

ANITA KONTREC >  
artist's portfolio

# CONTENTS

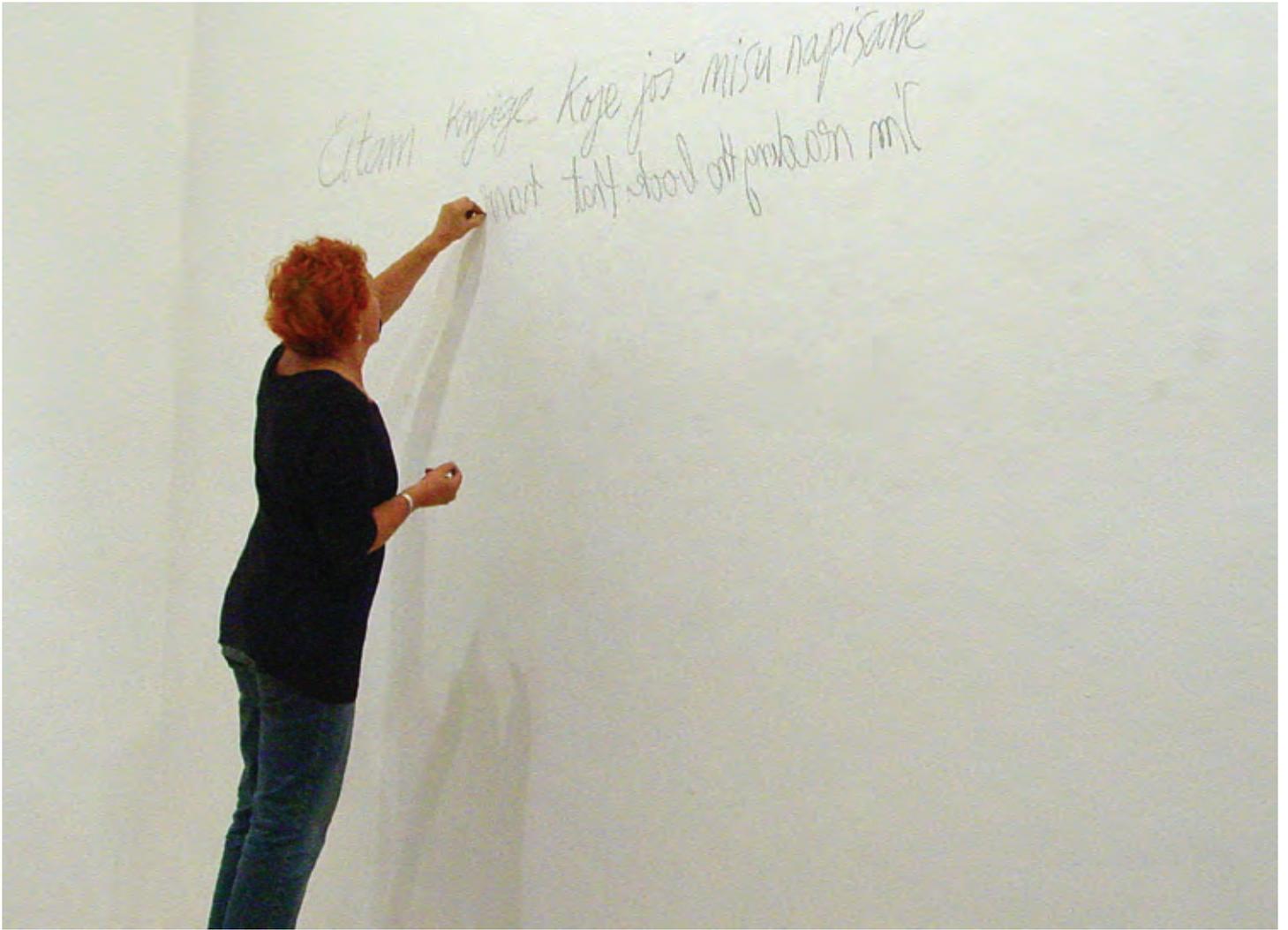
- 3 > CONCEPTUAL WORKS WITH TEXT
- 10 > SCULPTURES
- 19 > COLOUR, ENERGY, LIGHT
- 29 > SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATIONS
- 36 > HOUSES AND DREAMS (2017)  
SCRIPT AND ARCHITECTURE (2018-2019)  
SHAPES OF SILENCE (2019-2020)
- 45 > BIOGRAPHY, SELECTED EXHIBITIONS
- 48 > ART CRITICS AND HISTORIANS ABOUT  
ANITA KONTREC WORK

# CONCEPTUAL WORKS WITH TEXT

(from mid-80-ies till today)

“To Anita Kontrec writing is a means for understanding and interpreting the world, as well as a medium that has meaning, a pictorial quality, material and magic significance. Letters and ideograms express different layers of meaning which are manifested in paper, plaster, clay, stone, bronze, gold, and synthetic resin. These media have both material presence and immaterial meaning. Kontrec’s pictures with writing /Schriftbilder/ are layered images – *palimpsests* which display the simultaneity and multiple facets of language, writing and communication.”

Dr. Peter Lodermeier, art historian, Bonn  
preface to the catalogue  
*Recall Atlantis*, 2006.



"I AM READING THE BOOKS WHICH HAVE NOT YET BEEN WRITTEN"  
RECALL ATLANTIS, KARAS GALLERY, ZAGREB, 2006

Text  
Text  
Text  
Text  
Text  
Text  
Text  
Text



RIGHTWRONG, ARTHELLWEG EDITION. SOEST/KÖLN, 1990/2004.



"TOWERS OF BABEL", ZAGREB, 2016

Retrospective KRUŽNI TOK /KREISVERKEHR / ROUNDABOUT,  
"Prsten" Gallery; Meštrović Pavillion, Zagreb, 2016



"WARTEN SIE, SIE WERDEN PLATZIERT" - INSTALLATION, LEIPZIG - SPINNEREI, 2013



"CALLIGRAPHIC LANDSCAPES" - INSTALLATION, LEIPZIG - SPINNEREI, 2013.

# SCULPTURES

(from mid-80-ies till today)

Regardless of the grade of abstraction, her grey cement sculptures, comprising the whole potential of possible associations, are still very close to natural, living forms. Anita Kontrec knows how to transpose big dimensions to smaller ones; or, in other words – make sculptures of smaller dimensions appear monumental.

Anita Kontrec sees her artistic position in the context of the Croatian sculptural tradition, which is in Germany not well-known. We may expect that her work could arouse a greater interest in Croatian sculpture.

Dr. Gerhard Kolberg, senior curator for sculpture,  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne  
From the opening speech of the exhibition  
*Earth-War-Ashes*, Kölner Rathaus, January 1992.



EXHIBITION: ERDE-KRIEG-ASCHE  
CITY HALL, KÖLN, 1992





"HOUSES OF MEMORY", LUDWIG FORUM FÜR INTERNATIONALE KUNST,  
AACHEN, 1993





DETAIL OF RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION *KRUŽNI TOK/*  
*ROUNDABOUT* IN PRSTEN GALLERY, ZAGREB, 2016



"BAUSTELLE BYBLOS", 1993/2016



"SUN GATE", 1993

"Anita Kontrec knows how to transpose big dimensions to smaller forms; in other words: achieve that sculptures of small dimensions appear monumental."

Dr. Gerhard Kolberg,  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne



"SUN GATE", SCHLOSSHOTEL, LERBACH, BERGISCH GLADBACH, 2004



"FREE SOUL", 2003

Skulptur Draussen, Cologne, 2003



"KAILASH", 2003  
Skulptur Draussen, Cologne, 2003

# COLOUR, ENERGY, LIGHT

The touching point of painting and sculpture

Anita Kontrec believes that we first perceive colour and only then shape. This is why she foregrounds colour in her picture-objects. She does not use canvas for her painting because for her and her artistic temperament (as a sculptor who has worked on sculpture for over two decades – meaning work on the volume and structures of material) canvas lacks the dimension of space.

Her picture objects are made of synthetic resin, which is a very demanding and sensitive material and technology. She mixes high quality pigments directly with many layers of synthetic resin. She polishes the hardened surface of her objects many times until she gets the right texture, colour, and surface quality. The result are vibrant, multi-layered voluminous objects which radiate the energy of colours into space. For Anita Kontrec, it is essential that her “picture objects” are three dimensional *bodies of colour* which establish a dynamic and at the same time contemplative dialogue with people and the space itself.

