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# Hans Walter Müller



To visit Hans Walter Müller, you have to exit the Bordeaux motorway south of Paris and drive down a few narrow country roads. At the end of an airstrip, you see the apron of an old military airfield. Parked on the left in front of a wooded piece of land is a rusted old Renault Savien and, beyond it, there are yellow shapes shimmering through the bushes: this is where Hans Walter Müller has lived since 1971. Depending on how you view it, his dwelling is either very small or huge. Indeed, there is a giant inflatable membrane arching above a hole in the ground as large as a three-bedroom apartment. To access the hall where Müller lives, you have to go through a yellow airlock; in fact, you have to squeeze your way through what looks like a pair of giant vertical rubber lips. There is an old Honda engine humming away to maintain a constant excess pressure. Whenever it fails, the spacious hall that Müller lives in with his wife collapses around them. It does that, too, whenever it has snowed heavily, which, as Müller tells us, is something that has happened in the past. His house then becomes very small indeed, i.e. just the hole down below in the rock face, beneath the ground, to which Müller has dug a small side entrance. Life here is like that of a mole's inside its tunnel, but among plants and books. A staircase leads up into the hall, which is anything but that: the sun shines through the translucent membrane, and you find yourself at the very heart of nature, but shielded from it nonetheless by a light film of plastic. Müller has been living like this for more than four decades. When he moved in, people thought he was insane. Who could live inside a plastic bag?

Müller showed that it was possible. He built his inflatable hall, which is also his workshop. And it is here, to this day, that he still has the strips of plastic for his yellow-transparent inflatables cut to size and welded together. Müller was born in Worms, Germany, in 1935, and by the time he moved here he was already a well-known member

of the architectural avant-garde. He studied architecture in Darmstadt, graduating in 1961, but it was in Paris first and foremost – where utopians like Yona Friedman were teaching and artists were working on “kinetic art” – that Müller found the ideal climate for his works. He worked on light and photographs/slides, on dissolve and fading effects; he experimented with electric motors to see how they might support an “architecture in motion”, with building houses that could breathe. His first artistic works went on show at the Biennale and at Frei Otto’s legendary pavilion at the World Exposition in Montreal. But Müller was not content with designing kinetic machines as artworks. He was serious about the old idea put forward by Gottfried Semper that architecture was merely a second layer of fabric that people put around them like clothing.

For many architects of the day, one of the main motivations for experimenting with inflatables was that it was better to build a world that is shut off from the environment, from exhaust fumes and industrial pollution. When Ant Farm (the experimental Californian architecture commune) began printing instructions for its own inflatables – the famous *Inflatocookbook* – and its members walked around in helmets, it was also an ecologically motivated critique of a society prepared to sacrifice its life fundamentals on the altar of industrial growth – and more.

What made inflatables so attractive to architects at the height of the massively brutalist modernist age of concrete was their lightweight, spontaneous and versatile qualities, first and foremost. The construction method itself was also resource-friendly.

In 1969 Müller built an inflatable church at Montigny-lès-Cormeilles north of Paris. It weighed 32 kg in its deflated state; it was capable of accommodating 200 people and could be set up anywhere, lending an unexpected avant-garde reality to the religious metaphor of the congregation as a ship that sails around the world. The entire church was lighter than a sail.

Müller was designing his inflatables at a time when the Vienna architecture actionists of Haus-Rucker-Co were unsettling public spaces with their “pneumatic cells”. The *Gelbes Herz* (Yellow Heart) looked



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Hans Walter Müller

like the pulsating organ of a “psychedelic animal”; in essence it was nothing other than a bed surrounded by inflatable materials that you got into through an airlock. It was set up at the bottom of the construction pit for the new police headquarters in Vienna in 1968, which meant it was also a “dig” at the rigid notions of what is permitted in the public space and what isn’t.

Reyner Banham and François Dallegret’s *Environment Bubble* and also *Oase Nr. 7* by Haus-Rucker-Co had similar objectives in mind. It made its appearance in Kassel’s public space at documenta 5 in 1972, as if someone had inflated a giant bubblegum into the space behind the colonnaded façade of the Fridericianum. A see-through bubble you could sit in or doze in far above the city inside a human-sized soap bubble, prominently visible and yet detached from the crowds below.

