Object—Event—Performance

Art, Materiality, and Continuity since the 1960s

Edited by Hanna B. Hölling

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The Propensity toward Openness: *Bloch* as Object, Event, Performance

Johannes M. Hedinger in conversation with
Hanna B. Hölling

Bloch was conceived by the Swiss artist duo Com&Com (Johannes M. Hedinger and Marcus Gossolt) in 2011.[1] The work is comprised of several spatial and temporal elements. The central piece, a tree trunk that travels the world, is derived from a three-hundred-year-old, still-active Swiss tradition from the Appenzell region. *Bloch* has created an ever-growing archive of traces, objects, stories, and documentation in a variety of media amassed out of *Bloch*'s encounters and interactions. *Bloch*'s travel is a process or an event that unfolds in time, with a beginning but an uncertain end. Neither only an object nor just a set of actions, *Bloch* generates autonomous artworks and forms of documentation that function in between media categories and aesthetic definitions. *Bloch* is also constituted by temporally and spatially bound performances and actions on the sites where *Bloch* arrives, rests, and acts, inviting visual and performing artists, musicians, local communities, representatives of activist groups, and schoolchildren to interaction. *Bloch* is a case in point for the central concerns of *Object—Event—Performance*: artworks that are processual and evolving, based on performances or consisting of performative elements. This kind of work expands the conceptual framework of art and can be exhausted neither by aesthetic analysis nor by object-based, material scrutiny. Protean, assembling and disassembling, with a life of its own, thus based on chance and indeterminacy, works such as *Bloch* are generated in a collaborative effort of many actors, including those outside the traditional domain of visual arts. Thus, they also question the idea that authorship is limited to a single individual endowed with creative capability. Last

but not least, such artworks challenge the accepted views of preservable and collectible objects as discrete, self-sustaining entities that promise a long duration. *Bloch* is an active bundle of matter with the ability to steer its actors and its journey, questioning the long-standing conception that an artwork is defined by inanimate matter and an intentional subject.

The following conversation, conducted between Hanna Hölling and Johannes M. Hedinger, began in São Paulo in mid-April and continued in Zurich and London through mid-May of 2019.[2] As the final contribution to this book, this chapter offers an insight into a potentially forever-unfinished artwork and a prodigious multiplicity. A truly open form, *Bloch* instigates a conception of an artwork that transgresses the belief that collectibility and conservability are based on discrete, authorial objects and raises questions concerning the established processes of collecting and the assumptions about a work's institutional life.

Hanna Hölling (HH): Johannes, we are pausing in São Paulo, in a surprisingly quiet corner of this megacity, to talk about your longtime project, *Bloch*, which you will be attending to in several days on the other side of South America, in the Antofagasta region of Chile. Let us begin with the following question: How is *Bloch* different from anything we have experienced in the arts?

Johannes M. Hedinger (JMH): When it comes to artworks, our thinking, whether related to theoretical or practical concerns, is often object-oriented. The idea that art is object-based is deeply anchored in our Western aesthetic tradition and educational system. We encounter object-based artworks in art museums and galleries. Exhibited as objects-things, these artworks are often completed: produced in a specific medium and with a specific form that has been determined by a single author, often for the pleasure of disengaged audiences who "behold" the work. They can further be viewed according to the temporal anchor of the date of their creation. Instead, *Bloch* is processual and evolutionary. It is an artwork in constant movement. It is collaborative and participative.

HH: What does the word "Bloch" actually mean?

JMH: "Bloch" means the lower five meters of a tree. The term is used in the wood industry to designate the thickest part of a tree without branches. Qualitatively, it is the best wood of a tree used for construction

purposes. In the Appenzell region, the mountaineers refer to "Bloch" as both the tree trunk and a local tradition. As a three-hundred-year-old Appenzell carnival tradition, Bloch has been kept alive as a local custom that takes place biannually. This tradition entails a festive felling of the last and most spectacular tree, often a spruce, marking the end of the winter logging season and simultaneously indicating the arrival of spring. The tree, now turned into a trunk, is decorated and pulled by twenty men through Appenzell.[3] This is a large procession, consisting of musicians, harlequins, a horseman, and a fake bear that watches over and applauds the *Bloch* along its way and during its arrival in the villages. Held on a leash by a ranger, at times the bear escapes to scare off the women who appear along the way. The acoustic landscape consists of *Zäuerle*, a collaborative, improvised yodeling. The procession pauses multiple times to "present" the tree to the locals. There is plenty of drinking. The end of the procession is marked by an auction in the town square in the Appenzell village of Urnäsch and a traditional masked ball. The trunk is sold to the highest—often local—bidder. Then the wood is usually processed into shingles or furniture. The Bloch Gesellschaft pays a visit to the owner of the furniture to inaugurate the newly built piece with *Zäuerle*.