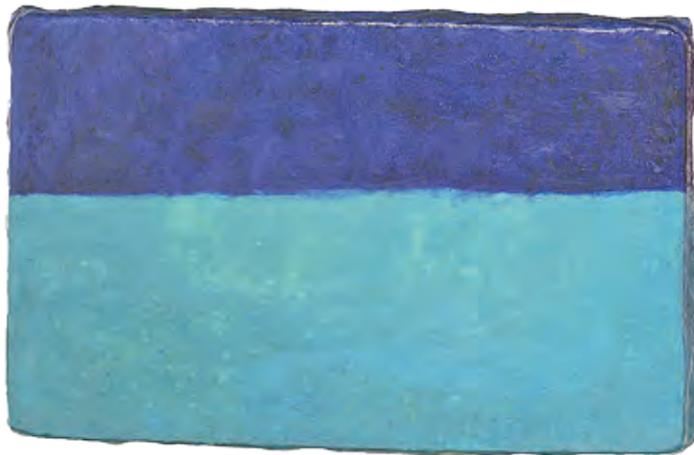
Jürgen Kisters, Art critic, Cologne



"STRIPES - HORIZONS", 2010



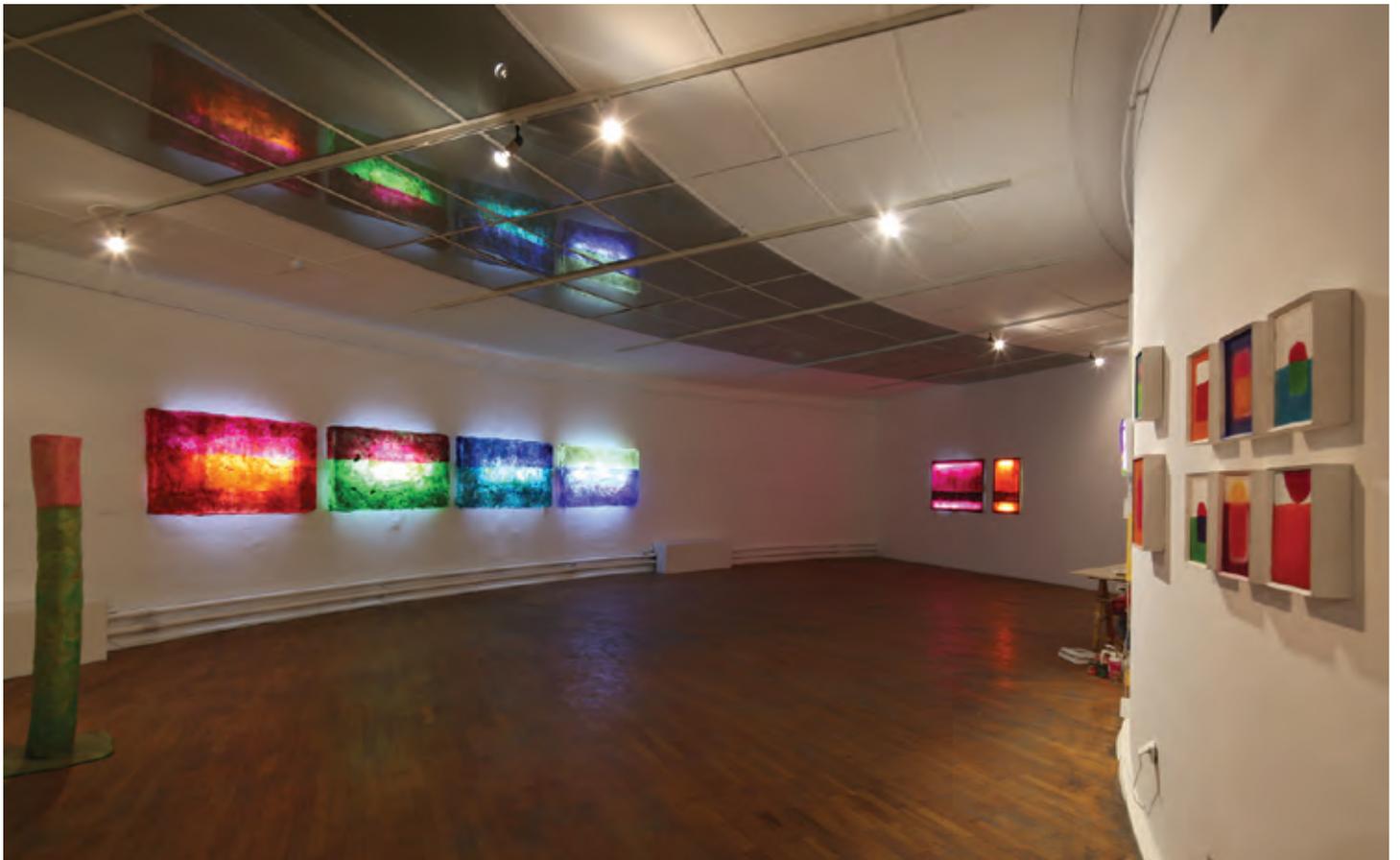
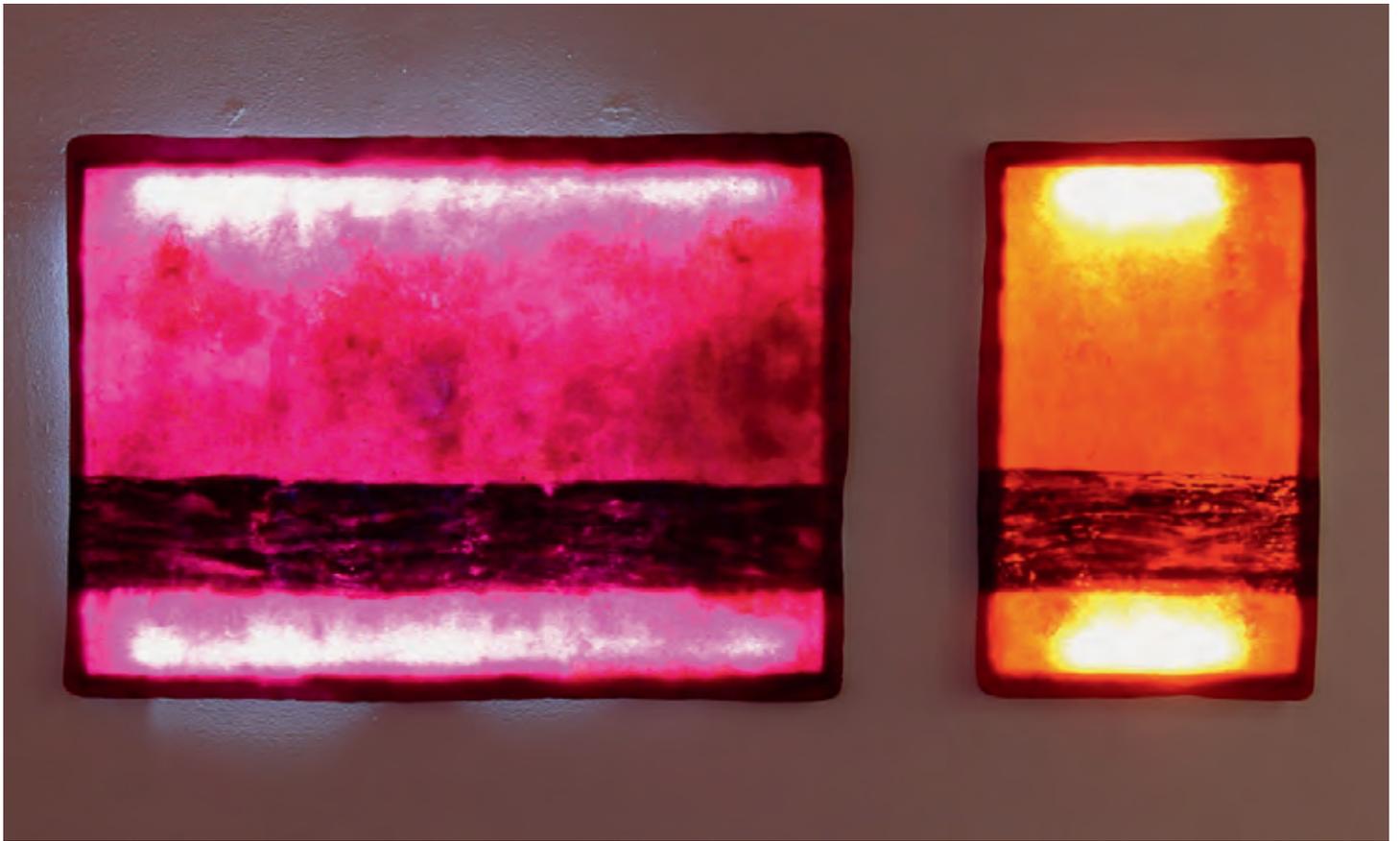
"PARADISE LANDSCAPES", 2006



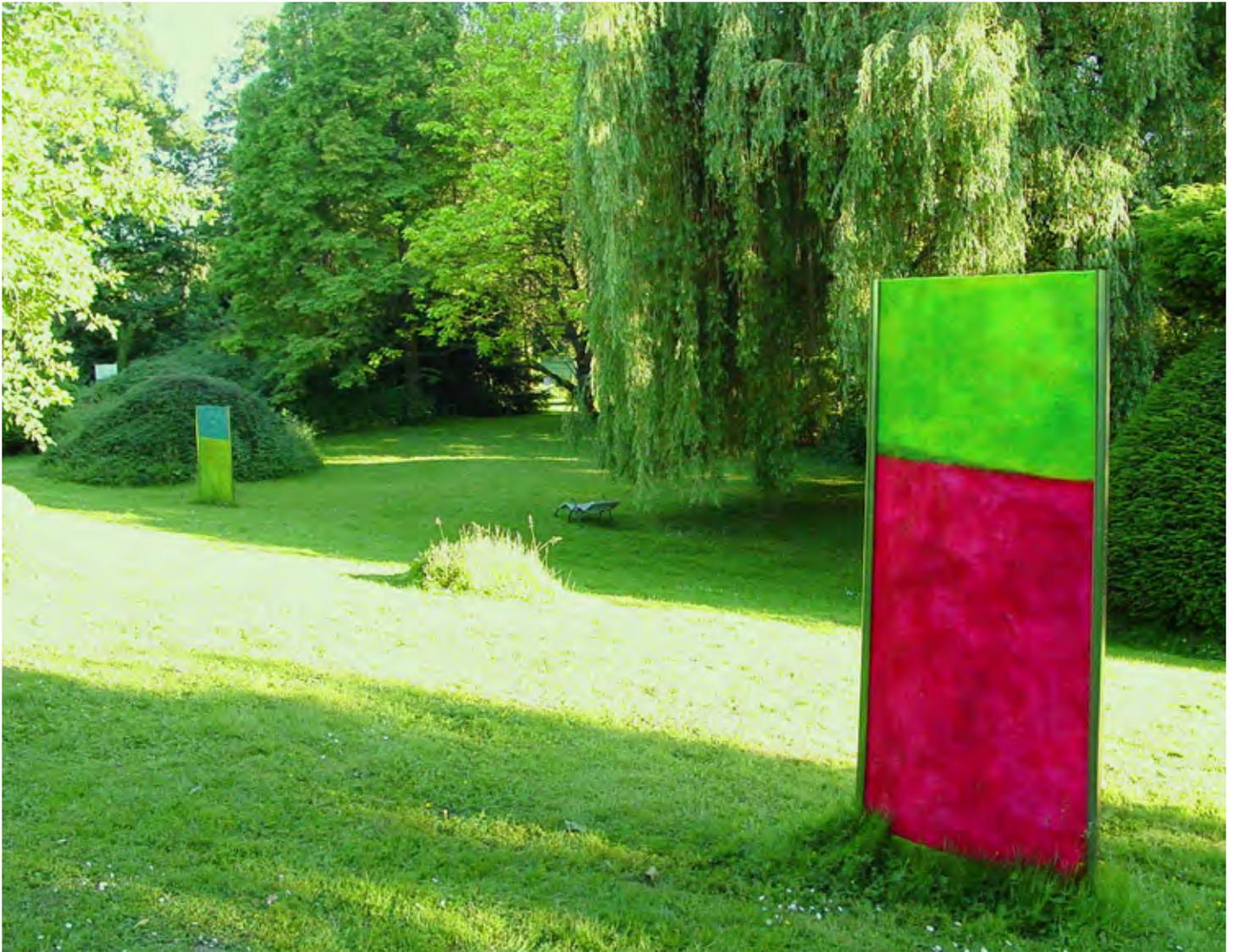
"ELEMENTS", 2004



"TRACE OF LIGHT I", 2016



"TRACE OF LIGHT II", 2016  
Retrospective, "Prsten" Gallery, Zagreb, 2016



"GARDEN PICTURES", 2012





"STELE", 2004

Skulptur Park Schwyz, Gallery Felchlin, 2004



DETAIL OF RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION *KRUŽNI TOK/*  
*ROUNDAABOUT* IN PRSTEN GALLERY, ZAGREB, 2016



