

**Georg Klein** (de)

KlangQuadrat – Office for Sound  
and Media Art Berlin  
Artist, Director

## Don't Call It Art!

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

In contrast to art, theatre and concert spaces – where virtually everything is allowed but no longer exploited, the artistic environment guarantees benevolent understanding or art makes no impression on indifferent tolerance – in public space, including media space, social confrontation is a given. An artist is at the mercy of societal dynamics, between economic, social and political interests, and soon encounters sore points if his art is not devoted to mere urban ornamentation. Whereas only people interested in art go to art spaces, public space has the most diverse audience imaginable, from the unemployed to stockbrokers. The reactions of an audience whose everyday routine is confused, disturbed or stimulated are thus equally varied.

I started with art in public space in 2001, leaving concert and gallery spaces, and my concept of making art and music changed completely; the starting point was no longer an artistic “idea” but situational research. Looking around in the streets, watching people, following traces, discovering spaces, I slowly get a feeling for a place, a city or even a country, finding my artistic point of view, my subject, my space and my substance to work with. By focussing mainly on spaces of transition with a certain suspense, I often find a hidden conflict, a social and aesthetic tension which I follow up, collecting sounds, images, objects and texts. Finally, in a site-specific installation I create an aesthetically “condensed” situation by transforming a real situation.

In 2006 I visited a GDR watchtower at the former Berlin Wall. Looking out from the observation platform, I developed a feeling for the work of the soldiers, with one of whom I got an interview, and did further research on border watching worldwide.

The project “turmlaute.2: the watchtower” consists of two parts: the installation and the publicity. Both parts were used to establish a fictitious organisation, the *European Border Watch* (EUBW), inviting EU citizens to actively monitor European external borders against illegal immigrants on their home PCs – border watching as a social Internet network.



Fig. 1: Entrance of the EUBW watchtower with blue EU flags and “George Klein, Executive Manager EUBW” as guide

The tower was converted into an EUBW registration centre with an audio-visual and interactive installation demonstrating new surveillance technology modelled on Google Earth. The public and international press were invited to the opening of the EUBW tower by email and fax, with a link to our official-looking website [europeanborderwatch.org](http://europeanborderwatch.org), which explains the goals and technique of web patrolling for private users and includes registration and feedback forms. Responses were collected and pasted into a comment book that was made available in the tower.

On-site visitors to the tower were welcomed at the entrance on behalf of the European Border Watch and given a green informational handout with a web patrol registration form on the back and a special guided tour. On the first floor, the *visual showroom*, an EUBW guide explained the satellite webcam system and the organisation’s goals to the visitors. The dark room had small embrasures as windows, with screens showing webcam images of ostensible border events. The visitors were invited to lie down on the camp bed and choose a surveillance area from several EU external borders.

The second floor, the observation platform, housed the *acoustic control room* with interactive surveillance equipment, a basic sound and the voice of the interviewed soldier (more details see Klein, Georg, 2009). Visitors were asked to register on the ground floor. The guided tour provoked intense discussions, and at times we had to expose the hoax to save ourselves. Some people were extremely upset, others joined the EUBW and registered. During the four-week run there were more than 1,300 visitors to the tower and of course many more to the website.

Working in public spaces particularly necessitates thinking about how I reach my public, attract it to the work, hold it and let it go again. There is a

wide range of possibilities in public interventions, interactive installations and participatory projects, and I have worked with various forms over the last ten years.

The watchtower project was my first experience with a project I did not announce as “art”. The publicity for the installation became part of the artistic work and was fully integrated into the fake. Visitors became part of the game, which they often took very seriously, and began to think completely differently than they did when confronted with “art”, which was the point. They had to behave, to react in a real situation, although it was artificial, leading them to think more politically. In an art context, even art in public space, everyone knows the rules of the “game”; everyone respects the freedom of art. Normally provocation in this setting only evokes smiles. Breaking the rules by denying the artistic character leaves the visitor uncertain and irritated, in a mental and physical open space.

#### References

- Klein, Georg (2009). “Site sounds – On strategies of sound art in public space.” Organised Sound: International Journal of Music and Technology 14, No.1: 101-108, Cambridge University Press.