

georg klein (Berlin)

ISEA  
2010  
RUHR

## DON'T CALL IT ART!

On Artistic Strategies and Political Implications of Media Art in Public Space

I want to present my work "The Watch Tower" discussing artistic strategies of electronic media art in public space. This work was realized in a former GDR watch tower in Berlin transforming it into a total media installation and working with a fake.

In 2001 I started with art in public space, leaving the concert and gallery spaces, and my concept of making art and music changed completely: the starting point now was not an artistic "idea" but a situational research. The main focus on spaces of transition with a certain suspense I often find a hidden conflict, a social and aesthetical tension which I follow up, collecting sounds, images, objects and texts, finding my artistic point, my subject and my space to work with. Finally by installing a site-specific work I create an aesthetically "condensed" situation by transforming a real situation.



FOTO 1: Watch tower at former Berlin Wall

In 2006 I discovered a watch tower at the former Berlin Wall. Now open for the public I could go inside, and looking out from the observation platform I got a feeling for this kind of work the soldiers did.

I got an interview with such a soldier and made further researchs on nowadays border watching worldwide – and I found the Texas Border Watch, an

organisation – initiated by the Governor of Texas of 2006 Rick Perry. With the help of webcam-surveillance they installed a border watch based on civil participation. A one-month test phase in November 2006 at the Mexican-American border was – how the Governors PR said – “a great success and demonstrated the high interest of the American citizens”. During the test “more than 200,000 viewers subscribed to the site and more than 25 million hits and 13,000 emails were recorded” ([www.texasorderwatch.com](http://www.texasorderwatch.com)). It’s a new model of private surveillance by the citizens of a whole country: border watching and self-defence by a social internet network.



FOTO 2: GDR soldiers at the watch tower in 1988

Following this model I planned a project for testing if this would work also in Europe. My project consisted of two parts: the installation part in this tower and public relation part based on the web.

Both were used to establish a fake organisation, the European Border Watch (EUBW), for inviting EU citizens to actively monitor the European external borders against illegal immigrants on their home PCs. Especially for Europeans we pretended a human touch: „Human tragedies like deaths of thirst in the deserts or the drowning of immigrants who were trying to enter Europe in the mediterranean sea could be prevented.” and “Illegals have no rights and are ripped of by european capitalists”.

The tower was converted into a registration centre of the EUBW with an audio-visual and interactive installation inside which demonstrated the new surveillance technology modelled on Google Earth. The opening of the EUBW tower was the cause for inviting people and the press worldwide by email and fax, linking to our official looking website [www.europeanborderwatch.org](http://www.europeanborderwatch.org) which explains the goals and the technique of web patrolling for private users including a registration form and a feedback form. We started emailing one week before the opening of the tower, got a lot of responses and collected them in a comment book.



» News	<p>Illegal immigration is one of the most pressing issues of national and international politics. Because of the increasing economic imbalance between the EU and its neighbouring states in the East and the South, more and more people try to illegally cross the EU border.</p> <p>The Treaty of Amsterdam on the European Union (EU) which came into force on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999 states that the EU:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• must be maintained and developed as an area of freedom, security and justice and as an area in which the free movement of persons is assured</li> <li>• in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combating of crime</li> </ul> <p>But in reality, this is not the case. According to Europol there is an annual increase of 500.000 illegal immigrants in the EU. In addition, it increases the crime rate and the smuggling and trafficking networks.</p> <p>The European Border Watch (EUBW) was founded to support initiatives of those European citizens, to whom European security is important.</p> <p>We are a non-profit and non-commercial organisation for information and intelligence on border watching worldwide.</p> <p>The goal of the EUBW is not only to prevent illegal immigration, but also to prevent human tragedies like deaths of thirst in the deserts between Mexico and the U.S. or the drowning of immigrants in the Mediterranean sea.</p>
» About Us	
» Goals	
» Register	
» Feedback	
» Contact	
Deutsch	

Africans near Canary Islands.

Illegal African Aliens near Ceuta/Melilla

FOTO 3: website of EUBW

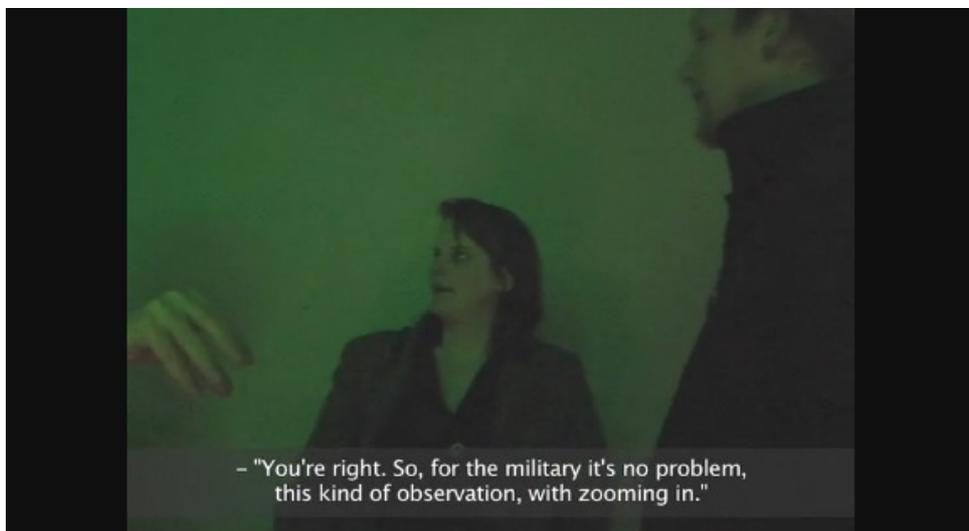
For on-site visitors of the tower there was a special guided tour, with a welcome at the entrance on behalf of the European Border Watch and a green informational handout with a web patrol registration form on the back. For an „official“ atmosphere we put two EU flags at the entrance door and weared EUBW stickers, also I myself as the „Executive Manager of the European Border Watch“.