Müller countered the hedonism of these “fun bubbles” with more serious intended uses for his inflatable habitats. In 1975 he manufactured 35 inflatables for homeless people, all of which were distributed during one freezing cold night in February. Countless other inflatables for museums and theatres followed, for example the inflatable theatre for the Olympic Games in Barcelona. And yet, gradually, people forgot about Müller – until younger artists like Tomàs Saraceno and architects like Plastique Fantastique and Raumlabor revisited the idea and Müller’s key themes: does it take a solid building to create a venue or would a mobile structure be conceivable, one that embeds itself temporarily somewhere and creates space wherever it appears, like the *Küchenmonument* (Kitchen Monument) that the Berlin architects collective developed together with the specialists at Plastique Fantastique for the Akzente cultural festival in the Ruhr district. Excess pressure is used to inflate a transparent bubble out of a container, with the bubble, accessed through an airlock, providing space for up to 80 people to dine or dance, etc.

Initially, the container was set up as a sculpture at inhospitable locations, such as beneath a motorway bridge, or in a run-down park. The pneumatic monument simply inflated its way into the city, like bubblegum. Thanks to its shape, it did not clash with the existing housing stock,



- 1 H.W. Müller, inflatable house near Paris, 1970s
- 2 H.W. Müller, inflatable house near Paris, 1970s
- 3 H.W. Müller, pneumatic structure, 2015



but simply nestled up to trees, pillars and buildings – and then disappeared without a trace afterwards.

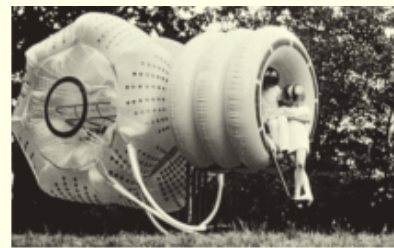
Passers-by were irritated by the fact that there were food odours coming out of the artwork – and then, suddenly, it would exhale its bubble, growing energetically and noisily as it filled with air, and then snuggle into empty spaces and up against façades, lanterns and trees. First a banquet for the entire quarter was organised inside the transparent space: “the postman, the kiosk owner, and the Gürel family from the third floor of the neighbouring building all became cooks and hosts alike”, said the architects. After the meal, the bubble disappeared as quickly as it appeared. The object continued on its travels and became the *Ballsaal Ruhrperle* (Pearl of the Ruhr Ballroom); this time, dance music came out of the box. Then the box continued on its way, again transforming the city into a public kitchen. The classic either/or of the contemporary European city – either behind thick walls, i.e. on the inside, or out in the public square, i.e. outside – was dissolved. A membrane creates an open, weatherproof, mobile intermediate space that wanders through the city and is multi-purpose in its function.

The transformation energy of the pneumatic urban machines that Müller and his students build is quite astonishing. Once inflated, they even manage to turn a motorway bridge into an attractive venue; guests sit inside the bubble as if in a space ship and, through the protective membrane, they look out at the city as if it was the hostile, oxygen-deprived environment of outer space. At the same time, it becomes the hallmark of a different notion of the city, especially at night when it's illuminated and depicts its occupants as half-shadows.

The membrane creates an open, weatherproof, mobile intermediate space that wanders through the city and is multi-purpose in its function. What emerges inside these bubbles is a different notion of what architecture can be: not something static, built for all eternity, inflexible and expensive, but something dismountable, mobile, a stage that is as open as possible to all types of purposes, not just as a pop-up restaurant, but as temporary accommodation, as a membrane that separates the sleeping place from its environment. It is also about a political deconstruction of the systems that shape building practice and

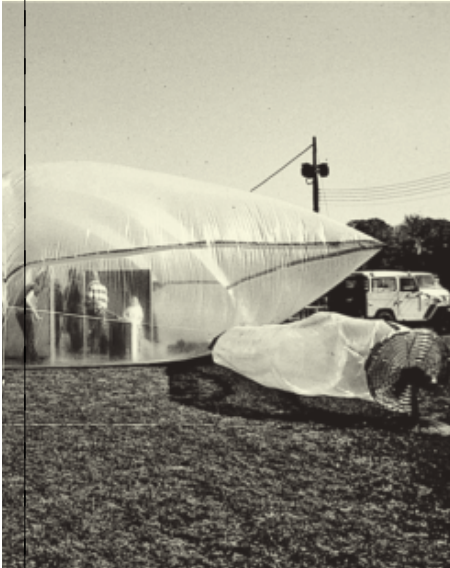


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- 4 Ant Farm, *Clean Air Pod*, Berkeley 1970
- 5 Haus-Rucker & Co, *Oase Nr. 7* at documenta 5, 1972
- 6 Haus Rucker & Co, *Das gelbe Herz*, 1968



urban planning. Who decides how the public space is designed, how it is built, what materials are used, and in what forms public life can take place? These are all questions that the pneumatic monuments raise, which Müller continues to work on, inside his own inflatable hall, south of Paris.

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7 Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Cecil Balmond, *Serpentine Pavilion*, 2006

8 Raumlabor, *Küchenmonument*, Berlin 2006