Semantics of a City

by María Inés Plaza Lazo

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Artist Ruth Buchanan at the opening of *A garden with bridges (spine, stomach, throat, ear)* (2023), A project for the New Patrons of Mönchengladbach. Photo: Florian Wagner.



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Preparatory workshop: *No such things as weeds: care, growth, regeneration part 1.* Public wild plant workshop with Caroline Pekle and Ruth Buchanan, garden of the centre for the unemployed, 2021. Photo: Florian Wagner.



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After five years of development with the communities around a secondary school, centre for the unemployed, and art museum in Mönchengladbach, Germany, Ruth Buchanan's A garden with bridges (spine, stomach, throat, ear) *opened in May 2023. For* HUM, *María Inés Plaza Lazo considers the significance of the work's citizen-led commissioning process and Buchanan's architectural installation for a space at the intersection of the town's social institutions. Plaza Lazo writes that Buchanan's work does more than allow access to social interaction by building literal bridges and ramps into a garden; it creates a space that promises inhabitants a break from the hegemonic social relations of the city.*

The *Arbeitslosenzentrum* (centre for the unemployed) in Mönchengladbach is not a job centre.[01] They often get confused for one another. Forty years ago, when unemployment was at its peak in Mönchengladbach, this nonprofit association was founded, and since then has entangled itself into a tradition of welfare and the labour movement. Thus, since the 1980s, the centre for the unemployed has offered not only counselling, guidance and courses for those who seek it, but also a lunch table. It is at this table that the first meetings with members of the New Patrons and the artist Ruth Buchanan took place to embrace the commission from citizens for a work of art that intervenes in a space and turns it public.

This table is also where the first questions were formulated: How do social institutions, such as a centre for the unemployed, and their neighbours—the Museum Abteiberg and the secondary school Stiftisches Humanistisches Gymnasium—create opportunities for encounters? The first attempt at an answer came from the principal of the school: Could the canteen of the centre for the unemployed also prepare food for the students?[02] Unfortunately not, as the rooms only have capacity for fifty people. What would it need, then? It would need a pergola and an outdoor kitchen—indeed, a whole garden.

Buchanan is known to take every opportunity to question the etymology of exposure and exhibition-making throughout histories, contesting it with playful, dynamic and appealing forms that turn the abstract into social, even though both are manifestations of reality. She dynamises the relationship between body, power, language and the archive.[03] The vocabulary she uses for the artwork that resulted from this commission, *A garden with bridges (spine, stomach, throat, ear)* (2023), is therefore consciously treated as an element of the artwork itself; a catalyst for considering the city as a whole body wherein sensory and aesthetic elements are renegotiated and the garden becomes an important organ of the city. Organs here are to be understood as synonyms for bridges: revealing the hierarchies between functional social institutions, which, as membranes, hold the different functions of the city. This analogy may seem somewhat redundant, especially when it is art in public space that is being described. But what Buchanan wants to demand of architecture is to forget its

mechanical ideals, and open up to something more important for beings: vitality.

The artist challenges the ideal, humanist relation between architecture and the body, replacing the technical discourse with a linguistic game to describe what is desired as common; as public. She uses architecture as language. This displacement from a technical or ergonomic consideration of architecture into a semantic opening of itself reminds me of what French philosopher Georges Canguilhem (1904–1995) stated towards an aesthetic image of human proportions, and the problem of standardisation that is to be found in abstract and idealist archetypes that seek to encompass a model of the human body in which it functions as an object. In *La Connaissance de la vie* (1952), Canguilhem studies the possibility of conceiving of organisms not on the basis of mechanical and technical models that would reduce the organism to a machine, but rather on the basis of the organism's relation to the context in which it lives, its successful survival in this milieu, and its status as something greater than the sum of its parts.[04] Canguilhem disarms and questions herewith the ideas of health and pathology, of living and inanimate things, and brings us back to the usage of language in Buchanan's spatial interventions. She questions normativity through poetic gestures, through the cracks between abstraction, theory and social work. To give an example, she expresses in the exhibition *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS*:

> *Women against architecture*
> *Women against fire*
> *against cold*
> *against steel*
> *against idioms, aphorisms, norms.*
> *Women against numbers, buildings, inside, outside, color, form*
> *Language or loss of control.*
> *Look up a word: Look up a word on a tongue, look up a word on a tongue, in a mouth, on a tongue Ssss-society:*
> *Society is a measure of a gap.*[05]



