

Seven Questions to Karsten Konrad

1. Do you have a clear idea about your compositions right from the outset, or do the works come into being while you are working on them? First of all there is a somewhat diffuse idea, a hazy mental picture, and right from the start I decide on certain colours or materials. The composition arises then through doing, through the internal dialogue between the parts. As in everything the beginning is what's most difficult. The first elements that I piece together must set sparks flying and create the certainty that it will keep on going and become interesting.

2. How do you find your material? Where for instance did you get the delivery bike that you have used in your piece *Long John*? I don't buy my materials in normal shops, but find them on the streets, at junk markets, in second-hand shops or in the remainders department at DIY stores. Back in my studio I have a well-organised storage system for my materials, which I have collected over the last twenty years. They come from different places all around the world and date from the middle of the twentieth century onward. My material can be anything that has a shape and colour. I employ the original colour without any changes, just as I find it. My ideal when it comes to gathering materials is the beachcomber who picks up interesting flotsam and jetsam: all kinds of stuff that has been washed up on shore or abandoned in town. The delivery bike *Long John* is a classic Danish model that I was familiar with from my trips to Scandinavia. I found one on a Danish second-hand page that happened to be close to a ferry port, and loaded it onto a truck on my way back from an exhibition in southern Sweden. In point of fact I bought the bike for practical reasons. But once it was in my studio next to the sculpture I was making right at the time, I hit on the idea of amalgamating the two. In that way I solved the problem of the pedestal, which is always tricky for sculptors: the question of whether the pedestal belongs to the sculpture or is merely the go-between for the space. I could now drive the piece directly from my studio into the gallery space where it was exhibited for the first time.

3. Does the fact that your materials are old, that they have signs of use and a history, have any bearing on what you do? I feel very drawn to the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, which extols the beauty of weather-beaten things. I like it when materials have a story to them, have lived. Not knowing just how old the materials are introduces a further puzzle into my works. In addition, certain surfaces only appeared in certain periods, such as for instance a special seventies kitchen orange or a fifties kidney table yellow. Traces of use are fine because they show that the material has been touched and used. But there again I also like sparkly new industrial surfaces.

4. You recycle as it were material that others have discarded and thrown away. Do your works level a kind of critique at our throwaway and affluent society? The idea of recycling meets up there with the principle behind alchemy: making gold from dirt. Which also contains the insight that all materials are already in circulation. Recycling has been my work principle since my student days, when I made sculptures using above all car parts from scrap heaps. So much is discarded nowadays and at the same time so much new stuff is produced. There is the possibility for me as an artist of taking particular things out of the commodity cycle and feeding them into the art cycle via my studio. There is an energy if not love in these cast-offs, and I am able to redefine their commodity value by transforming them.

5. Have you ever thought of exhibiting an *objet trouvé* as a readymade without in any way reworking it, or is that out of the question for you? Even though I own a lot of *objets trouvés* that are more interesting in formal terms than a urinal, since Duchamp that is scorched earth for me. And I cannot keep up with Ai Weiwei, for instance, and the way he presents old furniture, trees and so on, even if I find it appealing. Readymades like that are more a source of inspiration for me than things that prompt me to

make a readymade myself. The simple translocation – away from the street into the museum – is not enough for me. My work requires the detour via my studio, because I am interested in the transformation and putting together heterogeneous materials.

6. Where does the affinity to architecture come from that is evident in a lot of your works? Architecture has been one of my passions ever since my childhood. When I was about eight my parents built a house and my mother, as a “would-be architect”, involved me early on in her decisions, particularly about the interior. So my response to spaces and architecture is simultaneously emotional and analytic, and to this day I attempt to transform spatial situations along my lines through interventions, which is to say through my sculptures. One option for me after leaving school was to study architecture, and during my art studies at the Universität der Künste Berlin I had more to do with the architects than with the artists; I found the course for the budding architects extremely interesting, but the professional realities that awaited them were very disillusioning. A strong impulse for me came with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the accompanying fact that after five years in West Berlin I received a second half to the city which was both familiar yet very foreign. As a result, the nineties in Berlin gave me the chance to use all the empty spaces that appeared in so many ways in a sculptural, installational manner. This was followed at the turn of the millennium by an intensive look at East German modernism, above all in the form of model sculptures that document the disappearance of top grade GDR buildings as “monuments”. It is very frustrating how Berlin has dealt with this historic chance for urban space over the last 25 years. The uninspiring investment architecture that has sprung up all over with its interchangeable facades is living witness to this. Architecture comes before art, but without art, or an understanding of it, architecture is nothing.

7. Your works have very catchy titles – for instance the name of the largest work in the exhibition is *Big in Japan*. What role does the title play? It’s an extra and serves above all communication with gallerists, collectors and curators. Ideally it opens up a new field of associations for me, is as pithy as possible, and comes from a different realm of cultural production, as for instance a song title or a line from a film, or comes from literature. English lends itself very nicely to my titles because of its significance for pop culture. But I’ve also used French, Italian, and even Korean titles. They are not supposed to help view the work itself, but rather to create further confusion. I want to keep the readings of my sculptures as open as possible. *Big in Japan* is a somewhat kitschy song that the band Alphaville released in 1984. There is a chunk of furniture in the lower right corner that reminds me of traditional Japanese architecture. You can even see a free flower sticker on a kitchen top beside it, an icon of the seventies and eighties that came attached to every bottle of Pril washing up liquid until the year the song was recorded. Apart from which, the work is also pretty big.