

With the death of Inge Mahn on the early morning of 19 June 2023, an artist passed away whose formal language will hold an exceptional position for many years to come and will, correspondingly, have a lasting impact. This formal language is sculptural by definition, but without any of the parameters of sculpture – neither of the traditional kind nor of the last five decades in which her work was created. At first glance, Mahn's three-dimensional white structures, which seem to disappear into and merge with the white exhibition space, speak of the disappearance of sculpture in a Beckettian sense. Yet one immediately sees that it is the exact opposite, namely a new presence of large, ambitious objects whose existence one would never have thought of. It is in this dialectic that Inge Mahn's work, whose impact will continue to unfold, is suspended.

Her studies with Joseph Beuys at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf were decisive in several respects, including for her exclusive use of organic materials. Using mainly plaster and wood, she elicited levels of expression that had not existed in this form before. Beuys was also decisive for her engagement with the art public. After all, whilst Beuys fostered constant revolutions at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the years before 1972, Inge Mahn designed and executed her emblematic sculptures as places of retreat, including the *Vogelnest* (Bird's Nest) and a sanctuary in the classroom – works which would guide her sculptural work until the end. On the advice of Joseph Beuys to Harald Szeemann, Inge Mahn took part in the legendary *documenta 5* of 1972 with *Schulklasse* (School Class), her final project at the Kunstakademie. Her refusal to engage with the art world's burgeoning celebrity culture also came from Beuys, despite an exhibition in the early years of Galerie Max Hetzler in Stuttgart, after her graduation.

A fulfilling life as an artist and teacher ensued – including the conception of the Weißensee School of Art, for which she ran for rector but did not get the majority – until a historic moment in December 2013. Rosemarie Trockel featured in the latest issue of the newly launched *Cahiers de l'Art*, the best art magazine in the world at that time, without any advertising. For the issue dedicated to her, Rosemarie Trockel could invite two further artists. She chose Absalon, the Israeli artist with an ingenious new view of volume who died of AIDS in Paris in 1992, and Inge Mahn. Rosemarie Trockel told the editors of *Cahiers d'Art* that I could write, since I was the specialist for Inge Mahn. That's what the *Cahiers d'Art* staff told me. I had never heard the name Inge Mahn before, but of course agreed since Rosemarie Trockel gave me the assignment. That's also how Inge Mahn's 2014–15 solo exhibition at the Akademie-Galerie of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf came about. This was its first solo exhibition of a female artist and, moreover, of an artist who wasn't a professor; it was decided on with Rita McBride, then the new rector, in cooperation with Galerie Max Hetzler.

In August 2014, Inge Mahn spent a whole week in the Akademie-Galerie getting a feel for the space. This resulted in a very special, quite tongue-in-cheek (that dimension was very present in her nature, work and oeuvre) exhibition course, which students from that time tell me is still fresh in their minds today. This resulted in a telephone call from Inge Mahn: 'We now have a very beautiful poster. But one thing bothers me. My name. Nobody knows my name. Not one more visitor comes because of my name.' Who among us has ever heard such a thing from an artist? Fortunately, we left her name on the poster and invitation, so this exhibition resulted in two lasting gallery connections. Before the exhibition was over, Inge Mahn called and said, 'Now it's your fault that I had to buy another calendar.' That was her way of saying thank you.

It started as an endless workflow, which was always handled within her self-modest framework, with the annual project at K21 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and the purchase of *Schulklasse*, her final project with Beuys, by the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, where she stands for the German reckoning with the Holocaust. These resonances are not far removed from her work.

There is something very fresh about the work, which essentially stems from the fact that between graduating under Beuys and participating in *documenta 5* in 1972 and 2014–15, Inge Mahn did not heavily involve herself in the exhibition business, although she regularly held exhibitions, largely with Stephan von Wiese. She very consciously avoided letting her work be consumed by the art world. This accounts for the freshness and the contemporaneous nature of her sculptural propositions – as one might refer to them in the conceptual language from which they come.

In Groß-Fredenwalde, in the north of Berlin, Inge Mahn carried out exceptional social and neighbourly work with the village museum and numerous other artistic projects. Groß-Fredenwalde is also home to the storage which houses her sculptures. 'But I don't show that to anyone here. Otherwise they'll think I'm a crazy person.'

Robert Fleck