VIDEO turmlaute.2: watch tower  
[http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014\\_t2-watchtower\\_ev.html](http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014_t2-watchtower_ev.html)

The dark *visual showroom* in the first floor has little embrasures as windows. Instead of these small loopholes for shooting six webcam images of ostensible border events are seen: for example a forest in the Carpathian mountains, an ocean beach at the Canary Islands, the icy Bug river on the border between Poland and Ukraine. (And also a webcam image of the US-Mexican border – the only genuine border video – allegedly from the partner organisation, Texas Border Watch.)

A guide to the EUBW appeared and explained the satellite webcam system and the goals of the organisation to the visitors. The visitors were invited to lie down on the camp bed and, with this overview of several EU external borders, to get a feeling for professional border watching. A lot of them were really impressed by the elaborated technology based on our „WEP 2.0 software“ using the new european Gallileo satellite system and Google Earth, demonstrated for different border sections around Europe by our trailer.



[VIDEO part2: guide + acoustic control room]

[http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014\\_t2-watchtower\\_ev.html](http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014_t2-watchtower_ev.html)

The second floor, the observing platform, housed the *acoustic control room* with an interactive surveillance equipment. The windows were covered totally by green, transparent foil producing a strange light inside and a view to outside like a military night vision device. A standing acoustic field was generated. The continuous sound represents the continuousness of the surveillance and changes only gradually over the duration of the installation. The field could be modified from the outside by means of a laser sensor. A voice of a soldier was triggered by a surveillance camera which reacted to "incidents" – movements of uninvolved passers-by. The sounds and voices produced a heavy, dark atmosphere in the whole tower.

Back on the ground floor we asked the visitors for registrating. The whole guide tour provoked intense discussions and sometimes we had to uncover the project to save ourselves. Some were really upset, some just laughed silently, some escaped out of the tower, some joined the EUBW and registered in the four weeks run with more than 1300 visitors in the tower.

And some students planned a demonstration against the EUBW and checking all informations about the organisation they discovered that is has to be an art project as they said coming a second time. At least we had a lot of discussions with the visitors which often were ambivalent, saying that it's right that illegal immigration has to be prevented but this kind of civil surveillance is may be not the right way.

Let's see two examples out of a discussion in the tower (second floor):



VIDEO part3: reactions

[http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014\\_t2-watchtower\\_ev.html](http://www.georgklein.de/installations/014_t2-watchtower_ev.html)

The *watchtower* project was my first experience with an art project I didn't announce as „art“. The whole publicity for the installation became part of the artistic work and was fully integrated into the fake. The visitors became part of the game which they took seriously very often and they began to think in a totally other way than being confronted with „art“. And that was the point: They had to behave, to react in a real situation although it was an artificial situation and that leads the visitors to think in a more political way.

I want to give you some more examples out of my work, like the installation „sonic parole“ at the media facade of the Anschutz entertainment hall, the O2 World in Berlin.

For this video work at a huge media facade I collected advertisement slogans out of 4 decades which use a revolutionary phrase, like „Fight 4 your rights“, „Impossible is nothing“, „Drive the revolution“, „reclaim your life“, used by the marketing of the global brands to produce a "radical chic". These advertisement slogans were shown as isolated messages without the related products, animated by transforming the type face according to their acoustical rhythm. The messages dissolve in their own sound producing visual ornaments. And the O2 media facade becomes a revolutionary propaganda screen, shooting pseudo-radical slogans into public space.



FOTO 5: sonic parole

[http://www.georgklein.de/installations/018\\_sonicparole\\_ev.html](http://www.georgklein.de/installations/018_sonicparole_ev.html)

Or like my project „Ramallah Tours“ in Israel, where I deposit a palestinian taxi in the street.



FOTO 6: RamallahTours

[http://www.georgklein.de/installations/021\\_RamTours\\_ev.html](http://www.georgklein.de/installations/021_RamTours_ev.html)

The taxi was making sounds by some transducers and was labeled with an internet address ([www.ramallahtours.info](http://www.ramallahtours.info)), where visitors can book a tour from Israel to Ramallah: „safe & easy“, breaking all conditions of getting contact between the two people. The website is written in three languages - english, hebrew and arabic - and advertises also a fake exhibition: „Shrinking palestine: an architectural challenge“.

Foto 7: website of the fake travel agency „Ramallah Tours“

<http://www.ramallahtours.info/>

Like at the watch tower this project exists of an installation object at a local public space combined with a internet website available in a global public space.

If you want to do art with political implications you have to think on the artistic strategy to get the visitors involved. Working in public space particularly necessitates thinking about how I reach my public, attract it to the work, hold it and let it go again. There is a big variety of possibilities in public interventions, interactive installations and participatory projects.

But if you're staying in the art context, even if it's art in public space, everybody knows the rules of the „game“, everybody respects the freedom of art. A provocation there normally just let you smile. Breaking this rules by hiding the art character leaves the visitor uncertain and irritated. Even when they realized it afterwards that it was a fake the visitors often told us about strong emotional feelings and thoughts.

Of cause I'm not the only one using strategies of „communication guerilla“, „subversive affirmation“ and „artistic fakes“. Several political groups and artist groups from DADA to the YESmen made gorgeous projects. And especially media art *in public space* has great possibilities to operate in this way further on.

Thank you.