

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Axel Kloss-Fleischmann**

Axel Kloss-Fleischmann

b 1976(Kirchheim unter Teck, Germany)

Trained as a paediatric nurse and art therapist, Axel Klöss-Fleischmann is director of Atelier 5 at Mariaberg Werkstatt, Germany's first large-scale communal facility for people with intellectual and mental disabilities. Exhibitions include Skulpturen im Kloster (2011) and Begegnungen (2001). Artists in Exhibition #4 include Romina Bafaro, Roland Kappel and Marco Schmitt.

[START]

MoE: **Axel**, can you tell me about yourself, about **Mariaberg**, **Atelier 5** and the artist **Roland Kappel**.

AK: **Mariaberg** is a home for people with autism and other handicaps. It is in the **Alps**, far away from the city. People were originally brought here when they didn't fit in.

My first profession was as a nurse working with sick and critically ill children. I then started to work with mentally ill adults and later studied and worked as an art therapist.

Before I came, the art workshop here was small and no one was working with **Roland**. He was kept away from everyone else and although he had done a few exhibitions with building companies who liked his work, it wasn't really going anywhere.

MoE: What is **Roland**'s story?

AK: **Roland Kappel** was born in 1949. He grew up in an orphanage and was crazy about building sites and machinery. He was 20 when he first started to build his machines and cranes. He would create them out of discarded materials, not metal, but wood, paper and cartons. He then started to work in our metal workshop and that's where he found better materials.

Roland has created a parallel world of **Mariaberg** in his private workshop. He builds houses and towers, which is why he also builds his machines. He uses them in *his Mariaberg*.

MoE: Is it important for **Roland** to keep ownership of his work?

AK: Yes, he always wants to keep them. He'll say: *This machine is now at the exhibition in **Frankfurt**, but in a month I will use it again for the working area in **Mariaberg***. He plans which cranes and machines to use for specific areas and then identifies where he will use them when they are returned.

MoE: What do the machines mean for him?

AK: The cranes represent two things. He sees it as a hobby. He also understands that it is art. He has said to me: *Maybe the older people are reminded of the good old times, when they saw the nice building machines*

and cranes which don't exist anymore. He also likes the fact that children enjoy his work.

MoE: So he is technically very able.

AK: One time in **Mariaberg**, a street was being rebuilt. The workers were trying to lay a pipe under the road and there were cranes all around. **Roland** put on a white shirt, like an architect, went up to the workers and said: *You must move to the other street. This is the wrong street. Please close it!*

He showed some plans to the workers; and the workers believed him! They thought he was the man in charge!

MoE: **Roland**'s work reflects the reconstruction of cities. Where you are, **Mariaberg**, was it affected by the war?

AK: Yes. It was the era when **Germany** grew up again, the **Wunderzeit** of the 1950s. Everything was expanding and being rebuilt. A lot was happening during those times.

MoE: Perhaps **Roland**'s practice is related to him remembering that change and finding comfort in that.

AK: Yes, I think this is correct.

MOE: Tell me about the street signs.

AK: The signs are really amazing. He uses them in his parallel world of **Mariaberg**. He has 20 books full of traffic signs which he has seen on TV and in books, or simply made up.

MoE: I noticed there are tanks and army equipment in some of the traffic signs, that there are Arabic signs and impossible signs, signs which go in hugely complicated directions!

AK: I think when **Roland** sees something, he takes a photo of it in his mind. Everything is stored in his brain.

MoE: What I notice with artists like **Roland** is a desire to bring order to chaos. Our world is full of stuff, busy and disorganised. **Roland** creates

his own version. He doesn't build his world, there is no finished version, it just has to keep on being constructed, a working practice.

AK: Yes that's it exactly.

MoE: There are several artists in our show that are interested in construction. There's a great artist in Japan called Katsuhiko Terao, whose family used to own a construction company. He makes architectural plans of imagined buildings and cities. Does Roland work inside Mariaberg or on his own?

AK: He works inside Mariaberg. In the workshop he does the soldering because he needs the right machinery. He then takes them to his private workshop to fix them up and paint them.

MoE: Tell me about Marco Schmitt. What is his background?

AK: Marco is 25, also autistic and shy. He doesn't talk about his work a lot, so he just paints and draws. A large part of his practice are the houses he creates on sheets of paper. He counts all the windows and doors and writes down how many there are. Half a year ago he started to draw single items.

MoE: Did you work with him or just give him materials?

AK: We gave him the materials. He came straight from school to the workshop. He knows what to do, there's not a single moment when he's unsure. He takes his paper, chooses the pencils and checks all the colours are there. He is very positive and it's fun to work with him. We only provide the setting, the materials and a good atmosphere.

MoE: Many of the best workshops I speak to have these simple ingredients: love, enthusiasm and materials.

AK: I think the most effective aspect is the simplicity. Simple materials speak to the people. Even a pencil is helpful because it can reveal what is inside the person.

There is a story about a Chinese philosopher who wanted to cross the border to another country. He said to the border patrol: *I want to cross, I am a very important philosopher.* The patrol man said: *Show me your works, show me your literature. How can I tell that you really are a philosopher?*

The philosopher didn't have anything written down, so he sat down and wrote. This is the same point behind the workshop. I am saying to our artists: *Please sit down, please do it!*

If our artists don't come to the workshop, then they will live like they lived for too many years. If the workshop comes into their lives, you start to see their potential. The Chinese philosopher wrote his thoughts down and it became the only written scripture for generations thereafter. If he hadn't, then it would have been lost. Do you understand what I mean?

MoE: Absolutely. Yet the simple idea of a room with some materials and time doesn't exist everywhere. In many countries they still think of it as therapy, not as art. From what you are telling me, Roland thinks that maybe he is an artist. Marco perhaps doesn't, but he knows he is making something. What about Romina Bafaro - her work with wire is amazing.

AK: Romina works in the Mariaberg workshop. She loves to build cable reels, she feels it is work not a lot of people can do. She is fascinated by technical objects. I don't know if Roland influences her, but she knows and respects him and his work. She sees what he does and this gives her a push; but she doesn't copy him. She makes things on her own and doesn't look left or right to get her ideas. It all comes from her.

MoE: Working with these artists, how do you feel about the work you do - is it art, is it therapy, what is it?

AK: Through my work here I have come closer to understanding what *wholeness* means. It touches me personally because I know that diagnosis is not the only way to understand people.

The art and artists I experience every day have nothing to do with *artifice*. They are deeply original, genuine and authentic artists - and they map their reality without considering why or in what way that reality can be depicted.

I also believe that these artists are masters of the perception, discovery and implementation of their (and our) reality. Their works are not only reflections of events and conditions, they are profound presentations of experiences, individual sensations, feelings and perceptions. They express

simplicity, wisdom and vitality and affirm different ways of understanding ourselves and the world in and around us.

This creative process, this aesthetic of fragility and strength - it binds me, it upsets me and it makes me happy, all at the same time! Their art is a snapshot of humanity, of the objects, society and world which surrounds them. It allows us to share their point of view - and I feel privileged to be a part of their world.

[END]

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