

A Night in Everland

Gianni Jetzer

Sabina Lang and Daniel Baumann (better known as artists by their abbreviation L/B) created the Hotel Everland for the Swiss national exhibition in 2002. Once under way, it grew into an artistic success story with international appeal. Visitors revelled in what it had to offer night after night, not simply as somewhere to stay, but as a «Lebenskunstwerk» (lit.: Life Artwork). It makes sense for the one-room hotel to be embarking upon a European tour four years after Expo.02, and that it is still being run as a hotel, not on the lake shores, but on the vertiginous roofs of distinguished art institutions. It is starting high up on the Museum of Contemporary Art GfZK in Leipzig.

The little building is visible from a distance. It has sculptural and architectural qualities, and is thus a striking feature in the urban landscape. At the same time, it functions perfectly normally as a hotel, though it has only one room. The people who were quick enough to secure an overnight stay online are very lucky. There were only 195 nights available during the Swiss national exhibition, and there are 224 in Leipzig. Certainly many hopefuls will be disappointed.

People have started to get used to the fact that everything can be art, as an extension of Joseph Beuy's slightly misunderstood motto «Everyone is an artist». But it would not be sufficient to call a hotel room itself the actual work of art. It is all the social processes taking place around the Hotel Everland, the way it is used, that create a work of art as an «open field for action» (Peter Weibel)

Social metaphor

The paradoxical situation of Switzerland and its Expo.02 – a national exhibition of long standing – was reflected in the Everland exhibition concept. It brought together projects by L/B, Atelier van Lieshout, Olaf Breuning and Shirana Shahbazi. Everland addressed the nature, purpose and function of the state and the national exhibition as social structures: for example, the Hotel Everland played games with privilege and exclusion. It seemed to welcome everyone, but it was an exclusive place in the most precise sense of the word. If you had money and luck (when making a reservation) you had a private island for a night, though it was exposed to inquisitive looks from an international public.

The internet was used as the distribution system, as the major contemporary mode for social networking. This was supposed to produce the most open guest profile possible: lovers and couples, tourists and natives, webcracks and artnerds. One night is released for booking every day, always at a different time, working on the chance principle. The server has already been attacked several times with the intention of undermining the reservation system. It is absolutely right to talk about the little hotel having unleashed Everland fever. The media are reporting on it, and the visitors' book records the art-dreamers' euphoric memories. They have made it, and are now among the chosen, privileged people, and are clearly becoming admirers of a form of artistic architecture that is well-nigh anachronistic in its craftsmanlike zeal.

The hotel room as a work of art

Since the nineties, art has come up with various devices that viewers have to walk into or involve themselves in if they are to experience the artwork for themselves: supermarkets, and living or cooking in the museum have featured. This has proved to be a radical extension of contemporary art's scope. The viewer becomes an active participant, a player: «Open events replace the work

as object. The author, the work and the viewer, the three constants of classical art, have been subjected to radical scrutiny in the above-mentioned reflective spirit, and transformed ... Open events, actions, processes, games, instructions, concepts replace the work as object. The passive viewer becomes the co-creator, fellow-player, participant. The boundary between the various social players in the art field and aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects and events has become partially transparent and invisible.»

The Hotel Everland is not just to be interpreted in this social context. It is also about negotiating privileges. The hotel guests are only one part of the art project. The Hotel Everland deliberately uses the theatrically public quality of its exhibition to provoke discussion. Curious exhibition visitors are allowed to approach the hotel during the day and look inside through its glass doors, dreaming about what it would be like if ... It is a private enclave within the public quality of the art space, and offers a new challenge to visitors and hotel guests to renegotiate the boundaries between private and public interest. All conversations, friendships and differences of opinion form an integral part of the project.

In their work, L/B try to bring art and the everyday world as close together as possible. But unlike the advocates of modernist Utopias, they have stopped trying to make them exactly the same: «Art can never be really everyday. That would be like squaring the circle. But that does not stop us trying. We have always tried to push the envelope.» Like many other contemporary installations, the Hotel Everland is both a functioning service and a work of art. Reality and art mingle here, in a complex and contradictory fashion.

Hotel vision

L/B are well-known for their homely installations that deliberately set out to undermine the boundaries between art and design. Patterns borrowed from the 1970s are one of their trademarks. Carpets, wallpaper or screen-savers (www.langbaumann.com) are decorated with them, not as nostalgic symbols but as a quotation of times past, though they are built into the installations with the utmost precision, and thus generate their own environment.

L/B are notorious for inclining towards the Gesamtkunstwerk. The Hotel Everland is designed down to the last door handle, all the elements match to produce a kind of artistic fiction. This is also central to the two artists' project: «In terms of economics, a hotel with one room is an absurd idea. So guests should note that a kind of ideal hotel room has been created here, from start to finish. We wanted to construct a totally integral unit with – as far as we could see – nothing missing that the heart could desire. We treated and designed every detail as equally important. The whole thing is a very subjective statement that we hope will please other people, enthuse them or perhaps even be able to make them start dreaming.» And indeed the capsule is reminiscent of a space-ship, catapulted into another world of ideas or dreams.

When artists construct hotel rooms, their interests are positioned differently, and their curiosity, their visions, aims and the way they are implemented, are different from those of architects. So seeing the work of art as a field of action and not a mere object is crucially important. This means there is no fear of possibly asking too much of guests. It is this artistic focus that makes the difference. Even though health-and-safety regulations had to be and were met, the artistic hotel room is something that is far from being a mere service, and possibly would not work in combination with several rooms. The Hotel Everland is exemplary in every respect: it is a vision of the hotel 'model', a trip to another (Ever-)land, a paradox of public privacy that unlike the exposed position of the Big Brother container is equally respectable for all partners. It knows no

neighbours in its secluded intimacy, only pairs of eyes, looking curiously and perhaps a little enviously at the occupants of this human nest, and sometimes checking to see whether there is still a light on.

* Gianni Jetzer, curator of the Everland exhibition concept for Expo.02,
director of the Swiss Institute, New York since 2006

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