"SEVENTH LAYER OF HEAVEN", 2006

# SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATIONS

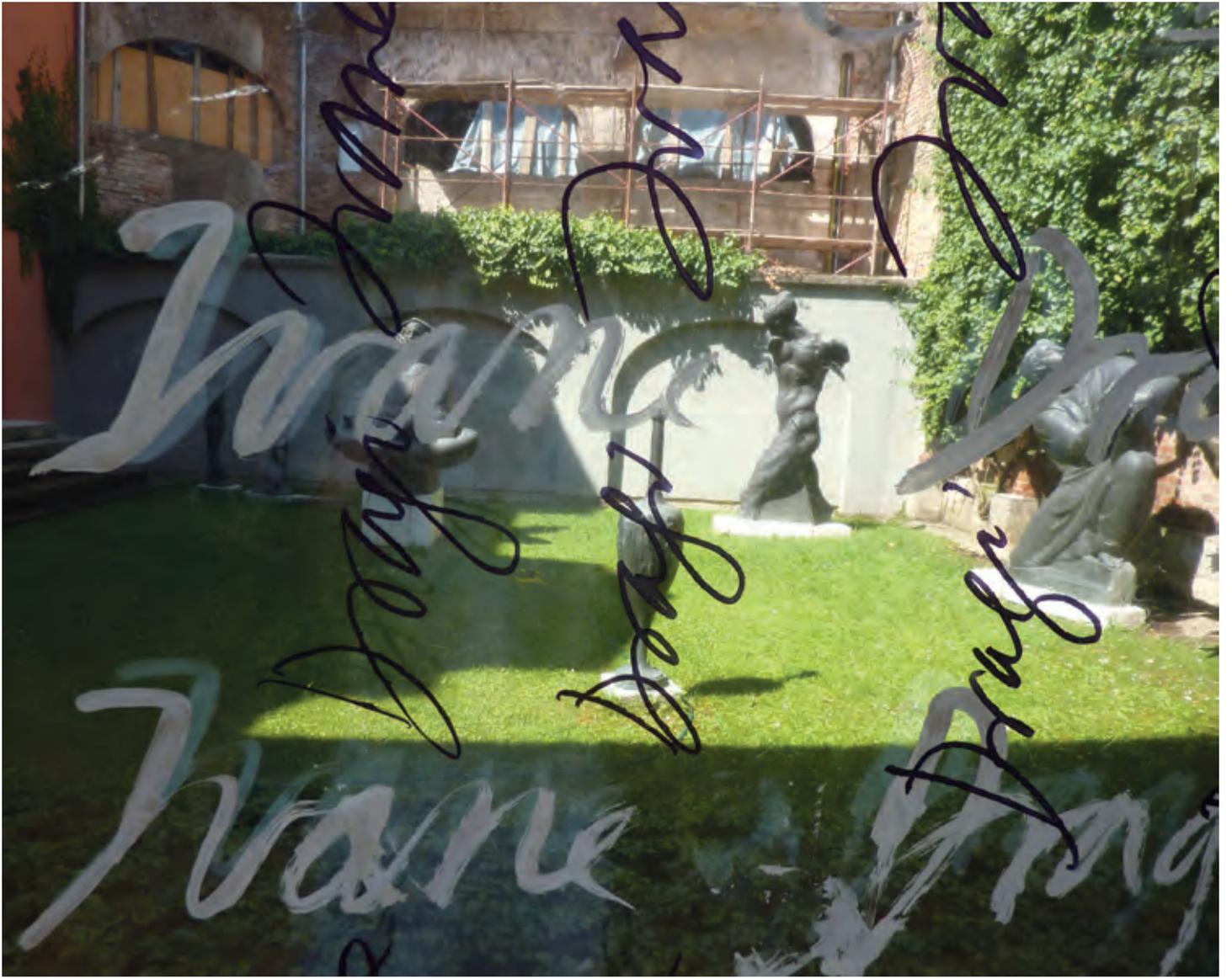
My site specific installations are personal dialogues with the atmosphere, character and message of each individual exhibition space.

I am particularly inspired by contemporary architecture and its new light and space constallations to which I am responding with my site specific installations and visual interventions with colours.

A.K.



"WINDOWS - PILLARS OF LIGHT", ZAGREB, KARAS GALLERY, 2006



"DEAR IVAN", ATELIJER MEŠTROVIĆ, ZAGREB, 2010



"RUŽA'S CHILDREN", ATELIJER MEŠTROVIĆ, ZAGREB, 2010



FLIES STRIPES WITH CALLIGRAPHIC DRAWINGS AND QUOTATIONS FROM THE BOOK  
"PILLOWBOOK OF SEI SHONAGON" (IN ENGLISH AND CROATIAN),  
LEIPZIG, ARTIST RESIDENCY ONE-SIDED STORY, 2013



VIDEO DANCE PERFORMANCE PROJECTED ON A WALL OR A SCREEN, OVER THE STRIPES HANGING FROM THE CEILING, LEIPZIG, ARTIST RESIDENCY ONE-SIDED STORY, 2013

<https://vimeo.com/65493334>



"PILLOWS", 2010

# HOUSES AND DREAMS

Why Houses? Why Dreams?

Because we need both to survive.

When does a house become a home?

When it gives you a sense of acceptance. When it nourishes your soul and helps you grow. It is a place where you can open your heart and feel safe. It is like a second skin.

Houses and Dreams project is dealing with the topic of Home/Less/Ness and migrations. It is an international and interactive project consisting of a series of my solo and group exhibitions, art workshops and lectures.

It has started in March 2017 and so far has been presented in Croatia, Italy, Slovenia, Germany and United Kingdom.

A.K.



Houses and Dreams / Installation, Palazzo Mora - "Open Borders", Venice, 2017 (in the context of 57 Biennale Venezia)



Performance "Burning Houses" at the opening of the retrospective in "Prsten" Gallery, Zagreb, 2016



Installation "Zigurat", Dulwich College, London, 2017



"Noah's Arc", 2018

# ANITA KONTREC



## SCRIPT & ARCHITECTURE

May 10<sup>th</sup> – May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019

John David Mooney Foundation, 114 West Kinzie Street, Chicago

The exhibition is supported  
by Ministry of Culture  
of the Republic of Croatia.

[www.anita-kontrec.com](http://www.anita-kontrec.com)

[www.mooneyfoundation.org](http://www.mooneyfoundation.org)



Installation "I, who know the letters...", John David Mooney Foundation, Chicago, 2019.



"Fortresses", John David Mooney Foundation, Chicago, 2019.



SHAPES OF SILENCE, 2019/20.

Silence as a form of  
communication: in silence  
I can hear my own voice,  
and your voice too.



SHAPES OF SILENCE, 2019/20.

BIOGRAPHY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

# BIOGRAPHY



Anita Kontrec was born in Zagreb, Croatia, lives since 1989 in Cologne, Germany. She began her artistic career in 1986 with her first personal exhibition *Shapes of Memory* in Zagreb; in 1993 she elaborated the concept and organised interdisciplinary intermedial project *Recall Byblos* in cooperation with artists, scientists and publicists from Zagreb and Cologne presented in Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst in Aachen, Germany and Klovićevi dvori in Zagreb.

She had numerous solo and group exhibitions in Croatia, Germany and Austria. Her artworks are in several public and private collections in Croatia, Germany and Switzerland.

With her picture-objects Anita Kontrec researches the touching points between sculpture and painting as well as the effects of color and light in new spatial and light constelations of contemporary architecture. Achitecture, Writing and Colour are the major topics that she will continue to explore in her coming projects.

[www.anita-kontrec.com](http://www.anita-kontrec.com)

[anitakontrec@gmail.com](mailto:anitakontrec@gmail.com)

## PERSONAL EXHIBITIONS (SELECTION)

- 2019 Script and Architecture, John David Mooney Foundation, Chicago (with Ivan Meštrović)
- 2018 Healing Houses, Laval Nugent Gallery, Zagreb
- 2017 Project HOUSES AND DREAMS (Personal and Group Exhibitions):
- > Personal Structures - Palazzo Mora, Venice / Biennale Venezia, Italy
  - > Cologne, Galerie 49, Germany
  - > Umag - "Zid" , Foto Galerija Grin, Croatia
  - > Kopar - Project Forum Tomizza , Palazzo Gravisi, Slovenia
  - > London - Dulwich College, U.K
- 2016 Kružni tok / Kreisverkehr / Roundabout – Restrospective, Gallery "Prsten", Zagreb, Croatia
- 2014 Angels, Art Meneghello, Palmižana (with S. Goedecke), Croatia
- > Stripes & Dots, Gallery Arthur, Dubrovnik, Croatia
- 2012 ArcheFarb, Kunst in Technologie Park, B. Gladbach (with S. Goedecke), Germany
- > Art Project Be Happy Gallery, Haidakhan (with S. Goedecke), India
- 2010 Nevidljiva Ruža / Invisible Rose, Atelijer Meštrović, Zagreb, Croatia
- 2008 Schriftlandschaften / Scripts and Landscapes; Gallery Art Depot, Innsbruck, Austria
- 2007 More-Amore, Art Meneghello, Palmižana, Croatia
- 2006 Recall Atlantis, Galerija Karas, Zagreb, Croatia
- 2004 Bildobjekte und Skulpturen, Alexa.Jansen. Galerie, Cologne, Germany
- > Skulptur Draussen, Cologne, Germany
- 1992 Wars and Ashes (with S. Raff), Town Hall, Cologne, Germany
- 1990 Earth and Sound (with S. Raff), Eurozentrum, Cologne, Germany
- 1989 Fortresses, Galerija PM, Zagreb, Croatia
- > Landscapes, Galerija Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia
- 1989 Krajolici /Landscapes, Art Meneghello, Palmižana, Croatia
- 1988 Zeitraum, Galerie am Baseler Tor, Karlsruhe, Germany
- 1986 Shapes of Memory, Galerija DDT, Zagreb, Croatia

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS, PROJECTS, ART FAIRS

- 2017 Art Basel - Box Office Project/ International Airport Basel
- 2015 Black & White, Gallery Art Engert, Eschweiler, Germany
- 2014 Poesie in Glass – Kroatische Künstler in Österreich, Gallery BBKÖ, Klagenfurt, Austria
- 2013 One-Sided Story (Residency), Leipzig-Spinnerei, Germany (Mai Rundgang)
- > Gegensätze, Dresden, Staatsministerium der Justiz und für Europa
- 2009 Art Innsbruck, Galerie Art Depot, Austria
- 2006 art.fair, Alexa.Jansen.Galerie, Cologne, Germany
- 2005 art.fair, Alexa.Jansen.Galerie, Cologne, Germany
- > art frankfurt 2005, Alexa.Jansen.Galerie, Cologne, Germany
  - > flora(l) \_ neu, Alexa.Jansen.Galerie, Cologne, Germany
- 2004 Querblick, Stadtmuseum Cologne, Germany
- > Gallery Art Felchlin, Zürich – Skulpturenpark, Schwyz
- 2003 Sculpture project, Alexa.Jansen.Galerie, Cologne, Germany, Schloßhotel Lerbach, Germany
- > Water-Symposium, KKL, Lucerne, Switzerland
- 2002 Sculpture-Garden Sürth, Cologne, Germany
- > Sculpture exhibition, Dorn Garden, Elm
- 2001 Water-Symposium, Lucerne, Switzerland
- 1998 Das Meer – the Sea in contemporary Croatian art, DW, Cologne, Germany
- 1996 Dea Syria, Frauenmuseum, Bonn, Germany
- 1993 Original idea and concept for the project Recall Byblos, a cooperative project by artists and academics from Zagreb and Cologne, Aachen, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst; Co-edited the art book Recall Byblos
- 1993 Recall Byblos II, Klovićevi dvori, Zagreb, Croatia
- 1991 Kunst, Europa (Art, Europe), Siegen, Germany
- > IV. Triennial of Croatian sculpture, Gliptoteka HAZU, Zagreb, Croatia
- 1988 III. Triennial of Croatian sculpture, Gliptoteka HAZU, Zagreb, Croatia

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Stadtparkasse, Köln – Bonn, Germany
- Prüfungsverband der Deutschen Banken, Köln, Germany

ART CRITICS AND  
HISTORIANS ABOUT  
ANITA KONTREC WORK  
> SELECTED TEXTS

# RECALL ATLANTIS – A TIME OF SYNTHESIS, A TIME OF MEMORY

## Breaks and Continuity

*From dust to light!* This may be an apt description of Anita Kontrec's artistic development – a refinement from the rough earth material of her first sculptures to the light effects and delicate transparencies of her most recent works in synthetic resin. Yet such a brief formula would only describe the “vertical axis” of her maturing process, overlooking the fact that art and life are rarely so straightforward. The form of a spiral seems to be more appropriate to a lively development. For Kontrec as well, both her move to Cologne, Germany in 1989 and the war in her native country of Croatia marked a distinct break in her biography, causing an inevitable change in her artistic expression. Twenty years after her first personal exhibition in Zagreb, where she started her artistic career, her Zagreb exhibition RECALL ATLANTIS is a kind of summary of her artistic activity. With her newest works – three dimensional picture objects – she takes up her major artistic topics once again.

