³ In the order of the text, the author is referring to the exhibitions *Michael Beutler, Architekt – Etienne Descloux, Künstler*, Kunsthalle Osnabrück, 2013; *Total Motiviert / The state of the upper floor: Panorama*, Kunstverein München, Munich, 2003; and *Flip*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2004.

⁴ Michael Beutler in conversation with the author on February 12, 2014.

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existing modes of industrial (mass) production and ways of using materials by testing out alternative forms of production that employ the simplest possible means. The devices can be regarded as an extension of the artist, as his “sculptural assistants”⁵.

The majority of Michael Beutler’s artworks are based on a modular system of objects, combinations of which are either assembled and arranged into ‘material heaps’ or used as building components and integrated into a larger structure or installation. For the presentation of the work *Zustand mit Loops und Kringeln* (2012) at the Hamburger Bahnhof, large quantities of outsize paper curls are being produced by squeezing paper through a machine that is several meters in length. The shaped paper curls are then gathered together in a huge pile. For *Potpourri* (2004), an apparatus combines paper, wire, and glue to produce corrugated wall elements. The resulting ‘building material’ can be used both as a partition wall inside the exhibition space and as a movable barrier during the set-up period. Beutler’s apparatuses are essential to the creation of these objects and modules. They are the (purely) mechanical producers, the ‘quasi-machines’ that are developed by the artist (often in the exhibition space itself) for the specific mechanisms and production steps required, whereby they represent the minimum amount of material, perfection, and durability necessary. The apparatuses have an ambivalent status between auratic art objects – in other words sculptures with all their autonomous objecthood (often compared to the artists’ machines of the avant-garde) – and auxiliary devices of a prototypical kind, which are clearly attributed a formative or formulating role. If sculpture is conceived as a process of (material) transformation, then these implements serve as a kind of medium through which many different materials acquire a new form. The fact that Beutler generally leaves the apparatuses in the exhibition space, presenting them as part of his finished installations, further reinforces this dual function. For the artist himself, their role as sculpture is however only totally fulfilled when the temporality of the “proto-machines,”⁶ marked by the production process itself, is completed by the sculptural presence of the resulting objects or ‘products.’ The “things” – the manufactured items – are to be regarded as “the foundations upon which the apparatuses assert themselves; they build their own pedestal, so to speak.”⁷ For the viewer, the devices thus raise direct questions about their role and mode of operation, stimulating the imagination in a humorous and playful manner. However, the ambiguous attribution of the visible traces (or props) means that it is never really possible for the production process to be fully reconstructed. The above-described “formulation by means of the apparatus”⁸ is essential to Beutler’s concept of the work of art, which is synonymous with the notion of (handi)craft in a literal sense. His primary focus is on the transformation of material with specific reference to the situation as a whole. The crucial factor for the outcome of the production process is not only the method of constructing the “proto-machine,” but also and above all its mode of operation – and hence its “activation”. Through continual repetition and variation, objects or building components are produced that never have exactly the same shape and therefore run counter to an anonymous and alienated practice of standardized industrial mass production. The individual operation of the apparatuses by the members of the team of assistants Beutler relies upon to carry out his work in the exhibition space is therefore another key aspect of his artistic strategy.

⁵ Gregory Williams, “Almost Machines: Beutler’s Enabling Devices,” in: *Michael Beutler. Flamingo*, exhib. cat., Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2004, pp. 35–46, here p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ Michael Beutler in conversation with the author on February 12, 2014.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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Learning and adopting the procedures and methods embedded in the ‘quasi-machine’ determines the final form of the sculptural product. The process of creating this product is thereby always open to view; it remains visible and comprehensible to those operating the apparatus throughout the procedure. The operation of the device can thus be individually controlled. This intended (and therefore inherent) possibility of improvisation and variation by the different producers or participants, combined with the resulting idiosyncratic nature of the products, rob the ‘machine’ of its status as such.

