

Transcript of an interview between Timothy Cahill, editor of *Art Conservator* magazine, and artist Mary Bauermeister. The interview was prompted by the arrival of Bauermeister's "optical box" #175 *The Great Society* for treatment at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, where the magazine is published. The questions were sent via fax in mid-February, 2009, and the responses given in a letter dated Feb. 26; the transcript below contains slight redactions for sense. The interview was excerpted for the cover story of the [Spring, 2009](#) issue of *Art Conservator*.

***Art Conservator:* What can you tell me about the creation of *The Great Society*? What prompted it, what are the significance of its elements, how did you construct it, how long did it take?**

**Mary Bauermeister:** Dear Tim — early morning, 26th, 4:00: usually I use these early morning hours to write my "Briefography"—*Brief* meaning letter—so a biography by letters, from childhood to my fossil age of 75—in three different typographies—(1) my normal life as child, wife, daughter, mother, etc. (2) My spiritual-metaphysical experiences, which I usually hide away—at least in art circles, which since decades are left-wing, anti-religious (which I can understand, as the institutions of religion are on the same power trip as politics, economy, [etc.] which wrack our world today to pieces). The error of the left intellectual movement was to throw away the "baby with the bath," a German proverb, meaning that they cast away one of man's most urgent desires, to connect with the Absolute. The traces of my spiritual experiences, which are part of me since ever I remember, long before speaking, are in my writings and scribbings, which are mostly hidden in my lens-boxes—"thinking-cases traces." The (3.) aspect: my artist's life, as painter, sculptor, landscaper, writer, singer, performer, speaker about art, art teacher [. . .]. So the traces of my long life's experience could help young people in their effort to become humans, a process which takes lifetimes. I had the privilege of always finding the right teachers and teachings when I was young. So now let me go through your questions.

I do not have a photograph of the piece, so have to write about it from memory. In Europe I was a strict nonfigurative artist. We, the postwar generation, did not trust anything our forefathers represented anymore. We started from scratch: bombed cities, everything we were made to believe in had been proved to be an illusion. Our grandfathers, fathers, cousins and older brothers did not return from the war, or if they did, they were broken. Broken limbs, broken hearts, broken ideals—for the rest of their lives they were *verstummt*, silenced, in a traumatic, paralyzed sense. Now, that was not because they had "lost the war." There is always a loser and a winner in battle. It was the awakening, the realization [of] what they had given their lives [for] and taken the lives of others. The soldiers were not aware of the Hitler regime's human crimes. Only after the war had they seen the photos of the concentration camps.

So we grew up in these desperate, hungry times, and to paint figures, landscapes,

still lifes, at least to me and my closest artist friends, seemed ridiculous. Also, as a child I saw around every living being a colorful moving aura (even around so-called dead things like stones), so when I saw Art, paintings of reality, I missed the color field. Later, when my visionary childhood vanished away through schooling and teaching, when I had to learn the reduced interpretation of the world, *I refused*. Before I knew what-for, I resisted the normative dogmas of what one does, thinks, feels, or what one does not. An ambiguity, a multi-dimensional, integral understanding: things are not either/or. They are  $1+1=3$ . Non-dualistic. That's why, later in my artistic life, I was so happy to have found the optical glasses, which, when put over my written statements in my lens-boxes would distort and change and make relative my statements. They were not meant as absolute truth, they were "in-between" results of a thinking and feeling process.

So, back to my early art life. Whatever I had started as an artist was not considered art when I did it. My early cloth material "sheet-lightsheets" were regarded as female "knitting" crafts; my stone pieces as pure nature. My experiments with colors (phosphors) which load themselves with light and fire [. . .] in darkness to vanish altogether (blue, red, yellow, violet disappearing at different speeds), were considered "chemistry"; my use of magnets in art pieces was physics.

I resisted art teaching more-or-less successfully. I only followed an inner drive to express what was not yet *there*, in reality or thought. To make art was more a finding, searching process than a knowing. Then in 1962 I had my first one-man show in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The director, Jan Willem Sandberg, had seen a "concept composition" which I did as a student in [composer Karlheinz] Stockhausen's composition class, *Score for Visual Artists*. What the interpreters of music do, play the notes of the composer, I brought into the field of art. The plan was part of a multimedia *gesamtkunstwerk*, so many artists from all fields could interpret the score. This strange piece of concept interested Sandberg and I had my first show. At the same time in the museum there was a little show of American art—[Jasper] Johns, [Richard] Stankiewicz, [Alfred] Leslie and [Robert] Rauschenberg's *goat*. I was so flabbergasted by this piece, and I knew, where this is called Art, I will and want to be! I went to Sandberg's office [and] asked him to buy one of my show's pieces, so I could afford a ticket to America. He did, and I ended up in USA October 1962. Six months on Long Island, [then] 1963, New York, National Arts Club, to which I transported all kinds of natural material, stones, sand, pebbles, tree trunks and many "ready-trouvier"—that's what I called my found objects, which I hung on the wall of my first New York show, Galleria Bonino, 1963-64, as an homage to Marcel Duchamp (who I consider my teacher, and who liked my work very much.) I stayed in New York and did many shows, was bought by many museums, and interrelated with the Art Scene, the artists and the critics.