Gazing in the mirror of memory, it is surprising to see that current themes were already present in her earliest works. Anita Kontrec still treasures her early fireclay sculpture “The Snowhill for Sei Shonagon” made in 1987, which at first glance looks like a model of an ancient clay hut. This work possesses a subtle poetic quality, achieved by using a technique in which tiny glass fragments are inserted into white fireclay. Fired in a kiln, these fragments melted over the surface of the globe-shaped form of this small-sized sculpture. The theme of transparency, which plays a major role in this early work as well as in her recent works, shows a considerable degree of continuity and consistency in Kontrec's art. The artist prefers to use simple shapes, avoiding strict geometric forms. She is interested in organic shapes, in a kind of “Tender Geometry”, as she calls her sculpture series from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. The fireclay of her early sculptures was the material most suited to her clear forms, yet today a distinct feature of her artistic style. Fireclay is not very often used as a material for sculptures. The most prominent sculptor to ever use it was Eduardo Chillida, who hit upon the idea of working with it in the 1970s. Fireclay is mainly used to line furnaces. This material per se refers to elementary stages of human cultural development – the taming of fire for heating and

cooking, as well as for the technology of stone and brickmaking for building houses and cities.

These connotations of the material relate to the constant subjects in Kontrec's work. For her, art is not an isolated autonomous subject, but an activity that encompasses the multitude of human concerns we know as *culture*. The title of her work “The Snowhill for Sei Shonagon” is a reference to the moving story in the “Pillowbook” (“Makura no Soshi”), written by the famous Japanese writer and lady of the court Sei Shonagon, more than a thousand years ago and translated from English by Kontrec in 1987. Sei Shonagon, as well as works by W. Shakespeare, W. Blake and T.S Eliot are the main literary sources of inspiration for Kontrec, who also studied English literature and ethnology. In the text of the “Pillowbook”, the artificial snowhill is already viewed as a bridge between natural form and artefact, a kind of simple, temporary architecture. The sculpture “Snowhill” ties together three motifs of human housing – a theme which has occupied Kontrec from the very beginning of her work: *landscapes* both as a home and a foreign environment, as a threshold between nature and culture; *architecture* – houses and cities as living and working spaces; *language* as a “House of Being” (Heidegger). Elementary forms of landscape (such as flatlands, coasts and hills), and basic architectural forms (such as walls, portals and arches) comprised the most common elements in Kontrec's earlier works: archaic and archetypal forms of human environment as the basic vocabulary of her plastic expression, always bearing in mind the historic interrelations and anthropological connotations. These features remain constant in all stages of her later development, including the most recent objects: in her choice of artistic form, Kontrec always refers to universals, which she nevertheless feels to be a personal experience, responding to them in her own individual way.

Text, Texture, Context. Kontrec.

Working with language and writing – more or less permanent feature in her work – Kontrec devotes her interest to archaic forms. For inspiration, she turns to the Phoenician alphabet, pictograms of Glagolitic script (the first Slavic alphabet dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century), and to Sanskrit. To her, writing is a means for understanding and interpreting the world, as well

as a medium that has meaning, a pictorial quality, material and magic significance. Letters and ideograms express different layers of meaning which are manifested in paper, plaster, clay, stone, bronze, gold, and synthetic resin. These media have both material presence and immaterial meaning, a sound, a vaguely anthropomorphic figurativeness and plastic intensity. Kontrec's pictures with writing /Schriftbilder/ are layered images – *palimpsests* which display the simultaneity and multiple facets of language, writing and communication.

### Color = Energy

When Kontrec began using synthetic resin with pigments for her work in 2004, it seemed to be a real cut, almost a break in her work. Since that time she has been focusing on color as a new theme in her work. However this has not meant a shift from sculpture to painting, because she does not use color for merely painting flat surfaces. For her is color pure energy. In her picture-objects, the sculptural themes of space, volume, material and texture continue to play an important role.

### RECALL ATLANTIS – Dialectics of Utopia

Deeply rooted in our culture is the knowledge that even the most successful and apparently ideal civilisations are threatened by demise. Atlantis as an immemorial mythological place, and in Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis" (1626) as futuristic model of social utopia, stands here for a symbolic paradigm full of meaning. In her project RECALL BYBLOS – *The Art of Communication* (1993) Kontrec focused on Phoenician script as the first modern alphabet, the most important trace of a civilization, which has almost completely disappeared except for few artefacts. In RECALL ATLANTIS the artist dares to take one step further into the Unknown: Atlantis poses even more open questions, offering unlimited artistic freedom.

In her search for answers, Anita Kontrec turns to the poetic work of William Blake. In homage to this English poet and artist, visionary and unorthodox thinker, she develops a kind of dialectics of Utopia. It seems to me that the three major characteristics of her picture objects may be directly related to Blake's concept of the three states of consciousness: *Innocence*, *Experience* and *Higher Innocence*. Key words to understanding this correlation are: *color*, *context*, and *light*.

Color as a pure chromatic value emphasized by her contrastive compositions, can be related to Blake's *State of Innocence*. "Purposeless" and random use of color, or in other words: color as a pure sensual experience, is gradually being suppressed from many areas of post-industrial society and

can only be found at its fringes. Kindergartens are colorful, but offices, factories and lecture halls are a drab white or grey. Consciously "naive" combinations of vibrant colors in elementary landscape paintings by Kontrec – such as Earth, Water, Air, and Fire – momentarily revive the innocent eye of our childhood. Yet every ideal of innocence inadvertently revokes the memory of a lost Paradise. This object of desire is staged continually by commercials. The installation "Paradise NOW" depicts this ambivalence, where substitutes for happiness are offered, and color and color psychology are always being (mis)used to nourish a consumer mentality.

Along with her profound interest in spiritual themes, Kontrec is nevertheless a very pragmatic artist. She creates works of art which accompany us as humans in our everyday lives. They are made for specific uses: as calming or energizing points in workrooms and living environments: gardens, offices, entrance halls, stairways. Her spatial, three-dimensional picture objects and sculptures are light, easily transportable, weatherproof, easy to maintain and can be combined and installed in many various ways. She works "site specifically" – her ideas of culture and urbanity are based on interrelations of specific social and architectonic facts. This aspect of her work can be related to what Blake calls the *State of Experience*. It refers to the stage of civilisation of pragmatic decisions, attitudes and ideologies, ideas of what is "right" and what is "wrong", the competition of contrary perspectives and lifestyles, dualisms and conflicts of interests and the resulting technical and cultural body of knowledge. In other words, this is the state of modern urban life, in which we are still trapped. In this section of her exhibition Kontrec quotes verses by T. S. Eliot, the poet of modern urban sensibility.

If it is possible at all to depict the *State of Higher Innocence* in terms of Blake's concept, this would be a state of consciousness free from the dualism of "contrary states of the human soul" that is inherent to most of the cultures and civilisations so far. If art can even address these themes or help to make them comprehensible, it can only do so by suggesting something that we cannot attain or something that we cannot "produce" but is simply there, *simply present*, not subject to our interpretation. In the case of Anita Kontrec's spatial paintings (picture-objects), it is the light that makes her works of art what they are. Since 2005 she has been increasingly concentrating her use of colors on their primordial essence – to light as the sum and origin of all colors. White pigments and transparent synthetic resin are her media of preference for these works. White pigments bring out the structure of her objects most clearly – endless variations of the most refined shades of whiteness and subtle structures of the material, which are

as versatile and varying as reflected light upon water or ice. It is the light in contact with the material that forms her art. The third section of her exhibition "The Seventh Level of Heaven" is a celebration of light – light coming through the objects on the windows, light radiating from the white pigments; light that fills the whole room, light as the embodiment of *Higher Innocence*. Just as we witness this in her work "Mensch" ("Human") – a timeless, dancing Being of Light that unifies micro – and macrocosms. This figure, representing man in his or her pure essence, evoking associations from cave-dweller to astronaut, from embryo to God in human form, stands at the same time as the thoughtful and joyful starting point and conclusion of this exhibition.

PETER LODERMEYER

# THE TEXTURE OF MEMORY – MIRROR IMAGES

## I. The Shapes of Memory – “Art before Art”

Ever since the 1970s the artist Anita Kontrec has continually kept records, not only in the form of a classic piece of text or a diary, but also adding sentences, thoughts and quotes to photographs, sketches and drawings, and she has played with the photocopies of records and self-portraits. That is the beginning of her complex approach to artistic expression, where the visible and the invisible, concrete and metaphorical / symbolic meanings meet. In this early period, Anita Kontrec does not treat her work as works of art or actions, *but rather as a natural extension of thought processes*, even though these records in the manner of their representation already bear the features of the *Fluxus* movement. She, to be exact, does not make a distinction between life and an artist’s work, but she uses intermediality the way the artist Dick Higgins defined it in 1966: “it means free usage of all art disciplines when articulating a certain artistic idea... When talking about synthesis, *Fluxus* aims to reconcile the eternal antagonism between art and life.”<sup>1</sup>

On the Croatian artistic scene the conceptual tendencies of similar ways of thinking can be found in the records, notebooks and black boards of the distinguished artist Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos, one of the founders of conceptual art in Croatia. However, unlike the work of Anita Kontrec, Mangelos’ artwork is much closer to the tradition of the Dadaist objects, which at the same time often carries a poetic-philosophical-ontological component which does not exclusively relate to the negation of existence and the purpose of art, but rather, it directs us to the philosophy of art, to the question of the survival of aesthetics, as well as to the artist’s intrinsic drive for artistic creation. This very same component may be traced in the early work of Anita Kontrec.

Anita Kontrec intuitively sensed the period of innovations in the Croatian art of the seventies and early eighties, so she conducted several artistic actions, including one “*Zamatanje*

<sup>1</sup> Koščević, Želimir: “Fluxus: rujan 1962. – studeni 1999.”, in the catalogue of the exhibition “Fluxus – donacija Francesca Conza”, MSU, Zagreb, 1999; 13

*krajolika*” (Wrapping up a Landscape) in the mid-eighties in Rovinj, when she wrapped landscape and rocks in crepe paper and cellophane. She repeated a similar action in 2015 on Palagruža, the southernmost Croatian island, as part of the artistic action “*Umjetnost na svjetionicima*” (Art at Lighthouses). The action “*Spaljivanje dokumentacije*” (The Burning of Documentation) took place in Cologne in 2008. She collected many documents related to the administrative aspect of her life and work in Croatia and Germany, took the lot to the Rhine river, built a fireplace there and set fire to the documentation, whose ashes were then carried by the wind into the river. Water, as a natural element that takes everything with it and which purifies, is connected with the energies of the earth, fire and air, all of which intensify the notion of regeneration.

In this period, Anita Kontrec also experimented with video-performances, of which there is an interesting one done at the site of Jesus’ grave in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where she filmed people entering the tomb, but standing in lines, keeping their eyes to the ground rather than lifting their heads towards the dome, which is the source of light. At the same moment the artist danced next to them in a blue dress, illuminated with the light that pierced through the dome. The message of this filmed work of art was that while people searched for light in the darkness, they did not see it above and around them and neither did they – metaphorically – lift their gaze towards the sky.

