

Expo – ‘Artist of human rights’ Françoise Schein returns to Brussels with a retrospective

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ARTIST OF THE HUMAN SPACE

ELSENE – The fact that a powerful NGO recently tried to hijack one of her projects puts Françoise Schein in a combative mood. “Metro stations that I designed – like Concorde in Paris – are world-famous. But nobody knows my name, I always kept it in the background. Now I want recognition.” At the CIVA, the Brussels Centre for Architecture, the Brussels architect and urban planner has built up her first retrospective.



In the west wing of the CIVA Françoise Schein is running around, excited. Together with a graphic designer she inspects the panels displaying her sculptures: architectural sculptures from Brussels to Sao Paolo, via New York, Berlin, Haifa, Ramallah, Lisbon and Stockholm. As long as the retrospective runs, Françoise Schein will remain in residence. Together with some neighbouring schools she will set-up a workshop about art and human rights. “If I feel at home somewhere, I don’t want to go away. I already feel that I could sleep here.”

The city’s underbelly

It characterizes Schein to want to be right in the middle of things. From her background as an architect, floor plans and maps are a natural starting point. She

plays with boundaries and landscapes and wants to anchor the inhabitants in their history. As an urban planner she often chooses for the city's underground: the metro network. "A metro station is always part of a map, with both feet you are standing right in the middle of a gigantic floor plan. I discovered that I wanted to work in metro stations in 1978, when I set up a project in the Bronx. At that time, this neighbourhood in New York was very depressed and unsafe. It looked as if a bomb had gone off. The only place where you could feel life was around the metro stations. Only there were some shops open and you could feel some liveliness in between the run-down houses. The metro kept it all together. It is the heart of a city, but also a portrait, a landscape. I discovered that urban design is also about city communities, about citizenship. From citizenship towards human rights is only a small step."

After this project the former student of La Cambre was offered the opportunity to work as an architect for the city of New York, but she brushed aside the offer. "I wanted artistic freedom." Nonetheless Schein's artistic career gained momentum. In Soho Schein redesigned the metro map to create the sculpture *Subway Floating on a NY Sidewalk*.

After New York Paris was calling. In 1989 she could unleash her creativity in the intimate corridors of the metro stop Concorde. Schein used articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen from 1789. "I was on the square where the French revolution had taken place exactly two hundred years earlier. It seemed essential to me to reflect human rights in my artistic language. Furthermore I believe that an artist that creates something in the public space has the duty to talk about community and socially universal themes."

Later on she infuses the metro corridors of Brussels (Sint-Gillis, Voorplein), Berlin and Lisbon with elements symbolizing human rights. But no artwork without an audience. "I want every project to be readable, understandable and intriguing."

Participative art

Tiles became her trademark. "Initially I preferred working with contemporary materials, like concrete, steel or electronics. But for the project in Concorde the public transport company RATP imposed strict specifications. I had to adapt my methodology to the materials. Gradually, I discovered how flexible ceramic can be. Undoubtedly, earthenware is one of the oldest materials available to man."

Schein refined her technique in Viuva Lamego, a tile factory near Lisbon. "It is an idyllic spot that I fell in love with. I spent almost one year of my life there whilst workers taught me the whole process of making earthenware."

Schein not only wants to taste the dust and smell the materials, but also wants people around her. "I love to work together with all kinds of people: engineers, philosophers, historians; people of all ages. Because everybody has a story to tell."

First of all Schein creates the macrostructure. Then every participant gets a working space, not bigger than a few tiles. Schein monitors the unity of the final artistic product through the colours. "I remember a Senegalese woman. She painted flowers on her tiles. All of a sudden and in a very spontaneous way she reflected on her artistic work. Whilst painting she started to talk about her home village in Senegal where she once had a job in a small company that processed

fish. She talked about the pots in which she put herbs and that she had painted with flowers. After painting flowers on the tiles, she drew different fish and started explaining to me about threatened and extinct fishes in Senegal..”

The woman participated in building up *Murmures*, a ceramic artwork on the front of the library of Les Mureaux, a suburb northwest of Paris. “It is extraordinary how for more than one year the 150 participants met, helped and appreciated each other. Finally we all celebrated the marriage of an elderly couple. When the project was finished the participants felt like orphans. A second and a third project followed, until a local politician joked with me: ‘We are not going to cover all the walls of Les Mureaux with tiles, are we?’”

Turning Point Rio

The origin of Schein’s interest in participative art lies in Rio de Janeiro. Around the turn of the millennium, Schein met the six year old Lohana in an orphanage. “Lohana said: ‘Você é minha mae da sorte.’ (‘you are my mother of chance ’). She was very communicative, almost asking me to adopt her. I said ‘yes’ immediately, but in reality she had a mother: Fernanda, a woman living on the streets, with whom I talked a lot. I never had the intention of stealing her daughter away from her.”

From that moment on Schein decided to work with children. She set up projects in the favelas. “I wanted that my daughter would always feel anchored in her city.” Schein formed a team and founded the organisation *Inscrire*. In the organic ground plans of favela neighbourhoods, such as Vidigal and Providencia, she mounted tiles on the walls to act as reminders of their human rights.

The *azulejaria*, the studio where the tiles were made for the successive projects in Brazil, nowadays runs on its own. “Some women turned it into their livelihood. They continue to attract projects to the favelas and in other neighbourhoods. The striking thing is that they teared themselves away from *Inscrire*. It is actually a sad story for me, but in the meantime it is highly admirable. I am almost proud that they kicked me out.”

Schein imported her instructive method of teaching about art and human rights from Brazilian schools into schools across Europe. *What do we want* is a recent work, a cooperation of pupils from three schools in Anderlecht together with photography students of the art school Le 75. The result will soon be shown at the recently renovated metro stop Aumale.

The fact that an NGO recently tried to hijack this artistic project, felt for her like someone stealing her child. “Maybe it is not exactly the right motivation, but the incident gave me a determined energy to prepare this retrospective.”

From construction site to construction site

This does not mean that the circle is closed. New hotbeds attract her. “I love complex cities, like Brussels. I would like to go to Tunisia, where a new constitution has just been adopted. The subject of human rights is at the forefront in the Arabic world. There is a lot of hope, but also a lot of disillusion,

but I don't think this doubt matters. I see it as a work in construction, like the declarations of human rights keep on evolving. You have to keep on thinking about it. I don't think I was mistaken when I stated in 1989 that it is important to continue talking about human rights, over and over again."

Kim Verthé

