

Oder Anders

**SCOTT ROBEN**

# Prelude

Like many commissions, Robert Keil's *Oder Anders* started with an invitation, which Keil chose to share with the global shipping and receiving company United Parcel Service, instigating a sort of collaboration. From October to November, 2021, Lothringer 13 Halle will become the site of a UPS Access Point to which parcels will be delivered and available for pick-up by recipients. Keil's issuing of the "invitation" is also the initiation of a gesture that will play out relatively automatically, though somewhat unpredictably, over a six week period within the institution's halls. This text is therefore less a description than a series of questions in anticipation of a situation that has yet to unfold.

*Oder Anders*, which means something like "said another way," may find friction in the doublings and role changes that occur when two found structures—a gallery structure and a global shipping structure—are brought into contact inside the building. Most likely, these will never resolve cleanly. Who, for example, is hosting whom? Is Lothringer 13 Halle hosting a UPS Access Point as an artwork within its exhibition? Or, will we come to understand UPS's global network as the temporary host of Lothringer 13 Halle? The overlay may also bring about other manners of spectatorship. How is the event of parcel distribution filtered through the setting of a contemporary art exhibition? And how does a contemporary art exhibition make contact with delivery persons and parcel recipients who hastily pass through it? For this "audience," will the institutional setting and artworks dissolve into ambience? What are its qualities?

Keil's concept is, on the one hand, an intervention into the architecture, and on the other, a choreographic prompt. That is to say: *Oder Anders* will inevitably become architectural as it reorganizes the space's function and, therefore, the patterns by which bodies will move through it. How do bodies move when they are approaching an artwork, or when they are arriving to collect a parcel? What differences arise in posture, speed, alertness? Meanwhile, packages, with their own specific materiality, dimension, and weight will move daily through the space, too. The sense of the work overall might lie in the character, effects, and traces of these various movements in proximity to one another. What kinds of marks will they leave on the architecture? What kinds of marks will they leave on the exhibition, on visitors, on the shipping company?

Finally, could *Oder Anders* be understood as a staging of encounters — or, to borrow some of the language at hand, of dispatches and receipts? Although many aspects will play out automatically, where do these encounters result in unscripted situations? Like two words that nearly rhyme, but don't, will Keil's intertwining of two found structures within the building, briefly or fleetingly, produce moments of disorientation? When their ill-fitting parts converge, what kinds of uncertainties, awkwardnesses, or hesitations might erupt as viewers, customers, and staff navigate their gaps? Moreover, how will these be recorded, remembered, and made sense of after-the-fact?

# Scott Roben in conversation with Robert Keil in the context of the work "Oder Anders" (2021), which was part of the project "dissolving matter & value" between Oct.-Dec. 2021 at Lothringer 13 Halle.

**ROBERT KEIL** (b. 1987, Penzberg) is an artist. He graduated in 2018 as a master student of Prof. Olaf Nicolai at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich and subsequently completed an MFA in Sculpture at Bard College New York. He works with a conceptual approach as well as sculpturally with classical materials, with self-programmed software, magnetic force or four-leaf clovers. His works and performances have been shown at the Kammerspielen Munich; Loggia, Munich; Bard College, New York; Hayward Gallery, London; KUB Arena, Bregenz; New Bretagne; Belle Air, Essen; Eigen+Art lab, Berlin et. al.

**SCOTT ROBEN** (b. 1989, Philadelphia) is an artist and writer holding an MFA in Painting from Bard College, New York, and an A.B. in Visual and Environmental Studies from Harvard University, Cambridge. From 2018-19 he was a participant in the Berlin Program for Artists. His work has been exhibited at various venues in the United States and Germany, and his writing on art has appeared in numerous artist monographs as well as publications such as *Art in America*, *Frieze*, and *Texte zur Kunst*.

**S** Maybe we should start with something concrete. The piece has been running for about a month now. How is it going? What's the day-to-day life of it like right now?

**R** It turns out that quite a lot of packages are coming every day. It's always the same person who comes to deliver the packages and pick them up. There's a face to the packages, somehow, which I hadn't expected.

