

Folke Köbberling &
Martin Kaltwasser

NEW TEUTONIA MUST FALL

Cars into Bicycles, 2010

Over the time of three month K&K transformed a Saab Turbo 900 into two functional bicycles on a carparking lot at Bergamot Station/Los Angeles



“Our work deals with mundane urban public space and its transitory nature as a reflection of more general social processes.” -

“In spatial and sculptural site-specific interventions we tackle issues around the public domain, grass root participation and self-organization, market economics, mobility, shelter, sustainability, and the scarcity of resources. The potential for social conflict is inherent in all of these.”

Berlin-based artists Folke Köbberling (b. 1969, Kassel) and Martin Kaltwasser (b. 1965, Münster) are two of the most important and inspiring creative minds we've come across in recent years—because they decided to care, because they decided to intervene, because they decided to fight, because they decided to question the status quo, because they decided to get rid of some trash and make something better out of it, and, ultimately, because they manage to blow our minds with some incredible wooden SUVs and self-built bikes from Saab parts. Join the resistance, and hear what they got to say.

How did you guys meet in the first place?

Folke: In the mid-nineties I had my workspace in the studio of a friend of Martin. In 1995 I wanted to make a model of a ruin, of a house which got destroyed. Martin is an educated architect and an expert in making models from all kinds of material. So I visited him. Then he visited me. I visited him again. And so on. In 1997 we both moved to a newly opened huge studio together with 15 other artists, architects and musicians. Our collaboration began four years later, in 2001.

Martin, how did you get started in Berlin?

Martin: I arrived in Berlin in 1988 and instead of building any houses in this time I began as a political activist, made street theatre and enjoyed life, political discussions, the street life and actions in this vibrant city, surrounded by The Wall. I saw the Berlin Wall being opened, started to study architecture, received my diploma in 1997, but instead of working as an architect I eventually found out that I couldn't be anything else but an artist. Folke Koebberling and I did a huge amount of conceptual artworks, solo, and together, issuing political themes. A substantial inspiration was the transformation of the city of Berlin in post-cold war period, this unique historical period of a city's search for its new definition. The first house we build in 2004 in front of the Gropiusstadt. The reason was that we did two evenings at the Volksbühne at Rosa Luxemburg Platz about the issue of informal housing in Istanbul. We were so tired of all the theoretical debates that we started to build a house overnight at Gropiusstadt close to the Schönefeld airport. We wanted to know what happens to inhabitants of an informal house in Germany nowadays. Interestingly, after we completed our small house we received very positive response from the local inhabitants of Gropiusstadt. They told us about their dream houses, house building dreams and their secret desires of living. These conversations were unexpectedly more than a side effect of our little overnight house building action. Therefore later, after this action we decided to focus our artistic practice more on the themes of housing, building, architecture, urbanism, and resources.

Having done that—and all the other constructions that followed, how are your feelings about Berlin and some of the recent trends and changes?

We, and a lot of other artists, architects and urban activists were (and still are) horrified by the so-called “critical reconstruction”, the rigid reactionary, historicist and revanchistic urban and architectural master plan for the city of Berlin which was installed by the government of Berlin in the mid-nineties. This terrible master plan is still the rule for all urban developments, changes and new buildings. This plan is not just ignoring all the gaps, breaks, wounds and different historical layers of the post-war city until nowadays, but it is erasing them and replacing them by an imagined, idealized historicist urban and

architectural language that is superficially copying the pre-war-state. Which, in its consequences, means in fact, that this dump coalition of Berlin's governments and the German Federal government together demolished loads of buildings of the socialist era, but simultaneously they renovated and refurbished the monumental national socialistic architecture (which hosts nowadays, for instance, the German Department of State) and reconstructed rows of houses of these “good old times”, which always means the pre-modernistic times. Critics have called this master plan the “**New Teutonia**” plan. New Teutonia happens in the same period of the transformation of middle European inner cities, following the rules of neoliberalism. We, artists, and a lot of other creative citizens, activists, and intellectuals tried to express, of course, our oppositional standpoints. Together we organized, “inner cities action days against privatization, exclusion and paranoia of security” in 1996–98. We organized seminars, discussions, temporary urban interventions and produced a lot of astonishment in the public. Because it was the gold rush era in Berlin and nobody, apart from the corrupt government, together with some involved corrupt local architecture companies, and us, the opponents, wanted to think about the future shape of the city. So—things happened, New Teutonia went on and we worked on our ideas of a better city. For us, this city was the ideal city: still full of public space, non-defined public space, publicly used private space, abandoned lots, abandoned industrial spaces, empty office buildings. So—we overtook these spaces and used them as creative spaces, lovely spaces, open for everybody—without any money, but with plenty of ideas!