From the series of the so-called “little artistic notebooks” in which the author jotted things down in this early period, one with a special meaning has been preserved because it was saved at the last moment from a fire in her apartment in Zagreb in 1987. This “little notebook”, besides the quite personal, intimate records, also contains some sketches and early templates for many of her later works and concepts. It is interesting to note, however, that the artist already at that time did not insist on a hermetic-intellectual concept of her works, but was intensely dealing with the subject of light, preservation of the soul, getting out from the greyness and darkness of the everyday, as well as with the subject of love. It would be quite unwarranted and superficial to say that she aims for

that which lies beyond, for those works – inspired by various European and world poets and writers – already at that time reflected the author's call for a synthesis of all the levels of the emotional-mental-social horizon together with the personal experiences.

She also writes concrete poetry, as well as the so-called "songs for dancing"; she turns words into forms, she plays with the hidden meanings, lexigrams and anagrams, never-ending repetition of words according to the mantra principle; with the rhythm and the music within the words and verses, "as if the words dance", she searches for a deeper meaning to anything that is at the first glance seen as clear, and written in the cultural code as having a fixed, one-dimensional meaning. At the same time, she reminds us that we must bear in mind that for the ancient cultures *words were like living creatures*. The idea of mirroring or reverse writing from the back of a thin sheet of paper, with the left hand from the right to the left, is linked with the thesis that there exists something "on that other side", both in the meaning and in the metaphor, when we feel that there is absolutely nothing there. The blending of words and drawings and dealing with letters and characters carries with it an act of meditation, but also of searching for the ancient principles according to which the world was built, in her own words, the "infinite arabesque of the cosmos".

The artist herself calls this period of her creative life the "art before the art", i.e., anything she had done before transferring to the medium of the sculpture, which can roughly be dated in the middle of the 1980s.

## II. Cities and Dreams: The Archaeology of Memory

In the mid 80s Anita Kontrec gradually crosses over to the medium of sculpture of small, medium and larger formats, mostly made of fire clay at the fire clay factory "Zagorka" in Bedekovčina near Zagreb. At the first glance, it may seem that this chapter in her creative work is shaped extremely heterogeneously, but what very soon becomes evident is the regular and continuous pulse of identical thematic circles that quite evenly perpetuate the themes from the collective treasury of the unconscious, the archetypal forms into which memories and symbols of ancient civilisations are built, as well as the evocations of her own periods of childhood and growing up. Already the titles of the first fire clay sculptures unmistakably point to her own cosmogony: "Školjka" (The Shell), "Mali istarski sveci" (Little Istrian Saints), "Pupak Istre" (The Bellybut-

ton of Istria), "Muško-ženski portal" (The Male-Female Portal), "Spirala" (The Spiral), "Trokuti" (Triangles). Sculpture "Snježni brežuljak za Sei Shonagon" (A Snowy Hill for Sei Shonagon, 1987); made of fire clay and molten glass, not large in size, but with a great aura of significance for the artist, was inspired in part by the work of the Japanese artist Sei Shonagon, and represents a kind of a "milestone" in her opus. What followed was a cycle of ceramic sculptures "Krajolici" (Landscapes), which soon became the cycle "Gradina" (Fortress, 1989). These simple shapes may be attributed to any ancient culture of the world, but also to our local areas, and they suggest a cosmopolitan and universal character of the sculptural thought process of Anita Kontrec. The artist later attributes the name "Tender Geometry" to her cycle of soft-form sculptures that are placed somewhere in between the geometrical and the archetypal, where she discreetly imprints into the forms and shapes the elements of female creation, an echo of worship of the Great Mother, i.e., the goddess of the Earth.

Observing their shape, it may be concluded that they seem to draw roots from ancient China, Sumer, Iran, Egypt, Crete, Etruria, but they are also close to Croatian scattered fortresses, which we have not even closely been able to date. There are also the motifs of the Tower of Babel, ziggurat, throne, the towers that stand as a warning even to the human civilisation of today. The building and the tearing down goes on in our recent past as well, so on several occasions the artist deals with the motif of "Kuće sjećanja" (The Houses of Memory, 1993), the key piece of work that was developed from the beginning of the 1990s until the beginning of the new millennium, a disturbing echo of the new migrations caused by the Homeland War in Croatia (1991-1995), when, after the people were gone, their houses were destroyed as well – so they live on only as images in the memory.

One of the most important artistic projects from the 1990s is certainly the exhibition *Recall Byblos* (1993), with Robert Pinsdorf, a painter from Cologne, as a co-author. The idea was built around the Phoenician alphabet and civilisation, the city of Byblos, as one of the oldest cities in the world. This conceptual exhibition in *Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst* in Aachen and *Klovićevi dvori* (at the time Museum Gallery Centre, MGC) in Zagreb investigated the mythical and cultural her-

itage of this civilisation.<sup>2</sup> This was at the same time the beginning of a more systematic dealing with the motifs of ancient scripts in the opus of Anita Kontrec, the subject of the lost knowledge, myths, libraries, heritage, scripts and the fragility of paper and mobile material heritage.

### Tracing the letter: A letter is / like destiny

In some primal, archetypal dimension, Anita Kontrec goes back in circles, always following the subject of the beginnings of the Mediterranean and European civilisations that communicate with the present world (but also with the worlds beyond), by means of the letter, syllable and word. Her sculptures are an intimate homage to the Tower of Babel, but also to the mystical old Croatian ruins, just like in the words and letters that she applies or carves into shapes or papers there are hidden ancient forgotten scripts, and an awareness of the complexity of Sanskrit, Phoenician and Japanese scripts, Glagolitsa or Bosnian Cyrillic scripts. For, *a letter is a destiny* – much like there is worth in an encyclopaedia or someone's intimate diary, depending on who is writing it and in what moment and under what socially and historically turbulent circumstances. Even when we fall silent before the disasters of this world, we still have the opportunity to record our thoughts, attitudes and feelings that connect us with others around us, far beyond the reaches of our time-and-space limitations or our lifespan.

### III. Colour, Energy, Light – The Meeting Point of Painting and Sculpture

When writing about the project *Recall Atlantis* (2006), the German art historian Peter Lodermeier noted that this project represents for the artist a “time of synthesis, a time of memory”, with the “cuts and continuity”, when sculptures emerge that are more reminiscent of standing picture-objects, paintings, and drawings in space. Although Anita Kontrec introduces colour into her work already in 2004, making a series of picture-objects of various formats in polyester with pigments, it is interesting to note that she has never

crossed the line in terms of the measure of the intensity of applying strong pigments, but, depending on the subject she was exploring, she more or less controlled the fireworks of colours. In only two years, between 2004 and 2006, the artist created a series of picture-objects that predominantly consist of two shades of pigments, combined in utterly unpredictable, atypical pairs of colours, beyond the strict rules of complementarity or contrast. The “Elementi” (The Elements), “Rajski krajolici” (Paradise Landscapes), “Pejzaži” (Landscapes), “Sunčani kvadrati” (The Sun Squares), “Indijsko putovanje” (The Indian Journey)... are only some of the cycles created following the idea of chromotherapy, or healing with the frequencies of colours, which directly lean on the colourist abstractions of Mark Rothko. However, the author keeps upgrading them structurally, without the danger of repeating the same patterns of colour. Colour, as pure energy, receives in these works an entirely new dimension; a semi-transparent character of polyester enables the light of day or artificial light to pierce through the picture-objects, turning them into vibrant bodies of colour. Moving the threshold of perception and sensibility with the colour palette of the works that resound with the “*forgotten rainbows and forgotten melodies of colours*” (Linda Goodman) tells the viewers that what stands before them is a piece of meditative-contemplative art that is not to be taken lightly.

Just as Anita Kontrec in the project *Recall Atlantis* broaches the motif of a social utopia, an ideal human civilisation that we have learned too little from, so too in the diptych “Paradise – How long?” (2006) – that was part of the project *Atlantis* – she deals with the subject of *Paradise Lost* according to the works of John Milton and William Blake, which, in today's consumer society, we have replaced with the utopia of happiness that consists of a temporary possession of an item or one which has on offer the false happiness of the New Age hodgepodge. Anita Kontrec strives to make the viewer aware that “Paradise Lost” is a symbol and a metaphor of a descent into the disintegrated world of split principles, duties, ideologies, religions and our individual, (non)corrupted desires.

### Art Installations: “Verfremdung” as an Artistic Intervention in Space

Following the idea of “something completely different”, which also points to a great capability of making a synthesis between the idea and genre in the work of this artist, there

---

<sup>2</sup> The following artists participated at the exhibition with their works that were designed specially for the project: Petar Barišić, Vladimir Gudac and Ivan Kožarić from Zagreb and Gunter Demnig, Tina Haase, Regina Schumann and Robert Pinsdorf from Cologne.

is the project-exhibition “Nevidljiva Ruža” (The Invisible Rose, 2010) which was realised as a *site-specific* installation of 25 pieces in the museum space of the *Atelijer Meštrović* in Zagreb. With this exhibition of assembled pieces, installations and sculptures, the artist placed herself in the wider context of problematising the life and work of famous Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović (1883-1962), but also his first wife, Ruža Klein, who played the key role in Ivan Meštrović’s artistic career. In the focus of interest of Anita Kontrec, one finds their emotional and creative interrelationship together with the museum space, as a testing site, a *stage of memory* of a truly remarkable woman. The space and atmosphere built by Anita Kontrec symbolically opens the space for Ruža Meštrović, with many emotional references to her fate as a woman and artist and “companion” of the famous Ivan Meštrović. When she deals with feminine subjects through history, Anita Kontrec can never be placed within the aggressive ideology of feminism, but rather, she very subtly lets it be known that without the female energy – which appears to be passive and on the receiving end – our world would collapse entirely. In this project Anita Kontrec also uses some *ready-made* elements of artwork, like the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, but she makes repeated references to Beuys’ heritage, using organic substances as materials of short duration.

In many of her works from different time cycles, Anita Kontrec builds a spiritual bond with Beuys by using similar materials – fragile, transient, organic (soap, butter/ghee, wax), thus further developing the idea that the very material is a *message*, rather than just a means that carries the artistic message. The material and the work of art thus become something that is purposely and conceptually designed as “temporary and transient”, and this in turn, according to the German curator Julia Ritterskamp, negates the idea that a work of art is “conserved in order to last for a long period of time and where the illusionist character of our perception, beauty and earthly existence is intensified”.

By searching for balance and by rectifying the historical-cultural clichés of the characters of women (or rather women-heroes), Anita Kontrec has in the recent years returned to her very important theme from the beginning of her work as an artist, the personality of the Japanese writer Sei Shonagon.

#### IV. Calligraphic Landscapes – Homage to Sei Shonagon

Besides the painted and sculpted works of art that carry ideas and messages, one of the main lines of Anita Kontrec’s artistic production is guided by the idea of the so-called textual record or *palimpsest* that the artist incorporates and varies with the sub-topic of the “archaeology of memory”. More closely speaking, in this artistic opus, all records on paper (which frequently carry elements of artistic activity or performance) much like the spatial images, picture-objects, objects and sculptures made of polyester with colour pigments – indirectly reflect the theme of lost and forgotten ancient knowledge, letters, symbols, various cultures and civilisations. If one were to put the opus of Anita Kontrec within the confounds of a couple of particular notions, what would soon come to light would be the continuity of subjects related to the *letter, architecture and colour*, which are expressed through the tradition of lyrical, colourist abstraction, the author’s individual variant of the so-called soft geometry and *healing art*, as well as the component of gesture and calligraphy.