In the United States I gave up my resistance to figurative elements. You cannot illustrate something absurd or abnormal without reference to something else. So surrealism needs realism to play with and against (like atheism needs theism)—to make a drawing of a piano where the keys are "out of order" and the pianist has six fingers on one hand, four on the other: multi-meaning, ambiguity, indeterminism. So I gave into figurativeness, and I also could not resist becoming politically involved—Bob Dylan's

songs, Joan Baez, the Vietnam War, money, greed, inhuman exploitation, together with a clean, anesthetic morality. The Cold War, the “fellow traveler,” the “yellow danger,” the Chinese, were the evil ones—an enemy was always needed to distract from one’s own shallowness. Pop Art as a warning, making banalities the subject of art.

From 1968 to 1971 I did several pieces with figurative elements, drawings with political themes and titles, which show my intentions: (1) *Don’t defend your freedom with poisoned mushrooms*, 1964, hinting at the atom bomb mushroom cloud, dedicated to John Cage, a pacifist and enthusiastic mushroom hunter, whose work I had performed in 1960 with Cage, [Merce] Cunningham, [David] Tudor performing. (2) *I’m a pacifist, but war photographs are too beautiful*, 1966, hinting at the beauty of colors of liquid bombing, dropping colorful phosphors from attacking airplanes and setting fires in the cities a [conventional] bomb could have never achieved. As most of the German old cities had wooden roofs, a whole street would burn in seconds and no [escape] was possible. We lived in the forest near Cologne and watched these bombs at night. How can something so beautiful like these colors be so destructive. The piece is in New York with Mrs. Bonino [. . .]. (3) *No fighting on Christmas*, 1967-68, subtitled, “Kill for freedom, fight for peace.” [. . .] (4) *China Tinte “Import Forbidden”*, 1967-68, a sculpture which is now on consignment with Achim Moeller Gallery, New York. (5) *Yellow Flowers*, 1968, an assemblage of many elements, a standing box, a collage of yellow shapes which look like flowers from a distance, but up close turn out to Chinese people hurting each other. (Moeller has one of these flowers with the *China Tinte* piece.) (6) *US Asian hero*, 1968, and (7) *The Great Fallout Society*, about 10 pieces, lens-boxes, which I did in 1969 and do not have any or only a few documents. *The Great Fallout Society*, “fallout” = atomic waste, and the other meaning of our whole Western decadence. Are we as humans, the way we behave, not ourselves the fallout, the poison, the “mistake” of evolution? Are we at the verge of collective suicide? and if yes, why? Is the human experiment still valid, meaning does it lead to a peaceful, harmonious integration of spirit and matter—“the sons of God saw the daughters of the earth . . .” [Gen. 6:2] and we the result of this marriage. Can we tame our reptile brain and stop fighting—can we bring this experiment to a fruitful end, or do we end ourselves in atomic, ecological, economic disasters?

All these influences were urgent in the late Sixties. The Hippie Movement. The Student Revolt. The anti-dogma, [. . .] anti-establishment protests. And above all, “Mr. Clean, Mr. Proper,” keep it antiseptic, as long as it’s germ-free: a symbol of moral cleanliness, self-importance, arrogance, hubris. Oswald Spengler, in *The Decline of the West*: “Can we be saved?” Yes we can, but not from outside. The change has to come from deep within us. These were the thoughts I had when creating *The Great Society*. The title meant, of course, in an ironic or sarcastic way (although my sarcasm is never nihilistic—the beauty of sunshine, the serenity of love, the innocence of children, the desire to contact the absolute—the depths to which humans can reach in their search always for one hope. The bottle is half-full, not half-empty).

**What was your thought process as you developed the “optical box”? How did you intend our piece to be viewed, horizontally, looking down through the glass like a**

**museum case, or viewed vertically, like an aquarium or TV set?**

The “optical box”: a multi-dimensional circumscribing of my interpretation of life. It can be viewed both ways, on the wall or as a table, sitting around it. With a glass plate on top, and with our daily “cocktail” glasses on top of that glass, it could maybe give us a hint—a warning. [. . .]

**You mentioned to me that *The Great Society* was made during a “political phase” of your career. How long did this phase last? What was your aim as a political artist?**

I stopped “political art” when I realized that I would not change the world. I could only change worlds. So I withdrew into the German forest, brought up 4 children, grew vegetables, got involved with ecology, geomancy and mysticism, meditation, silence instead of verbs—my art withdrew from figurativism and became—utopian. I did landscapes with crystals, got involved with the healing aspects of art. Started music again—walk through landscapes and hear their “acoustic signature”—write poems—and letters and texts. My last work is an edition of 10, *Kultur beinte-l*, which I gave as “a price [prize?] to 10 people in the Art World” (curators, museum people, critics, supporters, collectors). The word *Kultur beinte-l* can only be understood in German. It is the name for a “necessaire,” a bag in which you put soap, comb, toothbrush, etc.: *bentel*=bag; *beinte*=rob—so a hint to the stealings of artworks during wars and occupation, a very acute theme today. All Western museums have robbed the world and their countries of their Art.