But these spaces and ideas where and are under siege! The compulsion to consume, increased monitoring, and continuously expanding traffic threaten to fundamentally change the appearance of our cities. And exactly since 1998, we, as a part of a Berlin-wide connected network, have been implementing our concept of an artistic and architectural aesthetic of resistance to this appropriation. Our work presents alternatives to this consumer ideology—through structural interventions, artistic statements, actions, and theories. We use streets, squares, bridges, parks and interior spaces as our areas of operation. The materials we apply always consist of “urban resources”—such as litter, trash, and donations. As a result, each work is based on communicative and social moments. Our strategies encourage emulation, distribution, and multiplication, as they can be implemented with very simple materials.

Finally we created not just statements for a more democratic use of public space, but also our own statement against the rigid dogma of the mentioned “New Teutonia”, which is on-going and transforming (or rather: abusing) Berlin into a less and less livable city.



The Games are Open, 2010 ongoing

During the summer of 2010, the artist team Köbberling & Kaltwasser worked with materials recycled from the 2010 Olympic & Paralympic Winter Games Athletes' Village to create a situation of exchange & cooperation.

Like you said, your work touches upon so many issues, ranging from economics and housing to mobility, grass-roots movements to waste management and back—how would you define the unifying link between the different interventions/works?

The unifying link is: The Aesthetics of Resistance! (Resistance against the neoliberalistic origins and symptoms of late capitalism).

Apart from the city itself, who inspired you to use trash for many of your works?

We did not need inspiration for using trash. It came automatically, it was absolutely normal for us to use trash for our art when we began to make art installations in the years after the fall of the Wall: Berlin was full of empty spaces. We did not have any money. We easily found studio spaces for producing art. Everybody found a place almost for nothing. And the material for producing art was everywhere—for free: Thousands of square meters of abandoned factories provided us every kind of material for free! Why buy material?! And this went on for the next 10–15 years! We became experts in getting our material for free and this was so normal—for instance we found



Jellyfish, 2010

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all our extremely good and fashionable furniture pieces for our flat on the street; and later we officially defined our daily practice as our artistic practice. And, by the way, it makes so much more fun to work with used material than with bought one! Used material always has to tell you the most fantastic stories about previous lives! And we are not the only ones who practice it like this. Because this is the best way.

Which is your favorite discarded material to work with?

Wood! Wood is the most democratic material. Everybody is able to work with it and to create funny results.

One of my favorites is *Cars into Bicycles*—was it difficult to pull it off? Tell me some more about that particular work....

Cars into Bicycles is our programmatic statement about motorized individualized mobility. We are convinced that the car culture has to be replaced by another, much more sustainable, less polluting, less isolating, less violent, less devastating, more livable, more enjoyable form of mobility. Considering the resources that go into a car, we are convinced that all these rich, great, expensive, unique materials, that are condemned to waste their desolate, miserable existence in such a horrific creation like a car, deserve a better life. Therefore we carefully dissected this Saab and built two functioning bicycles out of the best parts this car provided. The experience of dissecting a car—one's own car—is something every car owner should have, worldwide! And the experience of riding a bicycle, which previously was a car gives everybody the feeling of the potential of changing the world.

Why use a Saab and not some American SUV, for example?

Actually we tried to get one of the 15 SUV Hummers from Arnold Schwarzenegger. We tried everything when we lived in LA to get in contact with him. Finally we got an answer, that he was not interested in converting his Hummer into bicycles because he had already converted his Hummers from petrol to gas. So he thought he had done enough for the environment. Then we looked everywhere for an old car and found the Saab. The good thing about the Saab was that this type of car has so many chains and instruments, that we could build the bicycles out of 100% car. We used everything only from the car. This was not possible with the Peugeot or the Opel, which we had transformed into bicycles a year before.

