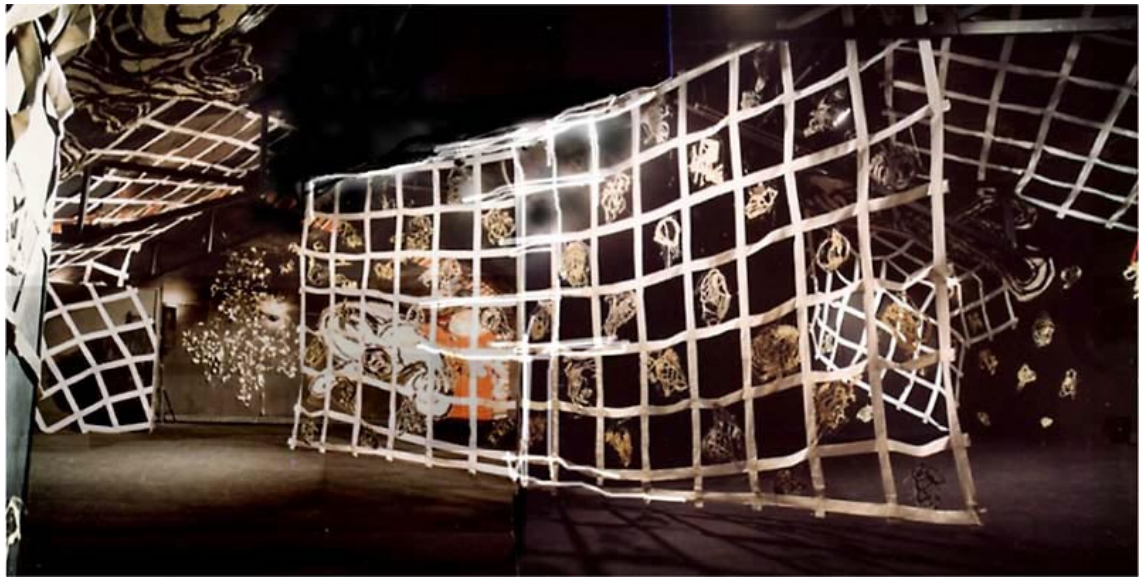


Susanne Kessler

Room of Evolution – Tehran 2003

The organizers of the 21st International Fajr Theater Festival held in Tehran from January 21 - January 31, 2003, the Dramatic Arts Center of Tehran invited me to Tehran to participate as a visual artist with an installation in the festival. In keeping with the idea of a theater festival, I decided to create a theater-like room, where the visitors to my exhibit would become protagonists in a piece, which was told visually by me and within which they could move.

I installed my exhibit, the Room of Evolution, using a space of approximately 200 square meters of the gallery of the Artists Forum Taleghani. My exhibit was completely clothed in black. For my Installation I used six interlocking, sewn-together lattices, each 400 x 400 centimeters; 250 coal tar drawings and collages of the organs of amphibians, reptiles, and birds; a red, divided Gottlieb brand family tent, and three large drawings of 350 x 350 centimeters of parts of the inner ear - the part controlling equilibrium, the cochlea.



I fastened the lattices, partially through the coniers, on the walls and ceiling. I hung two of the lattices diagonally and one by its right corner in the room. The drawings, which I had prepared by separating them from their background material and arranging them as a collage on mesh netting, afforded see-through glimpses of the surfaces behind them. By virtue of the layers of the material and through the transparent nature of the lattices and the netting, the hung compositions of structures and lines formed concentrations which opened into quiet empty zones. The black front sides of the drawings were transformed on their backsides to a white bright view of the whole room, which seemed to become brighter. I decided where black or white drawings were to be hung on the black wall. Where I decided on black drawings, one discovered the drawings only on second glance. At first glance it appeared that the wall was shedding material. The white forms on the other hand, appeared not to hang on the wall, but rather to jump from the wall and the ceiling into the room.

I wanted to create a space in which one had the impression of abundantly proliferating life and where one could experience life in the process of change. I wanted my work to move the viewer through its multifaceted nature and its use of space. The work was to move the viewer physically, so that the viewer could gain information about it, and spiritually, so that the viewer might organize a wide variety of associations. The work was meant to allow the viewer to appreciate a process of change, while at the same time being in the process of change itself. The installation in Tehran, therefore, as it was to be experienced there, will remain unrepeatable, even though individual parts will be further developed and moved into future projects in new combinations and hangings. In Tehran the viewers were to have been caught up in the exhibit space and have had their thoughts become woven together with the installation.