Now that the show has opened, it's clear that I am only one small part of the whole thing. I just stop in now and then to see what's going on.

**S** How would you say the number of people coming to collect packages compares to the number of people coming to visit the exhibition?

**R** More people come to the space because packages are waiting for them. But then sometimes those same people come with a plan to see the show as well, with a package in their hand.

S I guess people who come to pick up their parcels are as much visitors to the show as anyone else, whether or not they perceive it that way. I have the impression from talking to you about the work previously that you don't have any expectations about how people respond to or engage with the work. You just want to see what happens. So if people pick up their parcels and ignore the show, that's as valid of a response as anything else?

R Yes. For sure. For me, it's that I want to create a potential with the work. And I also want to be quite precise in how I do that. But then it's totally fine: as you said, all experiences of the work have the same value. I'm more interested in how potential is constructed through an artwork than in communicating a certain message.

S When you started to think about your contribution to the exhibition, what motivated your desire to collaborate with a third party like UPS? Was there something about the gallery space itself, that didn't allow for that kind of potential that you were interested in creating, which is why you had to bring in another structure?

R I guess it had to do a little bit with the topic of the exhibition, which is summed up in the title: "Dissolving Matter and Value." Often matter in an exhibition functions very linearly. It's the model of: "I'm an artist. I get money to pay for some materials. I create a physical artwork with it, put it in an exhibition, people consume it somehow, and someone either buys it or doesn't." I was wondering how to manipulate that, and not only in a symbolic way.

For me it's always most interesting to start with a found structure, something that we all have to deal with in our daily lives, and to find a way of manipulating it, to put it somewhere else, and to get it to perform itself.

Of course it also shifts a lot of other power dynamics. For example, what is my role as an artist? Is this show this moment of presentation, of what I've labored over in the studio? For me it was a chance to change all of this, these different elements, and to see what happens. To bring the show and the production of an artwork closer together. Like a set or landscape – with all its components – that produces propositions in real time to which everyone relates in their own way.

S Does the viewer figure into that equation as well?

R Yeah, sure. I very much like this constellation between an artwork, the viewer, and the person who made the work. This is important for me, and I work with it a lot. But it's also about putting something in between those relationships, which is generally how I work. This is fun in a way that wouldn't work without the role of "the viewer."

S I see the intervention not just as a "coming between," which is the etymological origin of that word, but also a multiplication: everyone has a double role in the way you set up the project. The Lothringer 13 is also a UPS Access Point; the viewer is also a customer; the UPS site is also a sculpture, the sculpture is also a performance, and so on.

R Yes, that's a good point. I don't want to destroy those basic relationships. I like them. But I don't want to see them in a simple, linear way. This is not satisfying for me. I want to create the opportunity to play and switch roles. I like that art can offer this... and that it allows you to come closer to the construction of things, including of artworks themselves. The "how" matters. Actually I think this is also where the beauty sits for me. I consider the piece quite beautiful and not as anti-aesthetic, as some viewers of the show have interpreted it.

On the other hand, even though I enjoy working like this, and Lothringer was always very supportive, it's also exhausting for everyone. There's a lot of management and coordination, but also the institution itself is sort of dependent on a more traditional model of how an artwork works. In this case, they can't prove as easily—for bureaucratic purposes, say—that this is an artwork. And also many people who visit the show don't recognize or notice the piece as art—which is of course a totally valid response for me.

**S** The slipperiness that you're creating feels to me like an outgrowth of something else that's often present in your work, which is a troubling of the categories of sculpture and performance. Your work often involves sculptures that perform, for example, or sculptures in which a performance could take place. I wonder if that's a sort of ur-tendency of the work which in this case is triggering these other role changes?

**R** Coming back to the situation of the artwork, the artist and recipient—this relationship is already very performative. This back and forth. I think this is also how I think about objects and materials. They always exist in relation to something or someone else. For me an artwork is not one manifestation of something, but different possible narrations. Different strings that come together. In my mind, I can relate again and again in exciting new ways to a good artwork.