HH: So how does the artwork *Bloch* take on this custom, how does it preserve it?

JMH: Com&Com's *Bloch* is an adaptation and continuation of the Appenzell tradition. *Bloch* is a conceptual framework in which contemporary art and folk culture converge to create a dialogue among people, things, and customs. It spans art and culture. *Bloch*'s central physical element is a tree trunk, a starting point for interactions, exchanges, and reflections. So you might say that Com&Com's *Bloch* preserves the old tradition but also changes and enhances it with new elements. Instead of pulling the trunk between the villages in Appenzell, we have taken it around the world. We do plan to come back to Urnäsch, however. This is in short the basic idea that underpins *Bloch* today. In Swiss German, the verb *blochen* means "speeding." *Go ume bloche* means speeding exercised by adolescents as a leisure-time activity. This association is amusing because our journey with *Bloch* is all but quick. Quite the contrary—it is fundamentally slow and durational.

HH: So, what is so special about the project, and how is it changing?

JMH: For eight years, *Bloch* has been on tour. It has changed its form, shape, and meaning. Contingent on different geographical zones and cultural milieus, it has also been received differently by diverse audiences. *Bloch* is a work in continual development. I call it an "open work." With every new geographical, cultural, and political context, with each new partner, encounter, situation, and institution, *Bloch* has evolved. At the beginning, we had set a conceptual frame for *Bloch*. We have strived to a degree to maintain the general idea, which is that *Bloch* travels the world visiting all continents at least once; collaborations (often in the form of processions or performances) are organized with local artists, allowing it to reflect their cultural background; and at a certain point *Bloch* will return to Appenzell. Except for this frame, everything else has changed in response to the changing conditions occurring during *Bloch*'s journey. At the beginning, we thought that we would return to Appenzell in approximately three years; we now know that the project will continue for at least twelve years. But it is not only *Bloch* that has transitioned. During the first eight years of its life as our project, the world changed too, and with it the very notion of the artwork. Given the variability of its components, it is challenging to mediate this project. This is because our thinking about *Bloch* is hardly static; it too fluctuates.

HH: And it is challenging to write about *Bloch*, I assume? Of necessity, this conversation will uncover perhaps a tip of *Bloch*'s archival berg. Let us attempt it.

JMH: Yes, *Bloch* is a project difficult to bear with. Withstanding its continual unpredictability, which repeatedly compromises potentially foreseeable results and is often extremely challenging from the technical, logistical, and financial point of view, can be exhausting. At times, we have to explain to ourselves what *Bloch* has actually become over the years—this can only be done in retrospect. Today, rather than as a "work" of a certain singularity, I regard *Bloch* as a growing compilation of voices, events, experiences, individual projects, and archives. The work is open not only because of the open concept of *Bloch* as a process potentially without a certain end. It is also open because of the multiple partners that work with and contribute to *Bloch*. For us, this means that we often have to let the project go. We give away shares of authorship in and control over the project. This "giving away" might sound less challenging than it actually is in practice. If we allow *Bloch* to develop, then new circumstances, links, situations arise. But it also means that we need to ac-

cept changes that result in aesthetic interventions and modifications to *Bloch* that we would have not accepted under different circumstances. I am thinking, for example, of certain carvings or paintings that have appeared on the wood, or even acts of vandalism, such as graffiti. These enduring traces are exceptionally interesting because they mirror the culture they emerge from, the ruling social conditions, and the understanding of what an artwork is or might be.