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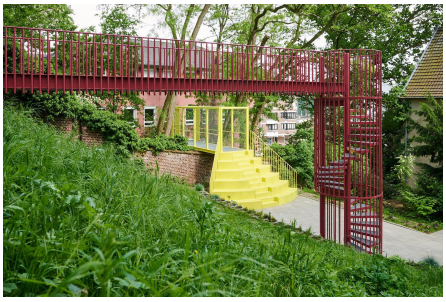

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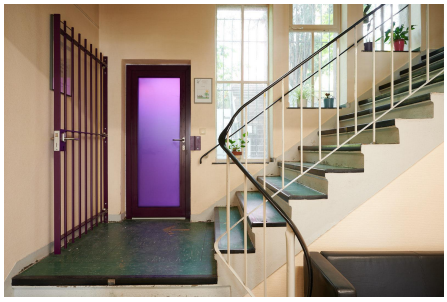

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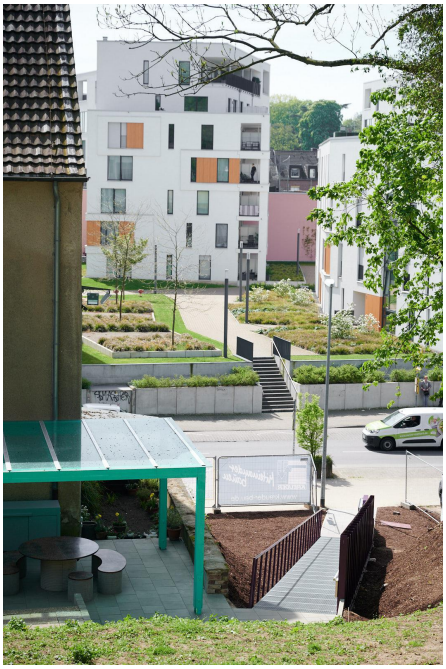
Back to the beginning: Mönchengladbach. A city without a centre. The station square envelops a construction site; there are hardly any stores, except for the chains typical of German shopping streets. “This is not the place to come if you can avoid it” says Susanne Titz, director of the Abteiberg Museum.[06] Mönchengladbach’s complicated history as a divided area is palpable, with neighbourhoods strongly demarcated along lines of class and race. The identification of its citizens with the city is hardly possible, even though all the city’s nervous systems—the hospital, the bank, the postal office, the train station—flow through it. In contrast, the garden Buchanan has developed within this place, unfairly described as uninteresting, opens up a bouquet of colour exploding in different directions. From where I stand in the middle of the garden behind the centre for the unemployed, pink goes up, neon yellow to the right, light green revolves in the centre, purple expands left to the street. The desire to bring this city back to life is evident in the engagement of different demographic groups coming into this garden. How did they plan for something like this?

The answer was found in the method of the New Patrons, the first programme of contemporary art commissioned by citizens, founded thirty-one years ago in France.[07] The idea is to democratise an ancient privilege that has shaped European cultures: that of commissioning art. Ancient cultures knew of art commissioned by citizens, and a common thread of civic art commissions runs through European cultural history to this day. The invitation from Kathrin Jentjens, New Patrons mediator for the Rhineland area, to Buchanan arose from the tension of these different considerations to realise the first commission with the New Patrons in Germany's Northern Westfalia region.

The chronicle of *A garden with bridges* began six years ago. New Patrons were connected in 2017 with the centre for the unemployed and the secondary school to build social bridges in a city "that never has money" and where they are noticeably needed and possible.[08] It took several meetings between students, teachers and citizens to find common interests to anchor the commission after which, in 2019, Buchanan was invited to have a meeting with interested people from Mönchengladbach, taking the architectural intervention into a literal manifestation of these needs.

The way in which the project site applies urban development to historically burdened architecture, working-class history and social traditions opens up new possibilities for dealing with Mönchengladbach's past and present. As a prelude to the sculptural interventions in the garden, Buchanan developed a collaborative workshop programme, where children imagined the sculptural occupation of the open space, giving Buchanan a departing point for her concept to develop. Other workshops unfolded as think tanks for potential events between, or on, the bridges. Together with invited artists, workshops dealt with central aspects of the project, such as community gardening, plant science or body perception, but also with work and working life. Work, care and physicality are thus at the centre of all of these encounters, which in themselves are core elements of Buchanan's artistic practice—that is, opportunities to trace subjectivity in social fabrics, to underline its absence, to shape its position. Buchanan's attention appears as a slowly meandering amalgam of images that begin in the body and its movements. Her projects

show results of collective exchanges in forms that are often abstract; clean lines, flat planes, instructions for action, placing things as words and words as things. The process never belongs to her alone, but to the students, teachers, caregivers, artists, and also to the signs of history that still levitate in the places where she intervenes.



