

Überwurf (Drape Sheets)

Birgit Schuh, Art in Public Spaces, University Hospital in Munich, Germany, 2017

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The large, bright blue and green drapes, hung over a grey concrete wall, are an immediate eye-catcher. They appear to have been accidentally left there and seem irritatingly out of place. For those who are aware of the location and know that the long wall leads to the operating theater of a hospital, the scene instantaneously evokes corresponding connotations: Blue and green are the colors of surgical drapes and gowns, used in hospitals around the world. Has a surgery team spontaneously decided to call it a day? Or has the hospital's laundry service forgotten the sheets? Or are the sheets concealing something – something that must be protected and which our eyes are not supposed to see?

The mysterious “sheets” are, of course, not real. They are made of fiberglass-reinforced plastic which almost perfectly replicates the surface texture of textile cloth, including the creases. The “sheets” are, in fact, a work of art by German sculptor Birgit Schuh, bearing the short title *Überwurf* (“drape sheets”).

The artwork intrudes into the hospital's spatial surroundings and reinterprets them, discarding the idea of the built-up area as immutable, rather portraying it as an open, temporary situation, designed and shaped by humans, modified over and over for repeated utilization – a kind of permanent worksite. In this way of thinking, an urban structure may be considered a living organism and a grey concrete wall can be interpreted as a “patient” awaiting a surgical procedure – perhaps an esthetic one? In *Überwurf*, a central motif in Birgit Schuh's creative work comes to effect: The artist's occupation with landscapes and architecture, that is, the interaction with basic forms, silhouettes, and the potential of shapes and materials to change. This interaction appears to be invariably light, almost playful. Quite fittingly, *Überwurf* furthermore bears a strong resemblance to the German word “Übermut”, which translates to “exuberance” or “exaltation”.

Birgit Schuh's artwork, however, is much more than a simple humorous gesture, more than just a description, more than a mere illusionistic gimmick: *Überwurf* sets something inside us in motion that we cannot immediately explain. The artwork, however clearly we can describe it, also retains something abstract and does not restrict itself to being a plain object. On the contrary, it consciously refers to its environment, opening up a free dialog with the rectangular shapes which form the concrete wall and with the netlike textile fabric that wraps around the building in which the hospital's surgery center is housed. Essentially, *Überwurf* denotes nothing but that which has been characteristic of the art of sculpture for centuries: The workmanship with materials, creating unexpected shapes and varying volumes which influence the space surrounding them. In a narrower sense, Birgit Schuh's artwork is part of a tradition of abstract sculpture that defines an independent but contextual reality, thereby intruding into our habitual understanding of things and, ideally, also changing this understanding. This sculptural tradition has its roots in the postwar years with the minimalist notions of *New Sculpture*, embodied by sculptors such as Robert Morris or Lynda Benglis. It can also be associated with the plastic explorations of Franz Erhard Walther, who introduced the experience of folded textile space to the arts. The works of these artists have one thing in common: They reflect our reality and simultaneously challenge it. With its mere existence, this kind of art expands our awareness, disrupting our standardized way of thinking, which is usually oriented towards functional thinking. Thus, *Überwurf* invites us to interact – be it in a curious, excited, imaginative, or inspiring way. For every time we interact, contemplate and think outside the box, we avoid falling prey to daily routines and letting the seemingly unchangeable take control over us.