This component of gesture and calligraphy has been a significant dimension of the artist’s work from 2013 until today. The poetic objects dedicated to Sei Shonagon, a court lady, who lived over a thousand years ago and wrote the novel *The Pillow Book* with diary records about nature and life in court, stand for an extremely refined and lyrical contribution of Anita Kontrec to our recent art. Whether she uses paper, felt or wrapped silk paper as the basis, these “records under the pillow” find an adequate artistic expression in Anita Kontrec’s work. Varying in size, from very small drawings in black acrylic paint on paper to large spatial items carried freely by the flow of air in the gallery space, their gestural and calligraphic sensibility brings them close to the work of the German graphic artist and painter Lore Heuermann, who writes disturbing calligraphic items using automated writing.

\* \* \*

Anita Kontrec’s artistic lifeline is exceptionally well weighed out, conceptually fully processed, without the illogical thematic-stylistic amplitudes and explorations, which suggests a truly and consistently laid out artistic concept, from the very beginnings of her active work until today. By means of an almost programmed application of the absence of excessive visual decorations, narration, and with the application of certain art trends and tendencies, in this particular art opus,

every phase is a world of experiences in itself, in which even the most grievous existential messages are brought to the viewer with a poetic dimension. Following the destruction and devastation, there always comes a period of creation, regeneration and rising from the ashes. Nothing is final and everything is subject to change. The artistic message of Anita Kontrec is at the same time deeply humane, dedicated to a large extent to the female creative dilemmas and the destiny of women through history; it is always, without exception, more or less equally attributable to any social or cultural moment or time period. In such a context, the artistic creation must bring new values, suggest new interpretations of the world – and when it on occasion deals with the idea of destruction and decomposition / or devastation of that which is not good – it must carry in itself a dimension of vital creation that provides a different view of the world. Anita Kontrec sometimes consciously treads on the ruins of existing worlds, always, however, showing new paths and emotional-spiritual patterns that make her art so profoundly humane and healing.

IVA KÖRBLER

# RIGHTWRONG – MINIMALISTIC MULTIPLE BY ANITA KONTREC

American artist Carl Andrea, wisely defined *minimalism* as the achievement of maximum effects by minimal means. In that sense Anita Kontrec multiple RIGHTWRONG is a minimalistic work *par excellence*. Words “right” and “wrong” written by hand are juxtaposed as if they were mirroring each other along an invisible axis. Written in this way one of these words can be read in the “right” direction, whereas the other can be read in the “wrong” direction. Therefore this contrast between right and wrong is only formal, expressed by the way it is written. Nevertheless the decisive moment takes place from which *side* of this transparent object one reads these words.

The whole story could be regarded as a formalistic semantic game if these words were referring *only* to the way they have been written. The crucial point of this work is that these words – right and wrong – evoke a whole chain of intertextual references, complex intellectual processes and conclusions. “Right” and “Wrong” are fundamental assessments we make in daily life – we evaluate (almost) everything that surrounds us by these terms.

Anita Kontrec’s objects question each petrified meaning. It reminds us that the understanding of what is right and what is wrong is the question of perspective, and our point of view can shift, and often does. For dogmatic dualists there is no bigger

threat than eliminating the relativity of the clear distinction between “right”-“wrong”, “fair- “foul”, “good”-“bad” etc. However, shifting the relative nature of these terms/notions does not mean their negation. The power/capacity of distinguishing between them is vital for our orientation in daily life. At the same time we can observe how easily such evaluations can become instruments of forcing certain attitudes upon others. As soon as these values are being declared as absolutes, they can then be misused for violence and oppression of those who do not share the same values. The terms “right” and “wrong” are basic for ethics, but also for ideologies and fundamentalism. From all this complex matter, Anita Kontrec makes an elegant and intelligent conceptual work, a *perpetum mobile* of observation and reflection. This work shows through simple means that the truth can not be conceived /understood by dualistic terms. Absolute truth – if it is possible to use this term at all – is much more complex. It is possible that art shows us a different position from which the question about truth can be put without the limitations of dualistic ways of thinking.

Dr. Peter Lodermeier, Art historian, Bonn  
Preface to *RightWrong, multiple*,  
ArtHellweg Edition, Soest/Cologne, 2007

# THAT IS HOW IT ALL STARTED

I have been meeting Anita Kontrec in intellectual and artist circles, which gathered around the avant-garde gallery PM (Gallery of Extended Media)<sup>1</sup> in Zagreb since the beginning of 1980's. When I first met her, she was working as a literary critic, journalist and translator. In 1985 I was preparing the first exhibition in Zagreb of the artists belonging to the "Group of Six" (*Grupa šestorice autora*)<sup>2</sup>, who at that time they were still unknown and marginal, and today are a legendary group who are internationally acknowledged. I was in the process of writing the preface to the catalogue, with a tight deadline due to some difficulties with the print. I needed to have the English translation the very same day. Knowing that in such an impossible situation I can rely only on Anita I went to her place and asked her if she could do it right away. As I was waiting in her flat for her to finish the translation I noticed some unusual objects, and in that moment discovered that they were her works of art.

## DDT Gallery: Alternative to trends

At the time I was working as a gallerist at DDT Gallery in Zagreb. My aim was to create a gallery with a unique and true identity and authenticity in Zagreb and in a broader cultural context. One should bear in mind that at that time in Croatia, as well as within European art, the dominating trend was the so-called "Bad Painting", "Transavangarde" and "New Painting", as well as all kinds of eclecticistic and syncretistic tendencies which were later referred to as the "Art of Revival". Artists who were researching still undiscovered areas and potentials of visual expression, were not "en vogue" and consequently not interesting for most galleries and museums. Such experi-

<sup>1</sup> At that time PM Gallery was led by Croatian conceptual artist Mladen Stilinović (1947-2016) and presented most relevant contemporary croatian conceptual artists and other avant-gardistic positions.

<sup>2</sup> "Group of Six" were Mladen Stilinović, Željko Jerman, Boris Demur, Vladimir Martek, Fedor Vučemilović and Sven Stilinović.

mental art, which was not "trendy" could be seen in only very few alternative galleries in Croatia and throughout Europe.

As a gallerist I have always been interested only in artists and artworks which were innovative and original. After a closer look at Anita's work I came to the conclusion that they were the result of a very profound reflection on how to give certain subjects- in her case poetic texts- a correlative visual/material form. The quality of her works convinced me that they deserve to be presented to the public and that is why I proposed to make her solo exhibition in my gallery.

## *Shapes of Memory* – Ambient Installation

The first solo exhibition *Anita Kontrec – Shapes of Memory* took place in DDT Gallery from October 7-17, 1986. Her exhibit was grouped into three units: visual poetry, sculptures and installations. The first group were texts composed in a visual way. The innovative aspect of her procedure was that she wrote her texts on different materials in a big dimension – for instance on a mirror (2,0 x 1,5 meter), or boards (1,5x1,5 meter) and on the walls of the gallery.

Giving her texts different forms like spirals, by writing them vertically and horizontally she gave her texts strong rhythmic impulses. It is important to note that her poems sometimes consisted of one single word – like "*miomirisnimiomiris*", a word/text beyond semantic meaning but with a strong rhythmic composition.

The second group of works were sculptures. Those made of fire clay, in terms of their formal features do not differ from contemporary sculptural practice; nevertheless, what makes them authentic and individual are the associations and connotations generated by a specific context or environment. Anita used many different materials for her sculptures: mirrors, aluminum, crystal glass, earth/soil, cellophane, plastic tape, and terra cotta. Some of these materials have strong symbolic connotations; juxtaposed next to each other they create metaphysical meaning. In this case, the primary medium of communicating the meaning/essence of the work is the material itself, and not the form. In contrast, her more organic

or geometrical abstraction works, sometimes combined with ready-mades, communicate their meaning through form / shape. Some works, for example "Little Rain", consisted of movable parts – in this case crystal sticks, which reflected light and created sounds.

I had divided her installations into two groups: those which form some kind of closed spaces (by means of transparent plastic tape) and those which are open three-dimensional structures, combining multiple different materials and techniques. An example of the latter is her installation "The Tree of Life" made of wooden pillars, dough, photos, drawings, notes/handwriting, collage and a clay basin with living goldfish. This installation is about connection between her micro-with macro cosmos, which is a recurrent topic in many of her works.

The main feature of Anita's early work is, in my opinion, her research into the poetics of visual (language), looking for forms of transmitting metaphysical and irrational messages as an intuitive experience rather than rational understanding. Thirty years after her first solo exhibition her works and ways of artistic expression are still inspiring due to their authentic artistic energy and freshness.

Andelko Hundić, Art historian

# EARTH - WAR - ASHES

On the ground floor of the Cologne City Hall Spanische Bau, right across from the historic City Hall of Cologne, a procession of dark figures seems to have halted mid-step. These figures are at a human scale, appearing as pairs or single persons, mostly women and children. Their heads are bent, looking down, in resignation, astonishment, and consternation. Their bodies are stiff, but due to the reduced language of form they do not radiate hopelessness but dignity.

Croatian artist Anita Kontrec has created this procession of suffering refugees for her exhibition in Cologne wanting to draw attention to the senseless war in Yugoslavia. She has shown this catastrophe in a very strong artistic way by presenting mute figures in their dark, monolithic gravity, a black sadness expressed through their body language. She did not give them any individual features because they stand for all victims of war in many other parts of the world.

The plastically formed figures of war victims remind of August Macke's painting "Taking Leave" ("Abschied") which can be seen in the *Museum Ludwig* in Cologne. August Macke started this painting in 1914, but did not finish it because he was killed during the war. In his painting, the darkness and stiffness of the figures suggest their anticipation of death.

August Macke paid special attention to showing children's bewilderment when facing the unfathomable.

Anita Kontrec has deliberately combined the sad procession with her earlier cement sculptures called "Cement-Tirani" (Cemented), which are placed near the procession of black figures. These sculptures also show almost archaically reduced language of forms. Regardless of the grade of abstraction, her grey cement sculptures, comprising the whole potential of possible associations, are still very close to natural, living forms. Anita Kontrec knows how to transpose big dimensions to smaller ones; or, in other words – make sculptures of smaller dimensions appear monumental.

Anita Kontrec sees her artistic position in the context of the Croatian sculptural tradition, which is in Germany not well-known. We may expect that her work could arouse a greater interest in Croatian sculpture.

Dr. Gerhard Kolberg, senior curator for sculpture,  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne  
From the opening speech of the exhibition  
"Earth-War-Ashes", Kölner Rathaus, January 1992

# OVERCOMING BORDERS

Dear Ms Kontrec,

In your work, you have always been dealing with our common European heritage which also inevitably means, with wars, escape, banishment and also, more recently, migration. All of these issues are crucial aspect of current political discourse at the moment. Already in 1992, in Cologne, you have very impressively dealt with the issue of refugees, which can be very well understood, considering the situation in Croatia at that time. A year later, in 1993, you have continued your work of establishing cultural cross-cooperation in your German-Croatian artists' project *Recall Byblos*. Due to the dozens of thousands of refugees who are coming to Europe from unstable regions, in the Near and Middle East, as well as from Africa, your work is again most poignant and relevant. It is not about anonymous masses of refugees, it is not about the numbers; it is about people with their most individual and unique backgrounds and life-stories. Not all of them will be able to remain in Europe, but all of them deserve to be treated with dignity, care and utmost respect. Last autumn, Croatia and its people gave an example on how it can be done.

