

WÄNDIGKEIT NY, NY

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Schweizer Kunstschaftende in New York
Swiss Artists in New York

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What prompted you to move to New York for ten years in 1993? What effect did New York have on you and your work?

At that time the signs in my life were pointing toward change. I wanted to experience something new, unfamiliar. I wanted to live in a different place. My two years studying in Florence after high school and my later university studies in Geneva were positive experiences and I wanted to continue in that vein and move away from Zurich. I had visited New York briefly ten years earlier and thought the city was great. This would later shape my decision. I didn't have a precise vision of my future stay in New York – an urge to explore was the crucial factor. It wasn't entirely insignificant, however, that I hadn't been successful finding a place to live in Zurich. By chance I happened to see an ad in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, "to rent, loft in TriBeCa" – I applied, got the apartment, and I moved to New York in 1993.

New York meant a new chapter for me and for my work. I had had to give up my studio, the "alte Schmitte," the old forge, in Männedorf, for health reasons. I didn't want to and couldn't continue with the heavy iron sculptures I'd been doing. In New York I first focused on making watercolors and building models. After a year, however, I was drawn back to iron sculpture and I rented a space at the Tallix Art Foundry where Frank Stella, Joel Shapiro, and Roy Lichtenstein sometimes worked and had their larger sculptures made. I was working for an exhibition in Germany and had an assistant – one of the conditions of working at the Foundry was you had to hire an assistant. I built models and then made the molds from lightweight and meltable materials: paper, cardboard, fine woods, clay, or wax.

In general I'd always been interested in the connection of organic and geometric forms in my work – in my early wire sculptures as well as later in my iron pieces. The configurations were forged and welded. I first became familiar with casting techniques at the Foundry. My assistant took care of the physically demanding work and after the casting he welded the different individual parts – cast in stainless steel or aluminum – into an organic sculpture. (Today I construct all forms effortlessly on the computer with a 3D program.)

At the time – I remember, it was around the end of 1998, during the pre-Christmas season – there was a lot of hype in New York about Robotix, a new toy for building computer-controlled robots. I headed straight for

FAO Schwarz, bought the kit, and started experimenting – just like I had with my brothers' Meccano construction set when I was a kid.

Back then robots were all the talk in the United States – the Mars rover, in particular, was a major topic in the media. The new technology, the fascination for robots, was also relevant to me as an artist. For some time I hadn't been content with static (iron) sculpture. The discourse, that the viewer, by moving about the space, perceives sculpture as animated, no longer interested me. For me, sculpture was static, and the question I was forever being asked – which side was the front of a particular sculpture – was obsolete, in my opinion. Indeed, as an artist I worked to ensure that there wasn't a hierarchy of views.

