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WITH FORTY-TWO PAGES OF REVIEWS

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Vol. 294 SEPTEMBER 2012 No. 1706

France under Its New President	Allan Ramsay	**273**
Monarchy and the Middle East	Michael L. Nash	**281**
The Image of the Russian Revolution on Russian TV	Dmitry Shlapentokh	**289**
Experiencing America	Tony Thomas	**299**
Australia's New Frontier	Keith Suter	**308**
The Indian and Pakistani Diaspora in the US	Alex Ninian	**317**
The War on Drugs	Daniel Williams	**324**
Revitalising America's Downtowns	Roger L. Kemp and Carl J. Stephani	**330**
Art in the Community: A 'Neighbourhood Watch' Scheme in Germany	David Carter	**335**
Edmund Spenser's Deliberate Dream	Donald Bruce	**343**
Identities and Lies Revealed by the Spoken and Written Word	Stephen Wade	**351**
George Saintsbury: The Ultimate Man of Letters	Richard Whittington-Egan	**356**

REVIEWS **356**

Elizabeth Ingrams, Michael Carver, Tony Thomas, Richard Rathbone, Ralph Berry, R.D. Kernohan, Edward Bradbury

The World of Paperbacks **378**

Short Notices **383**

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ART IN THE COMMUNITY

A 'Neighbourhood Watch' Scheme in Germany

David Carter

ART can be anything, and anything can be art: we are very much accustomed to the fact nowadays. It is just a matter of identifying something as art, in order to summon up the requisite reverential attention. But can art also be anywhere? In principle it would also seem to be the case. Endless examples can be cited to demonstrate the point. But there are limitations. Both artist and collector may wish to feel free to place a work of art wherever they think fit, but, unless they restrict themselves to displaying on their own property, they are likely to encounter the problem of the rights of others, most commonly embodied in the power of local authorities but also claimed by the owners of private property.

The location of a work of art must always be sanctioned, if it is not to be irreverently defaced and in all likelihood destroyed, or at least respectfully removed. All the more admirable and praiseworthy, and probably rare, therefore are the efforts of individuals, other than artists and collectors, to encourage the public display of art. One group of such individuals, who have worked wonders in this respect, live in an old quarter of the German city of Essen, once the smoky polluted heart of the Ruhr industrial area, but in recent years a model for the possibilities of urban regeneration. The quarter is that known as the 'Moltkeviertel,' and the local initiative undertaken by art-lovers there has come to be known as *Kunst am Moltkeplatz* ('Art at the Moltkeplatz'). The *Platz* or square in question is lined with houses and a church on one side and has an extensive park area.

It is frequently useful in clarifying what something is, to exclude from consideration all those things which it is not. The *Kunst am Moltkeplatz* initiative (known locally as the 'KaM') is not, strictly speaking, concerned with community art, nor with installation art or street art, and only partially with what is known as site-specific art. Community art is usually understood to refer to art produced by and within a community, to express that community's concerns about issues affecting the people in it, and often with the aim of bringing about change. Installation art has quite a long history, embracing such artists as Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, and is a loose term for art created for specific spaces, and which is often dismantled

after some time. Street art usually integrates elements of the local environment into the work of art. Site-specific art shares much with installation art and street art, and, as its name suggests, takes particular account of aspects of the character of the site in which it is set. The KaM initiative is unique in that, while sharing some characteristics with these forms of publicly located art, it also has its own particular agenda, which is rooted in the historical development of the quarter.

The Moltkeviertel ('Moltke Quarter') was named, following the practice before the First World War of honouring military figures, after the Prussian Generalfeldmarschall Helmuth Graf von Moltke. The architecture and general character of the quarter as it appears today are indebted to the visionary ideals and indefatigability of the man in charge of city planning and extensions in the early 1900s: Robert Schmidt (1869–1934). One of his priorities was to preserve the green areas as yet unspoilt by industrialisation, and his first major project of this kind, in 1908, was the Moltkeviertel. While developing tasteful housing areas he also ensured the provision of extensive gardens. Major innovative architects were employed, and the earliest buildings reflect the influence of the Viennese *art nouveau* movement (*Jugendstil*). Buildings influenced by the North German and Dutch styles followed this, and, in the 1920s, the influence of the 'Bauhaus' school is clearly evident. By the 1930s the trend to *Neue Sachlichkeit* ('New Objectivity') was reflected in characteristics of the architecture: design was to reflect function and mere decoration was out. The Second World war brought extensive destruction to Essen, with the prime target being the Krupp factories. There were over 270 air-raids on the city, with 90 per cent of the centre being destroyed and 60 per cent of the suburbs. After the end of the Second World War the main concern was rebuilding and economic development, and the new buildings in the Moltkeviertel from this time reveal little recognition of the achievements of the past. In recent decades however local residents have become more and more concerned to preserve the area's cultural heritage. In 1983 a protection order was issued for the whole Moltkeviertel. By then the first steps to establish the Moltkeplatz as an open-air site for the display of art-works had already been taken.

