

Press Release

Ursula Sax – Dancing into Space – The Geometric Ballet and other (Performative) Projects

The occasion of this exhibition is the premiere of a new version of Ursula Sax' *Geometric Ballet (Homage to Oskar Schlemmer)* on September 6 at Radialsystem Berlin. It is the beginning of a series of performances in several cities, which may be experienced on many stages around the world, according to the wish of the artist, author of these lines and initiator of this enterprise. The accompanying exhibition is designed to trace the development of the Geometric Ballet as an important and unique ensemble and work of art within the multi-faceted oeuvre of the sculptor Ursula Sax, and to follow the stages and impulses that have led to its emergence.

When preparing the exhibition *Model and Reality* on occasion of the artist's 80th birthday in 2015, and immersing myself in her multiform and top-class work on the basis of examples from her oeuvre and the literature, the discoveries I made became more and more frequent, including, of course, the special highlight: the *Geometric Ballet* from 1992 (as staged at the Braunschweig State Theatre, secondary stage). Please compare the short video on YouTube: *Ursula Sax – Geometrisches Ballett – Vision einer Neuaufführung* from 2018.

This exhibition will illustrate the numerous factors, development results of her sculptural work, and impressions of her extensive journeys, which have paved the way for the creation of the *Geometric Ballet*.

Evolution of the Artist's Sculptural Work – Expansion into Space

The early and initially blocky (core) sculpture (cf. illustration in *Modell & Wirklichkeit*, [M&W] pp. 11 and 27) was liberated and began to conquer the surrounding space, expanding into it more and more elegantly. Already in the period from 1970 to 1974 Ursula Sax made drafts for large sculptures and realized small sculptures which, radiating from a trunk-like centre, kept expanding into space like tentacles (design drawing for *Brasilia* 1970, M&W, p. 50/51), or as large sculptures (cf. *Entwurf einer begehbaren Großplastik* 1974, M&W, pp. 60–65). Especially this hitherto non-realized draft (maybe too daring for the federal authorities involved in the competition for the layout of the park grounds surrounding the Ministerial Buildings in Bonn) is characterized by six 6-metre-high curved walls, horizontally cut open in the upper part, with the thus created surfaces/shapes protruding with slight antagonistic movements like pathways into the green spaces delimited by the rising walls, like a dancing ensemble traversing and enlivening the predefined space. The timelessness and vigour of its design gives rise to the hope that it might come up to be realized one day, this time in yellow concrete. (Art) history has given precedence to another master working with the initially planned material of iron/steel,

although he became famous only 5 years later as the creator of *Curves*. Surely, however, it would have been an unforgettable experience to dwell in the spatiality of Ursula Sax' sculptural ensemble, and feel its energy and contemplative calm! (author's note: an ideal place would be the just created grounds between the Berlin Philharmonic Hall and the planned Museum of the 20th Century!)

Looping, the queen of urban sculptures in Berlin, keeps exemplifying this expansion into space since 1992 (M&W, pp. 128–131). Its bold and dynamic movements may also be described as 'a line's dance into space'.*

The creative development of her sculpture into space, her enthusiasm for the human geometry, also the basic shapes of the body, as a starting point for abstraction, have consequently resulted in the creation of the *Geometric Ballet*.

Travel Impressions

The artist's early encounters in Italy in the 1960ies (i.e. during her scholarship at the Villa Romana in Florence in 1963) , including centuries-old choreographed and conducted popular games as i.e. the Equestrian Games in Siena (*Palio di Siena*) or the exhilarating carnival processions in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970ies, have had a lasting impact.

Ursula Sax has translated these experiences 1974 into drawings as for example those of the *Carioca* series. The harmonious interplay of form, movement and masses uniting in rhythmically moving structures in space have left their traces in the submatrix of her memory, later reflected in her own festive productions and performances.

Participatory Sculpture

The artist's participatory sculptures from the 1970ies are still an important group of works (M&W, pp. 71, 90, 91, 126/127, 139, 140–145, 173–175), including the possibility of active intervention and change of the artwork by a third person. The example presented at the exhibition from the series *Cosmometrien* illustrates this flexible nature in the outer appearance of her hanging sculpture through the possibility of suspending it from (theoretically) all kinds of hinge points and thus individually effect the shape to be created (pp. 173–175).

Guest Professorship in a Stage Design Class

In 1985/86 Ursula Sax was invited by Prof. Martin Rupprecht to attend his costume and stage design class for one semester. There she became acquainted with crinolines that would stand on their own, reinforced by steel strips. She promptly procured strip steel and began experimenting. The first aerial dresses were created which were used later in the *Geometric Ballet* (cf. on YouTube: *Ursula Sax – Geometrisches Ballett – Vision einer Neuaufführung*).