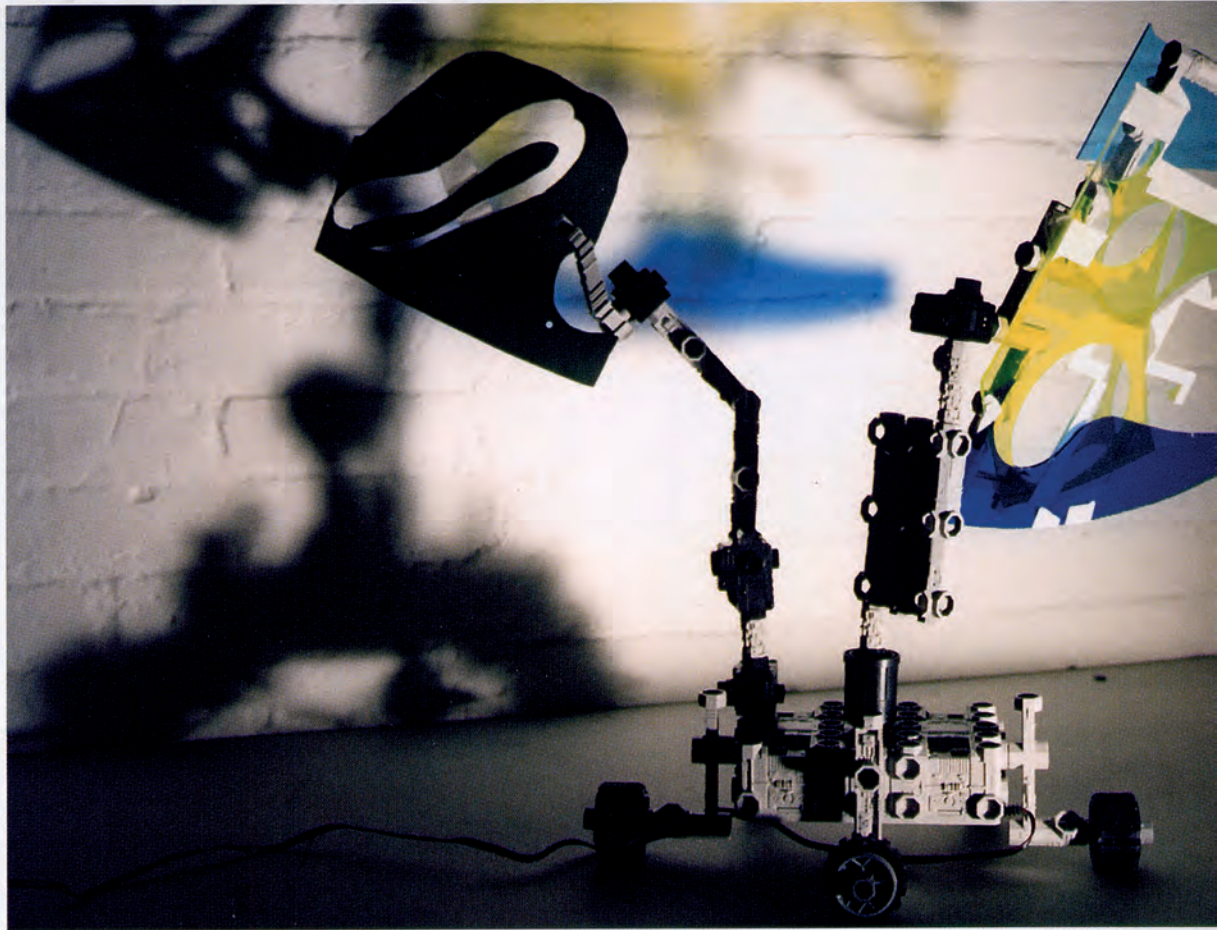
It was around this time, when I was starting to break with the inertia of iron sculpture, that I stumbled on this brand-new Robotix system. I also met a few students at New York University who, as part of their studies, were investigating the programming and control systems of robots. They were not only learning the technical aspect, but also the playful, creative approach to robots. I subsequently entered into a close collaboration with these students. A short time before this, I had been commissioned by the art committee of the Bank Julius Baer to design a client event in New York. During a visit to my studio, the committee members had seen my group of Robotix sculptures, "cobbed together" lightweight constructions – there were five of them, circa 30 to 50 cm each. Then came the fateful question – "Can you do these on a large scale?" – and after brief consideration, I said yes. Building, bolting, welding were things I'd mastered and the NYU guys promised to help with the computer controls. It was the start of a difficult undertaking. In short: constructing a model using lightweight materials is one thing, converting it to human-sized robot figures is another. None of us really knew what we were getting into. Such a conversion brings a whole string of modifications with it, which was something we weren't able to envision at the outset. We started with a lot of enthusiasm – we worked in my studio all day long and in the evenings I made dinner for the guys. We had to familiarize ourselves with new technical challenges. The guys read up on the subject and called in their professor for more complex questions. The sculptures finally took shape: they opened up, Plexiglas panes emerged, spun around to music and lights, and folded up again, as if by magic. No motor was visible – we used state-of-the-art technology, like that used for the Mars rover. We built and experimented, had setbacks, but we finished by the agreed date, and the event turned out a success: the guests were able to influence the motion sequences of the figures.

The outcome of this story: there is no way to make robots without massive material support from companies involved in this sort of technology and without sponsors. This commission meant financial ruin for me. I couldn't continue working this way, but going back to static sculpture was even less appealing. Keith, one of the guys I worked with, said: "Well, I think you should look into computers." And, indeed, the virtual world provided what I had been envisioning in terms of movement and lightness. I enrolled at the Pratt Institute of Art, and it was there that I became familiar with the software program Max, which I still work with today. I knew straightaway that this was exactly what I had been looking for – and then it wasn't so hard for me to give up iron sculpture and my studio and going back to school fulltime.