In 1981 the art gallery owner Jochen Krüper realised the potential of the site. His home and gallery was at number 5 Moltkeplatz, and he set up on the grass area opposite his house the first art work, which has

become a landmark for the whole quarter: *Hannover Tor* ('Hanover Gate') by Friedrich Gräsel. In the following years he arranged for works by many other recognised artists to be displayed in the park. When Krüper died in 2002 the works were neglected and the works and the park gradually took on a derelict air. It was at this point that local residents took a hand.

Whatever the residents of the Moltkeplatz may have thought of the examples of modern art when they first glimpsed them from their windows, the objects clearly grew on them with time. In 2006 they formed an organisation with a rather unwieldy but precisely descriptive name: *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum am Moltkeplatz Essen e.V.* ('Organisation for Art in the public space on the Moltkeplatz'). Their aim was nothing short of taking over responsibility for the protection and upkeep of the eight works of art which were at that time *in situ*. The fight to obtain their aims was to prove a tough one. It was to take them over one and a half years, as the city authorities did not look kindly on their endeavours.

Matters came to a head when the owners of the individual works became aware that they were in a poor state of repair and approached the city government about the matter. The owners were not just obscure eccentric art-lovers but influential institutions: a private bank in Munich, the Sparkasse bank in Essen and the respected art gallery Galerie Heimeshoff. It was decided to remove all the works to the large public park known as the Grugapark, where they could be properly cared for. The residents of the Moltkeplatz suddenly became aware of the fact that they were about to lose their collection of art works. Leading instigators in rousing the local art-loving residents to action were Volker and Lisa Wagenitz, who handled most of the correspondence and publicity and now run the organisation's website. On 29 May, 2006, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* reported that a group of local inhabitants of the Moltkeviertel had arrived at the office of the Oberbürgermeister of Essen, Wolfgang Reiniger, with two letters stating their case and a list of 450 signatures, protesting that the works of art should be left in the Moltkeplatz and not removed to the Grugapark. But all this was to no avail, and late in June lorries and earth-moving equipment arrived at the Moltkeplatz to begin the task of removing the works. Though dismayed the local residents were not willing to accept defeat without a fight: in fact their hour of heroic glory was at hand. In their edition of 23 June, 2006, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* reported

what happened next and displayed dramatic photographs of the event. Groups of protesters formed human chains around the works as the huge digging machines reared like prehistoric monsters above them. Here for all to see, starkly symbolised, was the conflict between helpless sensitive individuals and heartless authority. It prompted a leading German historian of art, Manfred Schneckenburger, who had twice been the director of the renowned 'documenta' international art exhibition in Kassel, to comment that breaking up that particular ensemble of works of art was an act 'verging on barbarism'.

Faced with the earnestness and determination of the local inhabitants and the bad light in which it had been cast by the whole affair, the city government finally capitulated. The local organisation, which now went by the more convenient title of *Kunst am Moltkeplatz* and became known, even more conveniently, as the 'KaM', now had the responsibility not only for the upkeep of the works of art entrusted to it but also of the surrounding lawns, and not wanting to function merely as an open-air museum, it also took it upon itself to display the works of new young artists there on a regular basis. In an interview with the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* published on 24 May, 2008, Lisa Wagenitz explained: 'We want to provide young artists with the possibility of displaying their works in the square on a temporary basis.' And since 2009/2010 the KaM has organised a temporary exhibition of this nature on an annual basis, under the rubric *Junge Kunst am Moltkeplatz* ('Young Art at the Moltkeplatz').

The present writer was able to attend the ceremony marking the installation of one such work, being the second temporary exhibition of its kind, on Sunday, 10 October, 2010. The sculptress Leunora Salihu developed and produced the sculpture *Tube End* (its title originally in English) specifically for the Moltkeplatz. She graduated from the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, and holds a Wilhelm Lehmbruck scholarship awarded by the city of Duisburg. The regard with which the KaM initiative is now held was demonstrated by the presence of several local dignitaries, including the district Mayor Rolf Fliß, the city Deputy for Culture and Integration, Andreas Bomheuer, and Dr Sabine Maria Schmidt, the Curator for Contemporary Art at the famous Folkwang Museum. Dr Schmidt provided a sensitive and perceptive commentary on the work and its context. Popular responses among other guests as they stood around chatting in the soft autumn afternoon sunlight were that it looked 'rather like a dragon lying on

its side', 'like the bellows of some giant old camera', or 'like the ventilation system in an underground railway tunnel'. Whatever their interpretation, all seemed to find it fascinating. Over light refreshments in the nearby church hall after the ceremony one heard nothing but praise for the whole venture.