**S** The work flips depending on whether you're arriving to collect a package or to see the show. For some people, your Access Point will be a kind of frame for the other artworks in the show, which they may or may not be interested in. For others, there's a more classic kind of re-contextualization gesture happening where, because the UPS station is in the gallery space, you start to read all of the gestures, the qualities of that experience, as sculpture and/or performance. They get articulated more clearly or differently, because you're encountering them in the white cube. It prompts another kind of looking.

**R** For me, I really like that you just sit there, wait, and then suddenly someone opens the door and comes in, and it's like entering the stage. This is how my tin plate works, to say: "This is the stage. This is where it happens." Every little detail could be or is the show, which makes it also frustrating because you can't pick it out. But I enjoy sitting there, and when people open the door to get their package—maybe they have a red face and are very angry, or it's someone very nice and friendly—it's like a character coming in, and this character is very connected to a history, to a story, which in this case is also tied to the way that people receive, consume and relate to goods.

**S** In many ways you also make things harder to consume. For example, as you described, many people do not recognize what you're giving them as an artwork—they're used to consuming art in a certain way that this piece doesn't lend itself to. Then at the same time, UPS is an entity that we relate to and consume in a certain mundane, almost unconscious way, and here you suggest these other ways of relating to it that are not as familiar or clear.

**R** Part of what interests me about the found structure of the UPS shop is that this global shipping infrastructure is happening all the time both inside of and outside of the gallery. It defines so much of our relationships and culture, but we can't see it. Its rules are dictated by UPS based on their interests. Of course these corporate interests open the door for a lot of unfair labor practices and other abuses of power that are perpetrated by UPS as well as other companies that make use of their services. But a lot of other things happen within this system as well, and I wanted to explore some of those things that aren't of any value to a corporate bottom line, but that might have value in other senses. UPS is not interested, for example, in how a package gets handed over to another person. This act of giving and receiving is a relationship that UPS doesn't care about. This is important to me. Perceiving these extra aspects

of the situation is one way of taking ownership of these structures back and inhabiting them differently. Instead of being confined to my assigned role, I have the possibility of playing and defining other rules. Hopefully I can then also enjoy life outside of the exhibition space more, realizing that this potential is there.

**S** That seems crucial to the work—that for you, these physical or emotional qualities of the specific, day-to-day running of a UPS shop lead to noticing a space beyond the company's bottom line, and to stepping into a space that's outside of the roles it prescribes us.

**R** This is the artwork. And just thinking of it, for myself, as an artwork is already a step in the direction that we just talked about. Claiming that this is an artwork is actually a way of opening up these different ways of relating, and of relating it other things that come up in the exhibition space.

**S** I wonder about the question of audience. The work doesn't quite have an audience, or a viewer, in the conventional way. Either you're a participant, or you're not. And a lot of people won't be aware, or understand themselves as, or even care that they're participants. But they are participating nonetheless. You talked earlier about wanting to think about objects and how their meaning and value can change or multiply in relation to their surroundings — that all changes depending on who you are in relation to the artwork—how you're participating. But then there are some people who won't go to the show and who will only encounter the artwork as an idea. I guess those people are the closest thing to a conventional "audience" that the work has, although even then, UPS part of a global connective structure in which everyone is implicated.

**R** Yes, I also like to just think about an artwork, to think about the idea.

**S** In our earliest talks about this project, you were imagining the piece as a more permanent intervention — that the UPS Access Point would continue beyond the span of the exhibition. For practical reasons, that wasn't possible, but the idea of a permanent performance seemed to stick for you. And you even mentioned it as a kind of Kunst am Bau, which I found interesting, because it suggests that even something as ephemeral as the action of collecting and distributing parcels was itself an intervention into the architecture of the space.

**R** I still like the idea of Kunst am Bau, and of having it permanently running. Maybe in that case people would eventually forget that it's an artwork. It becomes part of the architecture and the institution and how they're perceived. It's a natural thing that continues. I really enjoy that it might become reality again, that no one would even really think about it as an artwork again. That something can be an artwork, but also lose its status to not be an artwork. This dynamic is also—somehow I seem a lot of beauty in there. I do that with a lot of other things. You have these feelings about the thing, but then it can float back to where it came from. For me this is a quality.