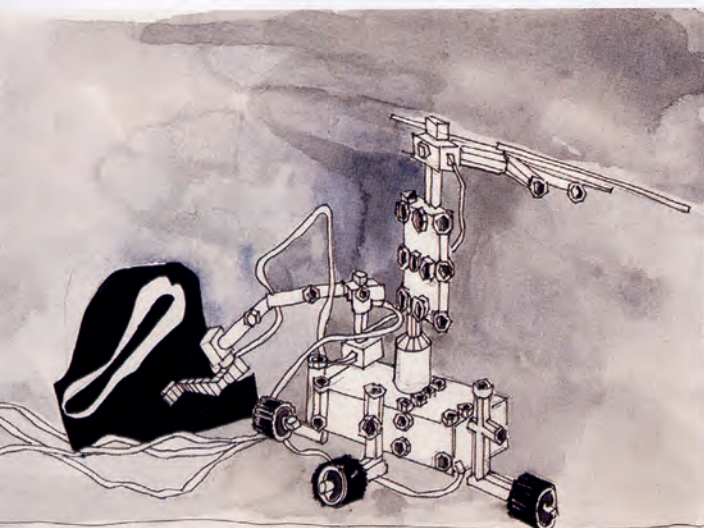
When I was a student in Geneva I had the nickname "La fille éphémère". My works were made of wire and transparent plastic film and I let them perform as light projections to music. Their presence was ultimately immaterial. My teacher in Geneva urged me to make something material, something that could also be sold. This is how, once I finished school, the wire constructions evolved into iron sculptures. I learned how to forge and weld. And then I designed computer-operated robots. But once I learned to use Max, the software program, in New York, I knew I'd reached the point where I'd have liked to have started in Geneva with my immaterial sculptures. I'd immersed myself in heavy iron sculpture to ultimately, in New York, arrive at the lightness of virtual sculpture.

Deux maisons – un arc en ciel, 1990
Stahl, Profilstahl, Stahlblech, lackiert
300 x 380 x 400 cm





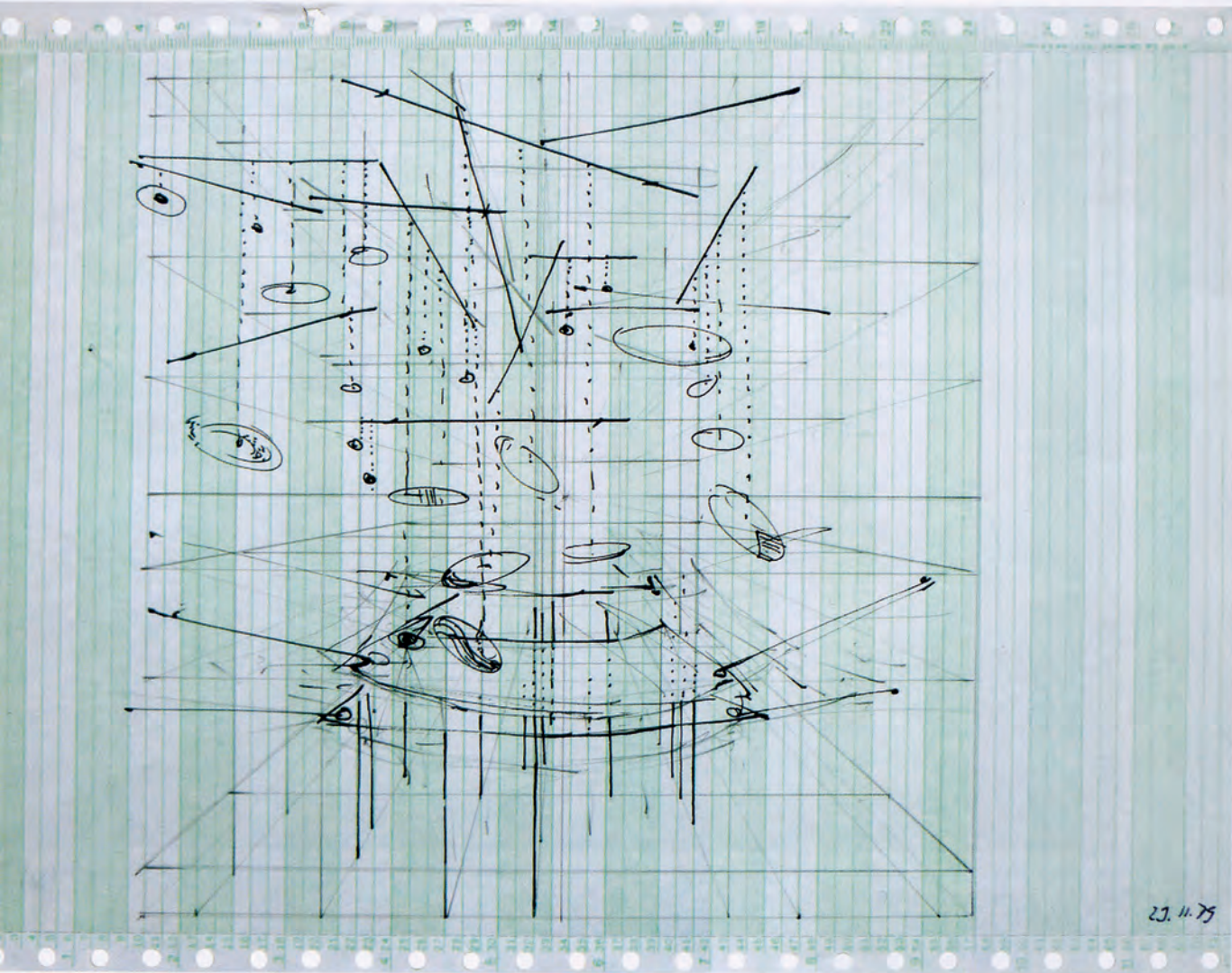
Murky baby, 2000
 Modell für Skulptur
 Robotix-Bausatz, Motoren, Plexiglas
 55 x 50 x 60 cm