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Preparatory workshop: *No such things as weeds: care, growth, regeneration part 2*. Wild plant workshop with Kobe Matthys (Zenne Garden) and Ruth Buchanan and the commissioning groups, garden of the centre for the unemployed, 2022. Photo: Florian Wagner.



Preparatory workshop: *Midnight/Worker: History, Temporality and context*. Film program and conversation with Maya Schweizer and Kathrin Jentjens hosted at Museum Abteiberg, 2021. Photo: Florian Wagner.



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The pieces belong to each other, as a composition, but they also belong to the city, and each one to themselves. As organs, they have integrity themselves. Thus, they leave enough space for metaphysical presence. I entered through the throat as if entering

a new building, only to realise it slid me back to the reality of the public space. Again, I think of a French philosopher, Henri Bergson, and the term he coined, é*lan vital*, which englobes the question of the spontaneous transformation of beings and organisms, moved by an internal force, emanating the properties of life, perception and intuition. Buchanan insists, through her sculptural gesture, on the necessity of intuition, just like Bergson. Environmentally and economically, the garden and its bridges have come to life thanks to the social dimensions of the artist, New Patrons, and everyone involved in the commissioning process. Moreover, the social relationships of all those involved in the maintenance of space readjust according to a common goal, namely a durational role for this garden to play for everyone inhabiting the museum, the school and the centre for the unemployed. Buchanan pays attention to those neglected spaces between the institutions, now turned into a garden, as well as infrastructures, by enabling the most vulnerable groups in the social fabric to participate. The colourful presence of these bridges emphasise the importance of the mostly invisible care work that is necessary for the maintenance of communities and institutions. Buchanan makes visible those hidden service spaces—storage rooms for cleaning equipment, an outdoor kitchen, material stores, toilets, and tables—as important areas to be carefully designed.

The park that unfolds on the hill, named after the philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993), is one of these signs of history. Jonas grew up in Mönchengladbach, his mother died in Auschwitz, and he was interested in late-antiquity gnosis as an expression of the basic, human experience of deep divisions between self and world. What his name bears helps to contextualise Buchanan's reflections on the encounter of language, history, art and architecture, even if Buchanan's references lie elsewhere; in the decolonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand, or a feminist stance that resists a feminine identity of necessity, or resists identity at all, as measures of control. Identity, as internal exile, is what she sets aside to open up the space where identity is performed, authorised, or shattered. Jonas's most popular quote—"Act in such a way that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of real human life on earth"—corresponds to the allegorical impulse of the bridges that connect the park, buildings, street and people. They grasp the

absence of the same structures elsewhere, and refer to all the bridges that could be and how they could channel understanding, interest and togetherness for demographic groups that wouldn't connect with each other in typical German society. Similarly, the drawings that led to the creation of the works are also allegorical for "real human life on earth," just as the ongoing conversations between the social and cultural institutions produce something like an aesthetic of (dis)integration.

The roles of the museum, the centre for the unemployed, and the secondary school are an entropy of ever-transforming elements. So, between the energy spheres, the bridges create a thermodynamic situation that generates heat: the "throat" allows views from the top, while the spiral staircase creates a metallic sound, and activates the "ear"; the high platform and agora where I myself would like to have a sandwich in the sun, wrapped in the tinsel leaves of the trees. The "ear" became the stage of the grand opening this spring, where the cellist Sarah Platzner, student of the school, accompanied the ceremony. The "stomach" is the public canteen at the end, where everyone can enjoy a meal, cook for themselves, or use the table for recreation. This "stomach" concentrates the longing for togetherness, underlining that this garden for organisms is not only an event or object, but actually an alliance of people who have now come together in this production: not only the contractors, but also funding agencies and many who have got involved due to pandemic-related delays.

The "spine," as a ramp, is the only accessible way in for those with limited mobility and the only direct aperture between the garden and the street, connecting to the door at the basement of the centre for the unemployed. This purple colour on the door, which in Nazi Germany was used to identify criminalised and marginalised communities, makes a connection with the fascist past of the building as a hostel and campground for young people of the Hitler Youth in Mönchengladbach. In the final phase of World War II, when US troops had already occupied the region, armed youths are said to have been sent into battle from here. The house has not been fundamentally rebuilt since then, but nothing remains of the interior. The history of this place is not fully represented on the website of the *Arbeitslosenzentrum*, but the "spine" opens the

possibility of dealing with it outside of the institutions, testing what is possible only by starting from a local dimension.