Performative Action and Reoccupying Public Space

As early as 1987 and together with her artist friend Klaus Steinmann, Ursula Sax has staged a performance with a participatory approach on an open stage, a ball court in Berlin-Wedding, on the occasion of the Day of the Foreign Fellow Citizen (M&W, p. 126/127). Geometric shapes made of coloured plywood boards were used by the actors and printed fabric fastened to wooden laths defined the space of action: the stage. Added to this were the artist's knitted masks from 1980 that were worn on the actors' heads, generating a surreal spectacle. The outcome was a dynamic, diverse and colourful play.

Survived has a small series of sketches, which the artist must have created in dozens for the initiation, preparation and execution of performances, demonstrating the artist's skills as a sculptor and choreographer. Stage directions are noted on the sheets, reflecting the same significance as the drawings themselves (M&W, p. 124/125).

Oskar Schlemmer

Ursula Sax' early encounter with the work of Oskar Schlemmer, closest friend of the most important German post-war painter Willi Baumeister, and her actual teacher in the early years at the Academy in Stuttgart – even if she was no regular member of his class – has over the decades become part of her memory as a valuable experience. Nevertheless, it must be said that from a formal point of view, Ursula Sax' *Geometric Ballet* has little in common with Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (*Triadisches Ballett*). Actually, both have in common only the fact that since 1912 he has presumably been the first one to stage 'danceable' sculptures in a choreographed play (in 1916 and premiere in 1922). Due to the circumstances of the time, and through conscious use of the term 'ballet' after the experience of Sergej Diaghilev's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (danced in 1912 by Vaslav Nijinsky), which has revolutionized classical ballet, Schlemmer wanted to shift emphasis towards visual arts or expand the classical concept of sculpture.

For Ursula Sax that was incentive enough to bring together her previous sculptural experiences and create a performative *gesamtkunstwerk* adapted for the stage.

Moreover, the artist has repeatedly staged performances with enthusiastic amateurs in the public urban space, thereby referring back to choreographed parades ritualized all over the world and in all cultures, celebrated on all kinds of (mostly religious) occasions as the Banishing of Winter/Welcoming of Spring or Thanksgiving.

Performance *gegeneinanderüber*

On the occasion of the Lipsius anniversary in 1996 Ursula Sax, professor of sculpture in Dresden at that time, has staged in the still unrestored octagonal exhibition hall (the former library in the Lipsius building) of the Academy of Fine Arts the performance *gegeneinanderüber* with numerous actors. A highlight like 10 mountaineers abseiling from the dome would, due to numerous safety regulations, presumably not be possible today. The first large public presentation of the documentary will take place on September 21st, 2019 at 4.00 p.m. in the Dalcroze Hall of the Festspielhaus Hellerau, and the *Geometric Ballet* will be the final highlight in the programme of the Appia Festival, together with a sub-exhibition to the one at Semjon Contemporary.

For Ursula Sax the human being is the measure when creating her sculptures, either on the basis of the human body geometry transformed into abstract shapes, or presented in relation to its area of activity, which continually redefines her small or large sculptures, as the perspective and relations between sculpture and observer in this process keep changing as well. With this participatory approach the energy and uniqueness of her works also bear witness to her orientation towards the human dimension: the dance sculptures of the *Geometric Ballet* rely on the liveliness of the actors that operate them. The limitations of their basic shapes are thereby experienced as challenging by the actors. On the one hand, their movements are determined by the shapes of the costumes, and on the other, Ursula Sax keeps challenging the actors to get creative and enliven her works, thereby establishing a certain relation between these and the surrounding space. She also wishes them to make use of music.

The artist's sovereignty and freedom are marked by her efforts to release her sculptures (in this case dance sculptures) into the world and awaken them to new life with the help of other protagonists.

The present, one-and-a-half-hour stage performance is the result of the work of choreographer Karja Erfurth and team, accompanied benevolently and critically by Ursula Sax and myself. Isolde

Matkey of tristan Production | Management | Event have produced the new version of the Geometric Ballet on our behalf in cooperation with HELLERAU – Europäisches Zentrum. Our thanks go to everyone who participated!

Semjon H. N. Semjon, Berlin, May – August 2018

*In this context it should not be forgotten to mention the large yellow hanging sculpture *RaummesserUX35* in the Albertinum in Dresden, unfortunately destroyed in the meantime (M&W, pp. 168–171). However, this time it is the other way round: the original courtyard was roofed for protecting the museum's stockrooms after the large flood in Dresden in 2002. As a consequence, an enormous interior space (entrance hall) was created, falling somewhat out of line with its missing angles, strongly sloping floor and lack of orientation towards the sky. The experienced sculptor Ursula Sax, however, familiar with the spatial conditions of the place, was able to master this imbalance with her 35 m long, 5.5 m high but only 5 m thick idiosyncratic disc sculpture!

Reference: *Ursula Sax – Modell & Wirklichkeit*, published by Semjon Contemporary, 2015, 192 pages with numerous illustrations and contributions by Jan Maruhn, Mark Gisbourne and Semjon H. N. Semjon; abbreviated in the text as *M&W*