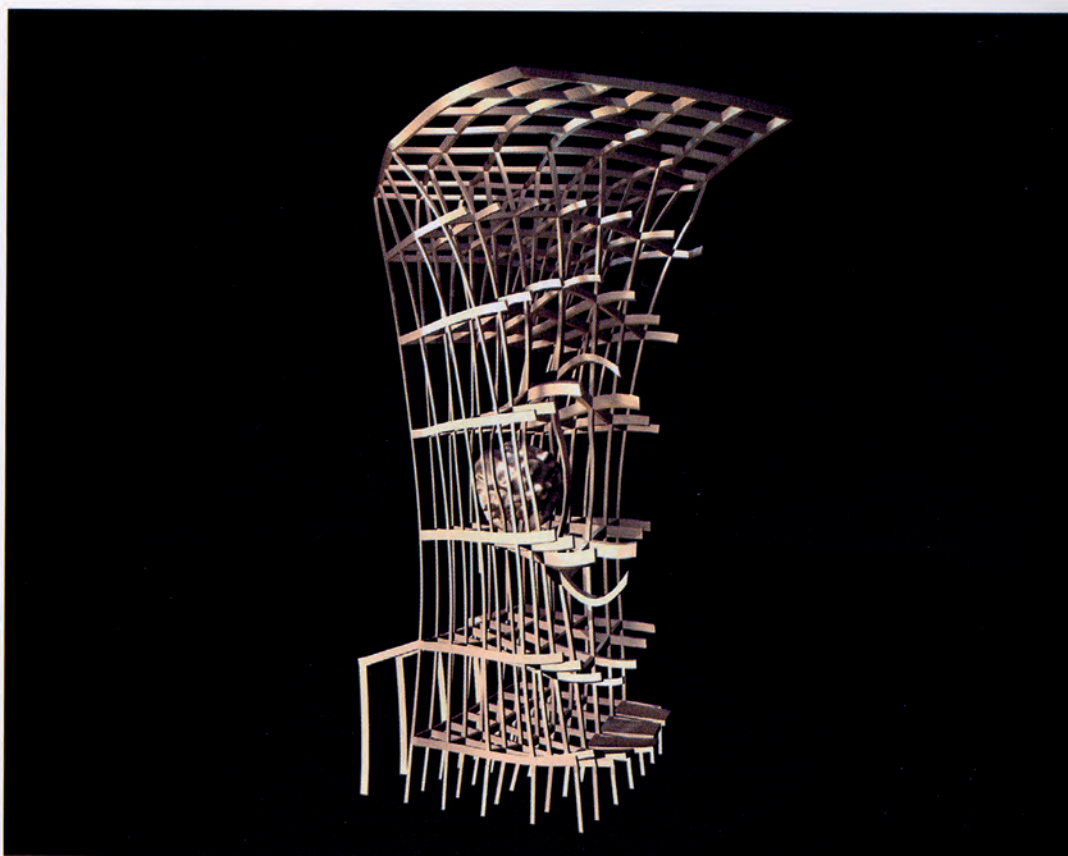
Murky baby, 2001
 Aus storyboard zu Murky baby
 Aquarell
 17 x 23 cm



Murky baby, 2001
 Computergeneriertes Bild
 Grösse variabel



Espace, 1979
Tusch und Bleistift auf
Computerpapier
23 × 30,5 cm



Cosmic Shelter, 2010
Polyamid
31 × 20 × 20 cm