Ruth Buchanan, *On a visit to Mönchengladbach*, 2019. Preparatory drawing for *A garden with bridges (spine, stomach, throat, ear)*, 2023. A project for the New Patrons of Mönchengladbach. Courtesy of the Artist and the New Patrons of Mönchengladbach.



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In one of Buchanan's early drawings, the colours of all the bridges can be seen: pink for the "throat," purple for the "spine," neon yellow for the "ear", and green for the "stomach." Like the cells of an amoeba, the colours in the drawing proliferate into the work of Buchanan, who merges them with the clear edges of the architecture of Hans Hollein (1934–2014) in the Museum Abteiberg. Hollein, whose work is seen as key for understanding postmodern architecture, was also interested in treating the ephemeral as part of design, eclectically putting references and forms together that create irritation at first sight. The museum was built in the early 1980s on a prominent hillside site, and intended for a permanent collection, temporary exhibitions and didactic uses, but also openness. There is an unavoidable contrast with the façades of the cathedral and a baroque abbey in the immediate vicinity. The garden, however, is not an extension of the museum, but a place in itself, opening a further dialogue between the buildings. Although both structures focus on integration with the surroundings and topography and are objects we can walk through, Buchanan's *A garden with bridges* is foregrounded by a certain literalisation and visualisation of the needs of the citizens. It is not a white, neutral ensemble, but rather a colourful, three-dimensional plateau of multiple rhizomes for mutualism. The bridges thus represent the deficiencies in workers' and non-workers' protection laws in Germany —the legal system's vertical hegemony obstructing a horizontal system of growth and propagation, while the bridges connect transversely what remained disconnected, even if the spaces shared the same spot: an *Arbeitslos enzentrum* is not a job centre, instead it offers the space that individuals do not get in the bureaucratic systems, such as waiting rooms and long periods of mailing exchange, and an anonymised relation between labour and life. Now, the pergola is a canteen, a refuge, a station to linger, while bureaucratic processes struggle to treat unemployment as anything other than a burden. *A garden with bridges* is something I finally experience as dialectically experiential: the bridges represent a constant process of defining, demarcating, and assembling, disassembling, reassembling, over and over again. It can go on forever.

Footnotes

01. The terminology *job centre* is used by the German government for a portal for people to be connected with employers and assist them to fill vacant jobs.

02. Thomas Hollkott, in conversation with the author, spring 2023.

03. Ruth Buchanan in her own words, website of the artist, accessed 16 June 2023, https://studio-ruthbuchanan.net

04. Augustin Ostachuk, "The Organism and its Umwelt: a Counterpoint between the Theories of Uexküll, Goldstein and Canguilhem," in Kristian Köchy and Francesca Michelini eds. *Jakob von Uexküll and Philosophy: Life, Environments, Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2019) 158–171.

05. Ruth Buchanan, Judith Hopf, Marianne Wex, *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* (Wellington: Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, 2017) 15.

06. Susanne Titz, in conversation with the author, spring 2023.

07. While the German iteration of this commissioning structure is called Neue Auftraggeber, in its original language, French, it is the Nouveaux Commanditaires. It has commissioned over 500 projects across 15 countries with local citizens. More information about the organisation and Buchanan's commission can be found here: https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/projects/the-new-patrons-of-monchengladbach.

08. Angela Wilms-Adrians, "Yellow bridge sculpture is 'courageous project'," Rheinische Post, 8 May 2023, https://rp-online.de/nrw/staedte/moenchengladbach/kultur/moenchengladbach-kuenstlerin-ruth-buchanan-eroeffnet-garten-mit-bruecken-am-arbeitslosenzentrum_aid-89200359.

Biographies



Ruth Buchanan is an artist of Taranaki, Te Ātiawa and Pākehā descent living in Tāmaki Makaurau. She works across exhibition making, writing, design and teaching. Her work draws out the contested and dynamic relationships between the body, power, language and the archive. This process of contesting often relates closely to the types of relationships that standardised infrastructures, such as archives, libraries and museums, create between our bodies and society at large, and actively asks how these relationships could be otherwise.



María Inés Plaza Lazo, born 1989 in Guayaquil, Ecuador, is founder and publisher of the street newspaper *Arts of the Working Class*. She works and lives as an advisor and dweller of engagement and communication structures in the arts. She is currently based in Germany.

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