At the time of writing (Spring, 2012) the latest work displayed under the *Junge Kunst* scheme has been a work by the young Düsseldorf artist, Monika Stricker, with the title (in English) of *I know it is metaphor.* It consists of a glass case containing a bucket, the remains of a T-shirt and burnt-out matches. In the earth around are broken fragments of a mirror. A small plaque suggests a possible interpretation: the objects under glass are as though in a vacuum and the viewer is left to imagine what events they could have played a role in.

Consideration of the eight works on permanent display in the Moltkeplatz reflects the unique ways in which they relate to the setting chosen for them. As already suggested they share some characteristics with installation art and site-specific art. One way in which they clearly differ from these types of art is by being appreciated and cared for by the local residents. They have become extensions of people's homes and private lives: they interact with them on a daily basis as they would if the works were in their own living rooms. The first work installed in the park, which became a landmark for the district, Friedrich Gräsel's *Hannover Tor*, established the range of significances and relationships to the site which set the tone for the subsequent works.

Gräsel's work consists of a 'gateway' formed from a broad steel tube with twisted protrusions at either end where the arch meets the ground, one simple vertical and the other like a second fallen arch. Gräsel has said (quoted on the KaM webpage) that his gateway indicates imaginary paths and visitors can walk in and out of them. The viewer becomes both observer and actor (*Betrachter-Akteur*), and is drawn to stay there, and this, he believes, encourages communication. What kind of communication depends, presumably, on the viewer.

Arriving from the direction of the main railway station in Essen, the first work one is likely to notice on the Moltkeplatz is Lutz Fritsch's *Ein·Stand* (1990): it confronts you on a traffic island at the entrance to the square. The title plays with possible associations of the two words which can also be perceived as one word. It has been rendered wittily in English on the KaM website as 'Mono·Pole' by the professional translator and resident of the Moltkeplatz, Mr Alan

Miles. It is one of the easiest of the eight works to describe, for it consists of a tall slender pole, the bottom half of which is painted orange and the top half blue. Of all the permanent works on display this one comes closest to the concept of 'site-specific' art. The sculptor himself has referred to it in such terms as '*ortsbezogen*' ('related to the location'). It was provided for that particular location and developed from the nature of that particular location. The location is a kind of no-man's land: a traffic island between roadways. The lower orange part of the pole symbolises the dynamic movement of the traffic. But above there is peace and a sense of space: represented by the colour blue. The sculpture and its location form a unity, standing together (one of the possible interpretations of the title).

Each of the eight permanent works is unique and owes nothing to any of the others (though it must be said that this is not necessarily true of the temporary installations: Leunora Salihu's *Tube End* does seem to take a cue from the nearby *Hannover Tor*). Christa Feuerberg's untitled work, described simply as 'work on the ground, made of wood and lead' (*Bodenarbeit Holz/Blei*) of 1990, was intended, she says on the KaM website, to reflect whatever the individual associates with it. It consists of fragments of wood and lead laid together on the grass. She herself associates it with a broken dance floor. Hannes Forster's *Eine echte falsche Geschichte* ('A Genuine Fake Story') is another 'site-specific' work. On first seeing it one can be forgiven for thinking that it is an enclosure for waste disposal bins: an enclosure defined by low brick walls with several entrances. In fact its axis, if extended, crosses that of the church opposite and its general plan resembles that of a church nave if seen from above. Ulrich Rückriem's untitled wedge-shaped sculpture, made up of four stacked blocks of Anröchter dolomite stone has stood near the north-eastern corner of the Moltke-platz since 1983. With time it appears to be gradually blending in with its surroundings. Gloria Friedmann's *Denkmal* ('Monument'), constructed in 1990, is one of the most eye-catching works on display: a red concrete wall with a dead tree embedded in it. It can be interpreted in many ways, but it is certainly making a forceful statement about the relationship between the man-made world and Nature.

Ansgar Nierhoff's *Paarweise* ('In Pairs'), erected in 1988, consists of two unequal steel posts standing back to back. The outward faces display profiles that clearly existed only internally before one pole was split into two. Heinz Breloh's sculpture *Lebensgrösse* ('Lifesize')

was produced in a unique way. Following a precisely defined choreography he used his whole body to interact with a slowly solidifying mound of plaster, embracing it, hugging it, pushing it and otherwise affecting it with his body. Finally the resulting object was cast in bronze.