How much do you love your bike? What type of bike is it?

M: I love riding my bike—which is a mountain bike, but I cannot say that I love my bicycle. I don't have this sick emotional

relationship to my vehicle like billions of car owners have to their car. When I ride my bicycle I still have more of a connection and contact to the surrounding world, to the environment, the climate, the nature, the human beings around myself, so that I can interact, I can respond, communicate. This is what I love. In contradiction to car drivers who are disconnected to the surrounding world, who are enclosed and sitting unnaturally in their vehicle, who have a pathological relationship to their vehicle. (Also due to the power of their engine, their potential of dominating, of oppressing the non-motorized traffic and the surrounding world).

How are your feelings about those burning cars in Berlin and elsewhere then (those guys are the real Carbusters after all)?

In general we refuse all kinds of violence. But it is a crucial issue—this concrete violent action (burning cars) against instruments of a generally accepted structural violence (cars) speaks the same language like the targets of the violent burning car action. Brutality is never a good answer on brutality. It has to be criticized as this violent action and is simply copying the same level of violence that is exercised daily by these millions, billions of cars, worldwide. So: both—driving a car and burning a car are violent actions, are against all forms of life and are to be condemned. We prefer to transform cars into something better.

Event, *White Trash*—all those pieces are so great—which one is your favorite work, and why?

F: My favorite work is *The Games Are Over*. The bulldozer made out of wheat board which decays over years. The decaying process started with the first rain. Since then we have no control of how the work transforms. The material was leftovers from the Olympic games in Vancouver 2010. M: My favorite is the *Bicycle No.1* which we built in Santa Monica out of the Saab. It is so great to ride it. Oh—I just notice that I did fall in love with this bike....

How do you feel your work has evolved over time?

This is the most complicated question. In general our work became bigger, more precise, more engineered, more people involved, more participatory, more—architecture-like.

How do you work as a team? Who is responsible for which aspect of any given project?

We share, almost everything in our work: both the office work, PR, lectures, the building processes, casting of helpers, interns, communication, finances. Almost 50-50%. The only specialization exists in video (F), internet-programming (F) and architectural and structural planning (M).

Is it always process over product for you?

No—process-orientation and focus on results are both important. During the process there are a lot of moments when we stop for a while and enjoy the status quo. Sometimes we make a small party in the construction site, drink beer together with invited friends and are happy about the unfinished, but extremely interesting aesthetics. But we are always keen to finish the work, to define an “end” and to work towards a deadline, because this awakens hidden energies, hidden creative ideas, hidden secrets....

How “low-level” are the solutions you base your private life on?

We never had a car and when we lived in LA, as a family we also didn't have a car. We used our bicycles and the public transportation, which is much better than the rumors about it. In terms of our furniture and our consumer life, we try to find as much as possible. So the most shelves and furniture we have in our apartment is self-made, second hand or found. The same with clothes.

Are there things in this world you nevertheless “like” to consume without second thoughts?

In special cases we simply like to consume: books, watching soccer, listening to music. But going for shopping? Horrific! (Except bookstores)

How are your feelings about human intervention on this planet in general?

This question is too difficult for us to answer in this interview. We are thinking to write a book of 1,000 pages about this question. But in the meantime we recommend you to read the fabulous book *The World Without Us*, written by Alan Weisman in 2007.

Who should dominate the planet, and why? Are we doomed?

M: See the mentioned book *and*, I think, that more intelligent, more responsible, less vain, and less domineering human beings should govern this world. Nowadays it is the horrific neoliberal doctrine, invented by some non-intelligent, irresponsible, vain and domineering schools of economics that, through some submissive represents, governs the world. But we are not doomed to follow their insane ideology, if we don't want to.

What's planned for the future?

Some collaborations with theaters, work projects in Ethiopia, Canada, United States, Germany. More writing, some book projects.

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Rolltreppe im Wunderland, 2011

Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, www.publicart.at

Leobendorf/Österreich



Crushed Cayenne, 2008

found material