Considering how Beutler’s concept of sculpture is related to the conditions of its production, a clear parallel can be drawn to Robert Morris’s notion of “anti-form.” Along with the question of how material is transformed into form, Morris above all addresses the conditions under which this transformation occurs, with the aim of considering our surroundings as something other than just an industry-fuelled collection of “forms” made from predominantly artificial materials using “obscure processes” that are unknown to us and allow no kind of “random distributions.”⁹

Michael Beutler’s art offers an alternative perspective upon this apparently determinate relationship between the materials, objects, and forms that shape our everyday lives and their conditions of production. His (handi)craft combines different sculptural categories and moves – without committing itself – between ephemeral installations, temporary material assemblages with a sculptural presence, and the lasting singular object as an autonomous entity. In this regard, sculpture above all means the possibility to experiment, the opportunity for sculpture to be understood as an (open-ended) act or performance in conjunction with its claim to objecthood.¹⁰

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At the end of the hall another part of the exhibition unfolds in the final section created by the artist. The centerpiece of this section is an approximately 60m² house that recalls traditional residential architecture in Japan. Beutler has given the structure a pitched aluminum roof, a chimney, an open veranda, and a shed-like structure in front. *Haus Beutler* is the title of this walk-in “catalogue of techniques,”¹¹ which was first developed for Beutler’s solo show at the Bielefelder Kunstverein in 2014 and has since become part of his repertoire of variable works. The creation of *Haus Beutler* must likewise be regarded as a logical consequence of or response to the spatial situation in the exhibition venue. The small, boxy rooms of the historical residential building in which the Kunstverein is located necessitated a shift in scale and a new articulation of Beutler’s work. *Haus Beutler* is filled with models, samples of works and materials, fragments of previous installations that have become building components, drawings, and three video loops that are presented on monitors – firmly embedded within the Beutler microcosm – and document past projects. Construction, production, and outdoor works – these are the three categories according to which the films have been differentiated and compiled. *Haus Beutler* can be viewed as an illustrative collection of materials which, while it has the character of a work of art in its entirety, is specifically not intended as an accumulation of individual works. The reasons behind Beutler’s decision to exhibit this assemblage, gathered together in the studio over many years, have more to do with the aforementioned practical logic, which here, too, becomes the motivating force. The accumulation of these materials, sketches, and files prompted him to process them and give them a new form as a display, as building components, or as filling material. Various

⁹ Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects,” in: *On Art / Über Kunst*, M. DuMont Schauberg, Cologne, 1974, pp. 226–240, here p. 238.

¹⁰ Cf. Patrizia Dander and Julienne Lorz’s introduction to *Skulpturales Handeln / Sculptural Acts*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2012, pp. 16–20, here pp. 17 f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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work samples and intermediate work stages are concentrated here within an experimental field, clustered together as “close neighbors,”¹² not in order to provide a decisive (retrospective) survey, but to clarify the purpose of their existence. While in previous presentations of *Haus Beutler*, entire exhibition spaces were occupied by the installation and were thus transformed, as it were, into *Haus Beutler*, at the Hamburger Bahnhof this ‘material composition’ has a very different presence. Here, for the first time, the fragmentary, model-like, and documentary aspect of Beutler’s practice is juxtaposed with his expansive works in their implemented and final (albeit temporary) form. The decision to incorporate *Haus Beutler* in the exhibition can however also be regarded as a logical reaction to the conditions of the large hall. The plan to divide the hall into three sections allowed the artist to add *Haus Beutler* as one ‘ingredient’ to other elements of his oeuvre and in this way combine different work forms.

This juxtaposition above all emphasizes the validity of both sides of Beutler’s artistic method: the planning carried out in advance and the “proper work”¹³ conducted on site. The intention is not, however, to present *Haus Beutler* as a kind of explanation or index for realized projects. Recalling artists such as Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham, Richard Jackson, or Rachel Whiteread, the formulation of an idea or approach on the level of the model is a fundamental element of Beutler’s working method. The actual realization of the various approaches or models in a spatial situation is thereby not a prerequisite for transferring them into the exhibition context.

Here, too, the dichotomy in Beutler’s practice becomes apparent: the difference between the test phase – the careful planning and preparation in his home studio – and the pragmatic, open-ended realization in the exhibition space that likewise serves as a workspace. The exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof for the first time reflects this defining duality of his artistic practice and also provides direct insight into the double role played by the studio in his work.

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.