The members of KaM may not ponder the deeper esoteric significances of the works as they pass them going about their daily tasks or glimpse them while adjusting the curtains or blinds at their windows, but they clearly look upon them with the concerned gaze of the guardian. It must be said however that not everyone in the neighbourhood appreciates their constantly watchful eyes. There are the dog-owners for example, with whom the members of the KaM have developed quite an earnest feud, though an outsider visiting can perceive the amusing side of it all. The green sward where the eight sculptures are installed is just too inviting for those inhabitants of the Moltkeviertel who own dogs: it is extensive enough for the animals to have a good run around while their owners chat and smoke together and discuss all those little things dearest to a dog-owner's heart. But dogs being dogs, they also take the opportunity to relieve themselves, and upright structures which humans may consider to be works of art are just upright structures to dogs. Apart from soiling the masterpieces the dogs also render the green sward unsuitable as a playground for young children. The dog-owners have protested their right to walk their pets there (one envisions the founding of a 'Dogs on the Moltkeplatz' pressure group), and it is even featured on a website for dog-owners. The KaM has been fighting to have the Moltkeplatz declared a 'dog-free area', arguing that there is a suitable though smaller area of grass where the dogs can run around to their hearts content just the other side of the nearby railway line. But the dog owners consider that area to be inconvenient and too limited. When the present writer visited the Moltkeplatz in 2010 the feud was still going strong. Perhaps a workable solution would be to invite an artist to add a ninth 'site-specific' installation, which could double as a 'canine convenience'. The latest news is that the local council have told both parties to try and coexist harmoniously, and one of the residents has informed the writer that the dog-owners seem to have become 'a little more conscientious about clearing up after their pets'. But now a new feud is developing between those who do and those who do not want to set up a *pétanque* pitch in the area.

Recently there occurred another crisis in the annals of the KaM. In the spring of 2011 the news spread that the owners of the *Hannover Tor*

planned to remove it from the square and put it up for auction. The members of the KaM had to act fast. Trying to modify the conditions of the charter of the KaM would have been too lengthy a process, so they set up a separate association specifically to protect the sculptures. In August, 2011, they started asking for donations to purchase the work (Volker Wagenitz has informed the writer that it is 'a five-digit euro amount'). Apart from the members of the Moltkeviertel several prestigious individuals and organisations contributed, including Berthold Beitz, the head of the Krupp Charitable trust, as well as several local companies. Just after Christmas, 2011, the writer received an email from Volker Wagenitz, in which he proudly announced: 'Now our association is the proud owner of a major piece of art ... making sure that it stays at its place.'

Finally, continuing to look on the positive side, it is clear that most inhabitants and the people of Essen in general are very happy with the accomplishments of the KaM group. Signs have been erected to direct visitors to the area and it was included in guides and brochures for the festivities during the year (2010) when Essen, symbolically for the whole Ruhr region, was 'European Cultural Capital'. Not only the press and the media but various city administrative bodies now regularly cite the KaM project as an example of what can be achieved through cooperation between local government, artists and local residents. And rightly so: groups of like-minded individuals in other communities, in other countries, would do well to attempt to follow the KaM example and invite artists to display in their own public spaces. Most contemporary art is still regarded with suspicion and even scorn by many who perceive it as belonging to a world of elitist and obscurantist taste remote from their own. Such initiatives are also of value to artists, inspiring them to ensure that their work actually communicates with those people who care enough to act as custodians for what they spend their lives producing.

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Contemporary Review

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The magazine, now in its third century of continuous publication, was founded in 1866 as a forum for experts to discuss a broad spectrum of topics. *Contemporary Review*, which is published in Oxford, specialises in international affairs, politics, the environment, current literary issues and the arts and is read in over 60 countries. There is a quarterly review section in which on average 120 new titles are reviewed or noticed. Writers, who have first-hand knowledge of their subjects, come from round the world. Each issue has 136 pages and is free from advertisement. The magazine's editorial independence is guaranteed through the support of the non-profit making Contemporary Review Trust.

Contemporary Review was founded by a distinguished gathering of English intellectuals, anxious to promote intelligent and independent discussion about the great issues of their day. A century later it merged with its even older rival, *Fortnightly Review*, which had been founded by Anthony Trollope. The great names of Victorian England were among the contributors. They included: W. E. Gladstone, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Cardinal Manning, Anthony Trollope, Herbert Spencer, Oscar Wilde and J. M. Barrie. In recent decades there have been articles by well known figures in the academic, literary and political worlds, including A. L. Rowse and Stephen Spender as well as important MPs, peers and retired diplomats. Our aim remains to provide a platform where experts in one field may address intelligent people in other fields.

Most contributions are commissioned, but the journal has limited scope for articles, 3000 words in length, from freelance writers with authoritative knowledge of their subjects. Material will be returned only if accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope (in the UK) or the requisite amount in International Reply Coupons (for contributions from elsewhere). We do not undertake to review unsolicited books and cannot enter into correspondence or discussion about them.

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