I am most fascinated by how you approach the topic of borders in your work. At this moment, there is much talk about closing borders. Borders can separate and hurt people; they should nevertheless provide security for the citizens of their respective countries. Borders, however, should never isolate peoples. Most beneficial and mutual co-exchange is entirely possible, and people should be encouraged to reach their hands beyond borders and give themselves and others a chance to overcome one's own internal borders. Instead of being reserved and suspicious, one can become curious and open, towards those who are behind any given border. Overcoming borders can unleash enormous amounts of positive energy. In countries belonging to the Schengen area (where

Croatia still does not belong) people could experience how united Europe feels; it inspired many of them to move freely in such a Europe without borders, and enrich it by doing so.

Many of us can remember the times when the long queues of people at the borders were a regular sight. Recently we were unfortunately reminded of that again, and we are quite clear about that: we do not want to experience it again. Your works, with the impressive associations they bring, together with the powerful imagery they evoke, make one think. And, as I said, they are now actual than ever before. Surveying your work, one can at once surmise that you yourself are also a "Grenz-über-Gängerin" – that is, someone who is passing over borders. The focus of your life has moved from Zagreb to Germany and back, again and again. Thanks to this fact, in the course of two decades, you have established close connections in both countries and art-scenes. My personal feeling is that, passing those borders, even when they made your life sometimes very difficult, inspired and enriched you as artist. And you have turned into a real traveller between Croatia and Germany and feel at home in both countries, being an appreciated and acknowledged artist and person. In this sense, one can see you as an example for the friendship which surpasses borders, and you confirm the thesis that human and cultural exchange enriches both sides, bringing us forward and opening new perspectives and horizons.

H.E. Thomas E. Schultze,  
the Ambassador of the Federal Republic  
of Germany in the Republic of Croatia  
Speech at the opening of the retrospective  
*Kružni tok / Roundabout* in the "Prsten" Gallery  
in Zagreb, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2016

# I INVITE YOU TO THE JOURNEY IN THE CELLAR

In this exhibition the Phoenicians are welcoming us in the form of goddess Tanit, made for this project by Croatian sculptor Petar Barišić. By its geometric form this sculpture reminds us of the very origins of the culture which gave us 22 letters. Greek alpha-beth was derived from these signs; later followed Latin a-b-c-d system; in the era of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* these signs are being spread by means of the famous "box of lead letters", all the way to the computer era which is using not only Arabic numbers but also applying the Phoenician discovery of transmitting messages by using "script plates".

In this exhibition the Phoenicians are a big metonymy, *pars pro toto*, standing for all cultures which have made great contribution to mankind and then disappeared. Phoenicians have left us 22 letters which is quite a big contribution when we think of the fact that it has provided basis for writing texts in numerous contemporary languages. This is what German artist Gunter Demnig has shown in this exhibition on his ceramic files inscribing his *Homage* to the equality of people born with intrinsic reason and consciousness as basis for brotherhood of men.

But the Phoenician metonymy has some additional layers of meaning. It invites us to recall vanished cities which used to be centers of civilisation. By exhibiting layers of seals with numerical codes from the brick factory in Bedekovčina near Zagreb (codes which contain for us secret, but for constructors

of the cities very precise messages where each brick belongs) Anita Kontrec reminds us of the fact that the city as structure is not possible without the alpha-numerical system.

Cellar as exhibition space is a message itself, emphasised in this exhibition by work of Vladimir Gudac called "Postmoderna". It is depicting the sign for shelters. By the first attempt to confirm their "European" character, Croatian people were forced by military power of Yugoslav army to retreat to cellars. Although *Recall Byblos* is one more exhibition which is taking place in the cellar, it stands at the same time for the exit from the Croatian cellar. It takes us to European artistic equality and "brotherhood" based on reason and consciousness. It is by no means a scream for help to get us out of the cellar for once and for all. This exhibition stands for the wish and intention to be connected to the general European cultural codes on intellectual and artistic level, to be present in Europe intellectually and morally not only because of promoting our own interests and creating a more favourable image of ourselves. We want to do that because of our own Croatian cultural identity.

Dr. Aleksandar Flaker, University of Zagreb  
from the opening speech of the exhibition  
*Recall Byblos*, Zagreb, 1993

# ABOUT COLOUR AND ENERGY: COLOURS NEVER LEAVE YOU UNAFFECTED

*For a long time Anita Kontrec has been concentrating on expressing experiences by means of language, sculpture and architecture. Now she is reaching for the unfathomable - experiences which cannot be expressed by language or be given a concrete material form, by means of a powerful radiance of colours.*

In her recent work, Anita Kontrec confronts her audience with a luminous radiance of colour, free from any concrete motif or narration. She knows that when we get in touch with colour, the *meaning* is constituted by itself – either consciously or sub-consciously. Colours affect the soul – it is a very common experience: blue touches us in a different way than red or yellow. Each colour has its own character, but the effect of it is nevertheless individual.

But one thing is quite clear: *colours never leave you unaffected.* Colours are as elemental as language and they influence our whole body. Anita Kontrec works to unlock this shining magic. She introduces colour to contemporary architecture where colour is often completely suppressed or dominated by sterile dark colours. For her, colours are archetypes and she has always been interested in cultural archetypes in particular, which psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung describes as primordial human images inscribed in our collective subconsciousness. Anita Kontrec, besides being a painter and sculptor, studied language and

ethnology/cultural anthropology, and is therefore well-versed in this topic. She galvanizes these archetypes by using the basic forms of architecture, sculpture, and the structures of language.

Anita Kontrec believes that we first perceive colour and only then shape. This is why she foregrounds colour in her picture-objects. She does not use canvas for her painting because for her and her artistic temperament (as a sculptor who has worked on sculpture for over two decades – meaning work on the volume and structures of material) canvas lacks the dimension of space.

Her picture objects are made of synthetic resin, which is a very demanding and sensitive material and technology. She mixes high quality pigments directly with many layers of synthetic resin. She polishes the hardened surface of her objects many times until she gets the right texture, colour, and surface quality. The result are vibrant, multi-layered voluminous objects which radiate the energy of colours into space. For Anita Kontrec, it is essential that her “picture objects” are three dimensional *bodies of colour* which establish a dynamic and at the same time contemplative dialogue with people and the space itself.

Jürgen Kisters, Art critic, Cologne

# BOTH HERE AND THERE

Life and Work between Zagreb and Cologne

Interviewed by Iva Körbler

The early phase of your artistic inspiration is marked with important literary idols and texts from the history of European literature. What writers would you single out according to the dialectic and spiritual kinship and who are the ones that may be found in every phase of your creative work?

One of them would, above all, be William Blake, who was himself both a poet and a painter, but he was also the one who most clearly showed what, to him, was the meaning of the word in relation to the image; not to mention what a visionary he was. To me, he stands for poetic depth, poetic quality and permanent value. Another poet that I keep coming back to is T. S. Eliot, and I often quote his verses, and that is because he develops an interesting theory, the theory of the so-called "objective correlative". It is about finding out what poetic images correspond to what feelings. He is also important because of the intense poetic expression of his language and because of his metaphors and images. But, the reason why I actually enrolled the study of the English language and literature was William Shakespeare. I had used to read his plays and poems before, but it was while studying English literature that I gave him my complete attention, especially to his play "Macbeth," which I find one of the best theatre texts of all times. When reading "Macbeth," I was astounded by the intensity of the images; and, at one moment, this entire series of images condensed into the two words from the beginning of the play, and that is the famous quote "Fair is foul and foul is fair". This led me to think about what it actually meant by "foul", and "fair," for that matter, and what the influence was of these words on the development of this play, how they resonated in our consciousness. In the beginning of the 1980s I made an art work which consisted of writing out the words "fair" and "foul" - i.e.: "right-wrong" on a transparent piece of paper. The point of this work was revealed by turning that piece of paper, so that the words could be read out on the background, too, thereby revealing the opposite meaning of each term. This is a brief summary of a very complex story that I expressed using these two key words from the play, together with the gesture of turning over what was written on the paper. To me, I mean, everything has its side that is its appearance, but I am always interested in what lies *beyond* that. Gesture takes me to the meaning.

If we attempted to comprise all of your work – before we address genres, interdisciplinarity, intermediality – and

define it with a few theses and sentences, I always come to the conclusion that you seem to strive in your work to raising above the material (world). However, with you there is never a presence of forced and pretentious intellectualism or spirituality... it's as if in this world of ours, split between the material and the spiritual, you succeed in keeping a balanced synthesis and a combination that encompasses matter, i.e., the physis, the emotional, spiritual levels, but also the subject of the soul. You do not seem to lose sight of the knowledge about the interconnectedness and simultaneity of all these levels in a work of art, regardless of a particular phase, stage or cycle.

I believe that as an artist I cannot wish to hear something better than this, because this is, in my opinion, the most supreme *kunst*, i.e., art. I am indeed striving for some sort of wholeness. I have had several opportunities to express interdisciplinarity in different ways and on different levels. The most wholesome image of this kind of thinking was the project *Recall Byblos*. There were altogether eight artists participating in it, and each of them had the freedom to have his/her own personal view of a set subject – it was the exploration of the *script* as a means of communication, in this case, the Phoenician culture. Besides the artists from Zagreb (Petar Barišić, Ivan Kožarić and Vladimir Gudac) and Cologne (Robert Pinsdorf, Gunter Demnig, Tina Haase and Regina Schumman), it was important to me to include in such a project several different voices and types of discourse – art historians, publicists, writers... and so a great team was eventually formed. This project had been my dream that was important for me to make it come true and to present it as a model of international cooperation where a new cultural and spiritual context was created in which I felt at home. In fact, this took place not long after I had arrived in Cologne from Zagreb. It was important to me not to succumb to the so-called "gastarbeiter blues" after joining a new cultural surroundings. It was not an easy task to find a new artistic identity in this surroundings, but – through art, it was easier. This thought process of mine was recognised and rewarded with the fact that we received substantial means for the project and a superb place to exhibit, at the prestigious *Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst* in Aachen, and in the *Klovičevi dvori* (at the time the *Museum Gallery Centre, MGC*) in Zagreb.

But, to get back to the wholeness that you mentioned... it really is what I strive for. Having dealt with cultural anthropology I came to some other insights. What characterises many ancient cultures – that we wrongly call “primitive”, (and the fact that this even gives them a twinge of negativity is part of our Eurocentricity) is that they always provided *wholesome* solutions to any issues in life, from the economic, marital, sexual, spiritual, in other words, they strove for a *syncretic* state of consciousness. For example, an Indian puts two logs together to build a boat to be able to catch fish and feed his family, but he decorates it with some ornaments and symbols which carry an aesthetic, magical and spiritual dimension. This primitive, i.e., original and primary approach was ideal to me too because I believe that all of our actions reflect in one way or another the entirety of our being, together with our cultural, individual *background*, our command of technology... and I am very pleased that this can be traced and recognised in my work because that indeed is my goal. Today, we would add that this is a holistic approach, but the thought is important to me that we are all not only culturologically connected, but that we also live in synchronicity and simultaneity of cultures and worlds, and that we are all connected on both the micro and the macro levels. These are the key elements of my artistic way of thinking.