**What are your thoughts when you see *The Great Society* now?**

I question myself: What did we artists achieve? Whose consciousness did we touch, enlarge? What did our warnings (in prophetic art) effect?

**Please describe your early art education, and how it continues to inform what you do?**

Life was hunger, misery, then hunger for books, for education. My family—father, scientist; mother, singer; grandfathers, writer, sculptor, doctors—an upbringing in humanistic “pantheistic” family with 1 brother and 5 sisters.

1954—high school—“Hochschule fur Gestaltung” (a follower of the Bauhaus, which Max Bill built and directed in Ulm) . . . 1957—left all school and went on as an autodidact. My inner self was exploding with ideas and I could not strangle or enslave myself into a formal education. 1957-58—I shifted my studio activities to Cologne, where in 1960 I had an atelier, which became known as the pre-Fluxus experimental stage of all and everything artwise which was not yet accepted officially ([Nam June] Paik, La Monte Young, George Brecht, Cage, etc.)

**I understand you had an early interest in mathematics and astronomy. How do those disciplines, and the philosophies behind them, fit into your work?**

Yes, I was a “mathematical genius” in my early life. What interested me most was infinity, zero, *infinities*—the absurdities. How could two parallels, in infinity, cross? I was not interested in the axioms, but—again—the tautologies, the ambiguities.

Astronomy. I never forget the night sessions with my grandfather [and] father about the stars, the cycles of the planets, the mysteries of the moon and its phases—early childhood memories.

**What was your role in the creation of the Fluxus group? How did the artists of that group influence or change your work? Bueys in particular?**

I was pre-Fluxus. My studio’s activity was 1959 to 1960-1961. [By] 1962, I had already left for USA. Beuys entered the scene 1963, when he showed up at a Paik event [. . .] and hammered a piano of Paik’s. Paik had done all this in 1960 in my studio and that’s why I’m named his muse. He was my protégé. I met Bueys when I came back from the USA in the early ’70s. We liked and supported each other, but never worked with each other. [. . .]

**Why did you leave New York?**

Why I left? Many reasons:

a) The early times, 1960’s, when the motive was *art*, exchange among artists, sharing of ideas, searching—had slowly changed into established movements, *results* instead of *research*. Money came into the scene and with it all the vices that accompany money, greed, jealousy, “fences” against the other, protection, security: possession, a “this was my idea” syndrome. The purity and innocence had vanished.

b) I realized how important language is in the education of children, and as I spoke four languages, but none of them well enough, I thought it better to bring up my children in my home language. (While I’m writing this letter, I miss so many words and have to use so many superficial expressions from the “bread and butter” language, as I call it, when language only circles around our daily life and its needs.)

c) The father of my children, and the man I loved, Karlheinz Stockhausen, lived in Germany and only part of the year shared my life in New York and later in Connecticut, so it was also a personal reason.

d) The mystic experience of my early childhood started to reemerge and I needed a refuge, which I found in the German forest. (I built my studio there, and it’s from here that I answer your letter.)

**You grew up in a time of war. How did this experience color your attitude, definition, and use of beauty in your work?**

The illusion of beauty; the instabilities of form, norm; the hypocrisy behind truth-spreading systems, be they religious, political, scientific.

**You obviously still have an enormous curiosity and love for life. How do you nourish that? Please tell me about the work you're making now.**

I just returned from Korea, where the Nam June Paik Art Center has just opened. There was a symposium [where] I talked about Paik, his beginnings as a musician, etc. etc. What else am I doing? Until this month, I cultivated a landscape garden, which I created in the city on terraces, roofs, balconies and surroundings of an old Cologne insurance company. This job gave me the income for my life and the education of my four children. (I always fed them myself, so the fathers of my children did not need to support them nor me.) Unfortunately, this insurance company was taken over by USA [company], and now the rules of the “new-liberal market” have changed the until-now social-market-oriented politics. Quick money, shareholders’ interest, interest of interest, the capital has to be served. So my job (as the jobs of many others in that company), the support, the involvement [with] others, the *caring*, has stopped. The atmosphere is of non-trust and fear. Who will be disregarded, discharged, fired next? People who have worked for 20, 30 years in a faithful relationship with their company are being treated like *Abfall*—garbage—rubbish. Until now this word was only used for items, now used to describe people who fall out of the net of capital interests. So your question, what about my work now? Got into politics, not with drawings, but with actions. Encourage people to claim back their dignity, regardless of the currency of money.