For the most part, working in layers is the basis of my construction principle. I have supported this through an affinity for light materials, and for transparent netting, for example, that allows views of what is behind it and lets one begin to intimate what could be there. The resonance and vibration of the drawings would also allow one to feel a sense of quivering and volatile life in transformation. For me it was important that the exhibit become possessed of a feeling of physical and spiritual life. Nonetheless, the drawings themselves were to remain mostly puzzling, secretive, and woven together in a cocoon-like fashion.

My work was also intended to somewhat displace all existing perspectives. One witnessed ongoing irritation and lack of orientation for some seconds among viewers entering the exhibit space. The darkness of the room also helped precipitate the feeling of loosening oneself and the surroundings from reality, so that the exhibit space became a nonspecific place that was an Everyman's room of origin. The lines of the latticed nets swirled through the room like a lined framework for a script that was moving toward becoming three-dimensional. I developed my amphibious signs of reptiles, wings, skeletal frames, and even the snail house, with its concentric circles, as if they sprung from that original place of creation where one had to discover a formula for people, animals, and plants, that is for earth, fire, and water, and all the circuitous powers at the same time. Indeed, ancient Persia and the Zoroastrian world view are of interest to me.

I would have gladly built a work outdoors. Unfortunately this idea was allowed to wither. The mixing of art into daily life is something that I find exciting and that always attracts me. The size of the pictures of the Ayatollahs on the walls of the high-rise buildings was impressive. They seemed to look down on the city or to almost hover over it like protecting angels, though they also often reminded one of Father Christmas. Similarly impressive were the pictures of the maimed war heroes, supporting themselves on their crutches, who looked down helplessly on the smog-filled streets and traffic jams of Tehran as if they were looking over the field of a lost battle. I would have gladly painted a protecting angel for Tehran on a large wall.

I have used tents in different forms on different occasions in my works since 1990. A tent with all that it symbolizes was brought to bear in a new form for my work in Tehran. The exhibit space itself had a concrete ceiling, which seemed like a tent-shaped covering. I fastened the fragmented tent, which I had brought with me, onto the central wall. As the single spot of color in a black and white room, it was meant to point to man's nomadic ancestry, among other things. I learned by accident that the Farsi word for tent is Chador. A red Chador, however, like my vermilion tent or Chador, would be unthinkable. It would perform exactly the opposite function for which the Chador is intended, which is to make that which it covers lost to sight. In fact, the color red is considered inappropriate in public clothing for women, if not indecent. That a vermilion Chador was unraveled there in a central place in my exhibit, and that this Chador was overgrown and entwined with a human inner ear, the labyrinthine inner passages of which I used as a sign of equilibrium and understanding, seemed to be noticed by very few. Yet I found this unintended additional symbolism and meaning very appealing.

As a woman and an artist it was very important to me to be invited to Iran. I was especially honored after meeting Iranian women and artists, including actresses, painters, and photographers, who so impressed me with their ability and their courage.

My experience with the exhibit viewers was very moving. Many people came to the exhibit several times, and many stayed for longer periods in the exhibit space itself I never witnessed anyone making a bored quick trip through the exhibit and only seldom did I notice that someone turned away immediately as they began to enter the exhibition space. Often, especially toward the end of the exhibit, people brought me small presents. Ironically, I was required by the exhibition organizer to sit with my exhibit and answer questions, though that had not been my preference. This duty seemed at first painful to me, since I would very much have liked to have made some drawings outside in the city, permission for which I was promised but never received. Sitting with my exhibit proved to be a very unique and important experience. People came directly over to me upon viewing the exhibit and told me what they experienced as they moved through the exhibit space. They wrote down on their note pads and slips of paper the motives I

gave them for my work and the ideas I had about it. College and high school students were very serious viewers of the exhibit, Fourteen to sixteen year old students Showed me their pictures and some presented me one of their works as a keepsake. College art students came and invited me to their end-of-term exhibits. None of the exhibit viewers forgot to say or write in the guest book that they wanted to thank me for coming to Iran. Many thanked me also for dressing in conformity with the local practice. Some dared to do that which is actually forbidden. In departing they shook my hand.

I would like to thank the following:

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