You have often said that in your work you make references to old alphabets of ancient civilisations and cultures. You have also moved a small step away from this mainstream because, unlike many artists in Europe and the world, you do not make references to the mystical level of Kabbalah. You deal with the Phoenician alphabet, Sanskrit and even the myth of Atlantis. You went much further into the past at the time when this as a motif was not widely used by artists, but you managed to keep yourself away from any esoteric trends. Would it stand to say so?

Definitely. I am not particularly fond of the concept of esoterism because it seems to me to be a reduced and a somewhat mercantile term. It does not appeal to me, unlike the true spiritual and intellectual deliberation, which falls under an entirely different category. I quite understandably wish to deal with the topics that have not become trendy and depleted. From the very beginnings of my art, I was never interested in any trends. I have always been interested in what was new and that in which I could let my imagination wander. This academic, or shall we call it rational, part of me stands above all for the passion for exploration, and here I will go back to the project *Recall Byblos* because it implied a scientific level as well. This was, culturologically speaking, a very important chapter of history and yet there is a lack of awareness about it ... I mean, the city of Byblos gave the name to

the Bible, which is in every sense a cornerstone of western civilisation. Even today, few people know that the Phoenician alphabet that consisted of 22 letters was the basis for the development of the Greek alphabet, and with it of all modern European scripts. This was an urban culture, where the relationship between the female and the male principles was very balanced. One of my sculptures from the project *Recall Byblos* is called “The Throne”, and both principles can be found in that form. After Aachen, that sculpture was exhibited for a long time in the *Frauenmuseum* in Bonn as part of the international project “Dea Syria” (1996), which was a cooperation with female artists from Syria, and the theme of the project was dedicated to the goddesses of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

You have broached another sub-theme of your art, which takes us back to the idea of balanced energies, the male-female principles. It cannot be said that your art is feminist in some narrow sense of the word, but your work at the same time does oppose simple definitions of style, idols, tendencies, because it consists of many layers. Namely, when we look at the works of many distinguished artists, both domestic and foreign, we always seem to reach the conclusion that the secret to their long lasting lies in complexity, that their works can be read in many ways, that they offer numerous interpretations – some of which may even be mutually exclusive – but it always boils down to being able to read the sense and message in many ways. It appears to me that this goes for your work too, for all your phases and cycles ... Are you aware of this and do you put some distance from your work in this context?

There are two ways to approach this. One is from the curator's point of view, i.e., the gallerist's, and the other is the one where I as an artist express in an authentic way that which I personally believe in and feel. Indeed, how many layers are there that someone may read out... I think we can say that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*, but also in the *background* that everyone carries within themselves. Another important thing is the freedom that I was able to allow myself because I was never part of some particular line of work, like a guild or a group. Naturally, such circumstances may very easily leave an artist adrift. I do have an understanding for artists who stick to one type of style all their lives, and there is nothing wrong with that. Everybody has the freedom to choose their own path, and mine was precisely the one of searching, exploration, wandering, roaming... Some ideas may fail utterly, but they can also provide some new qualities. However, what I noticed through my experiences with the galleries in Germany was their tendency to take you under their wing once you are discovered and prefer that you stick to one particular line of your work, be-

cause galleries look after their profit and they try to make an artist a *brand*. I was very fortunate because I met one of the most significant German gallerists, Hans Jürgen Müller, who played a key role for the establishment of modern German art, and he was the one who first brought Andy Warhol to Europe to his gallery in Stuttgart. Müller liked my sculptures and my collages very much, but the moment I started working in synthetic resin, he became kind of irritated. But then I met the gallerist Alexa Jansen from Cologne, who had preferred precisely that kind of thing: discovering new materials, dealing with colour in space... Changing style and media has always borne a bit of risk and is, to some extent, a matter of courage.

Let's get back some more to your beginnings, when you came to Cologne in 1989. What was it that greeted you there on the art scene, what were the challenges and influences you faced? How much were you taken in by the heritage and aura of Beuys, and how much by the post-abstract expressionism and gestural art... What played the key role and enriched your sensibility?

That process of enrichment has actually been going on all this time. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to be in the environment that was soaked in art, and I do not mean only German art. When I arrived in Cologne, there were over hundred of galleries there, with hundreds of artists from all over the world living there... which is on the one hand a very good thing, but on the other it brings very strong competition. About 50 years ago, the first international art fair was founded in Cologne as a modern way of presenting and selling art, the famous *Art Cologne*, where every year the leading German and world galleries exhibit their works. It is hard to imagine how difficult it was to establish any kind of contact with galleries and build a profile as an artist, but in my experience – looking in hindsight – it looks like a little fairytale. Which does not mean that everything went smooth and easy. However, after only six months I held my first solo exhibition. It was the cycle of sculptures "Tender Geometry," which was very well received so I had the opportunity to keep working and exhibiting. A year later (1991) I made my first public sculpture in Cologne – "Hier" / "Here" in front of the cultural centre *Stollwerck* in Cologne. My second solo exhibition in 1992 in the Cologne Town Hall was opened by the Senior Curator for Sculpture of the *Ludwig Museum* in Cologne, Dr. Gerhard Kolberg, together with the Mayor of Cologne, Ms Renate Canisius. And as for Beuys – I only discovered him in Germany and I was stunned by the fact of the extent to which I had been closely connected with him in the manner of thinking and in part in the manner of working, even before I came to know his work and the work of other artists from *Fluxus* movement. I was inspired the most by Beuys' social engagement and his term "*erweiterter*

*Kunstbegriff*" – an extended understanding of the concept of art. I was inspired also by the spiritual dimension of his work, which is largely based on the anthroposophical teaching of Rudolf Steiner, from whom Beuys took a lot, generally speaking. It surprises me that art historians – at least as far as I am aware – deal very little with the influence of Steiner on Beuys, who indeed was, in my opinion, the key figure.

I would say that such a chronology of events does suggest the fact that you were able to find the point of balance and recognition in your work, precisely through the authenticity of your artistic way of thinking, and especially in such a demanding artistic environment?

It really did transpire that way. At that time, the war was breaking out in Croatia, and I was very much burdened by that. At the moment I left Croatia, I was having very mixed emotions. At the exhibition "*Erde –Krieg–Asche*" / "*Earth–War–Ashes*) in the Cologne Town Hall, I wanted to present the cultural and political shock that was brought along with the first war on European grounds after 1945. For that exhibition, I had made fourteen sculptures over two meters high and made of paper glued together. I juxtaposed another installation, made of cement, which symbolised devastated cities and architecture, i.e., *the loss of home*. This exhibition also received quite some attention. I directed all of my appearances in the media towards making the German art audience sensitive to Croatian art.

You are interested in moving the threshold of perception and sensibility in various themes. On the material level, you do this through frequent changes in the medium, the material. What was the moment you reached the decision to use materials such as wax, paper, ghee, soap, which are not durable and are subject to weather conditions, or the passing of time... And how did you become so fascinated with transparent materials? Does it have to do with the important subject of memory and preservation of memory in your work?

There are a lot of reasons for this in my personal biography. These questions of *coming to existence* and *disappearing* are connected. If we look at a wider picture, there were civilisations before us that had reached their peak and then disappeared. One of these is the myth of Atlantis, then there is the Phoenician civilisation as a model, and there are traces of that somewhere inside all of us. In my biography, an indirect reason lies in my leaving Croatia towards the end of 1989. Ever since I left that place where I, in fact, felt good and where I was relatively well established (meaning that I had already had three or four well received solo exhibitions and had an opportunity to work in the brick factory "Zagorka" in Bedekovčina), the theme of *memory* and *moving* became present in my art work. I always had to face decisions about

what to take with me and what to leave behind, and so I was often forced to either destroy or give away my favourite pieces. I came to know very early on that matter is transient, as part of my sculpting, but also as a personal experience. In 1987, in a fire that broke out in my apartment in Zagreb, my entire library was lost, nearly all the books and notebooks, and all that was left were my fire clay sculptures. Today, it has become part of my concept to do things that have an expiration date, and so I am moving the focus more and more towards the idea, i.e., *the transfer of idea*, rather than the preservation of matter. I find that it is good in general for us not to be too closely attached to anything.

The year 2004 was also very important in your work; when you returned to colour, in other words, you started to work much more intensely with a very live colour palette. A lot of art theoreticians in Europe and the world at that time started introducing the idea of chromotherapeutic quality of colours, which was poured into art from science, when the works of many artists of colourist abstraction were beginning to be looked at as so-called “healing works”. They mean that every colour and nuance influences our mood, our brain waves and even the balance between the bodies of energy. How much was that decision made on intuition and why?

I did not have any thoughts at that time about using colour, although I was acquainted with the so-called “signalist movement”, where they determined precisely how different frequencies of colour affect us. My focus on the “body of colour” came a bit later. Namely, I was very irritated by the modern architecture that everyone admired and which was essentially colourless. It was later proved that people fell ill in those grey buildings, and I had had enough of such dull architecture, where everything was grey, black, anthracite. I noticed that people were disinclined to using colour, as if it was thought to be something primitive, and not to even mention the clothes! Many people are dressed as if the only place they are about to go to is the cemetery and this is considered especially *chic*, but in fact it is unimaginative, because black is something you need to know how to wear. In much the same way you need to know how to use black, and how to draw or paint with it. So, we are faced with a chronic lack of colour in the modern civilisation, both in the private and business areas of our lives. Colour stands for pure energy, so I always point out that I am interested in energy, and I am not interested in any narration, any story. I am interested in the *phenomenon* of colour, and I wish to fully bring attention to this: including this spiritual dimension of colour, and healing with colour. What helped here was my stay in India, which I visited on several occasions between 2000 and 2012. I dealt with their culture, but all their colourfulness is not there “just for fun”. Whoever observes and studies their cul-

ture will find that every one of their deities has “their own” colour and that one communicates with them through that particular colour. The Indians say: “*No colour, no Guru*”. So, I saw that it worked perfectly well over there, and I wanted to transfer that experience in my own work.

Synthetic resin was great to use for this because I do not paint *on* the surface of this material but use several kinds of pigments of similar nuances that I mix in many layers with the synthetic resin, and then I refine each layer and finally repeat the process. I am interested to see where does colour come from, the question of this source, and the source is *pure light*. After five or six years of examining the intensity and frequency of colours I came up with white. Many years I painted only with white pigments and transparent synthetic resin. Why? Well, of course it was not because of some current trend, even though there is the so-called white painting, which I appreciate a lot. It was only when I felt the *quality of white* that I dared to introduce the black colour.

Can we, therefore, conclude with the thought that your entire opus refers to or is guided by the idea of today’s civilisation, which is currently in the phase of *Paradise Lost*, and that we are aware of how much we have drifted away from perfection, from the balance of some Golden Age ... and that we are currently emotionally, spiritually, energetically and even civilisationally occupying a twisted world in which we are trying to retrieve that ancient wisdom and balance with art?

Naturally, this is what I aspire to as an artist and I am guided more by my intuition – so if it happens to coincide with the spirit of the era – all the better. We should all heal on all levels, which is what our everyday life points to. The biggest contribution is that art is able to awaken in a person some sort of joy, of life.

Does this mean that art should not bring us the blues?

I believe that an artist is allowed to be happy, that it does not make him or her any less good as an artist. This is another theme that I am dealing with quite a lot. I do not wish to bring people down. Of course, happiness means different things to different people, but to create such a state does not mean to humour people and do things cheaply, but to really work on bringing back that primal joy; to reach something vital in people with forms and colours.