Some other changes result from border regulations and travel restrictions for goods imposed by the countries that *Bloch* has visited. For instance, when *Bloch* was about to cross the border between Switzerland and Germany, we had to agree to the removal of *Bloch*'s bark because of the possibility of insect infestation (wood-consuming insects love to inhabit the area immediately under the tree's bark). Or when *Bloch* made its first intercontinental journey to China, we had to fumigate it to exclude pest infestation. We laughed that this was yet another death for the trunk. This has happened five times since. Most important, however, removing the bark from *Bloch* meant making an aesthetic decision that would impact the work's reception. Although initially unwelcome, to make this decision was to accept a radical change in *Bloch*'s appearance, mobilizing a potential for reconceiving what the work will look like. In this way, we have learned to accept the circumstances and have given the ability to plan away. One could even go so far as to say that we are not the ones in charge of *Bloch*'s trajectory; it is *Bloch* who shows us the way.

HH: Is there an infinite potential to the "openness" of the work, or will the work end one day? This would, of course, counter the idea that the work is infinitely open.

JMH: *Bloch* is potentially infinitely open to cultures, situations, and people. For the most part, its journey can be seen as a chain of coincidences. Invitations have kept on bringing *Bloch* from point A to point B. In China, the invitation was issued by the Shanghai Art Biennale; in North America, it was an effect of our collaboration with a state folklorist in North Dakota; in Africa, we worked together with the local wood industry. The resulting events and interactions were dictated by the context into which *Bloch* was brought. But the idea that the work ends once *Bloch* has visited all continents still stands.

HH: So is this work the sum of its parts, or is it more than this? This is important for the question of *Bloch*'s continuity, one of the subjects of this volume.

JMH: The work is larger than the sum of its parts. Up until today, more than five hundred collaborators have added to the project by reacting to it physically, by carving, writing, painting, attaching objects and materials, and using *Bloch*'s material to construct things. It generates artifacts, poetry and prose, songs, popular press articles, and academic papers. There have been multiple performative contributions: musical, theatrical, and dance performances, processions, talks, and lectures. Indigenous rites and rituals have been enacted in *Bloch*'s presence. Thus, *Bloch* acts as a stage, a vessel, and a performative space. It initiates a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Often *Bloch* has been a starting point for interventions that have become autonomous works that develop their own trajectories. These elements constitute *Bloch*'s growing archive—artifacts, documents, recordings, and remnants. But next to these physical acts (meaning performances, rituals, singing, writing, painting, or carving) and products I see *Bloch* as being interacted with mentally. I am aware that "mental interaction" might evoke slightly esoteric connotations. *Bloch* is charged with the energy, emotions, and memories of those involved either as participants or as spectators. So the interaction with *Bloch* takes place both on the physical and mental levels.

HH: What is the role of the audience?

JMH: The public is very important. Some events accommodate more than a thousand spectators; some are experienced by an intimate group of only a few. They all add to *Bloch*'s archive. At times, when people encounter *Bloch* for the first time, they insist on touching it, on establishing physical contact with *Bloch*. Children used to climb *Bloch*. And this is where the significance of the physical object comes into play. Although, as already suggested, *Bloch* is not just a physical piece of wood, it is precisely *this* physical piece of wood, a trunk that people are willing to come into contact with, that they can relate to. We could not have traveled with only a concept or an oral account of the Appenzell tradition. So it is this piece of wood that opens doors and hearts and that simultaneously stores and exerts energy. One could say that *Bloch* is a communication device; it instigates a dialogue. Painted and carved, when it arrives at a gas station in South Dakota, for instance, it is approached by locals who ask, "What is this huge log about?" "How is it art?" For those individuals, this is the beginning of learning the story of *Bloch*, and for us, of learning about their culture.

Next to its being a communication device, *Bloch* is also a collecting device, a device for saving and storing things. There is an anecdote that

stems from our encounters with the Native American tribes, such as Ojibway, and some of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota Sioux. They remained uninterested in the matter of whether *Bloch* is an artwork. Rather, they simply wanted to hear the story of *Bloch* and be able to interact with the piece. They maintained that *Bloch* is similar to one of their traditions that consists of a delivery of oral accounts in the presence of a "talking stick." At times, when they sit together, they pass around a wooden rod, a talking stick. The individual who holds the stick tells a story. When the story is finished, the stick is passed on to the next individual. They established that *Bloch* is an oversized talking stick that travels around the word telling stories and inviting people to tell their story. Since they listened to the story that *Bloch* had told them, they also shared their accounts with us and with the piece. We were so impressed by *Bloch*'s newly acquired identity that since 2014 we titled the project *Bloch: The Global Talking Stick.*

All in all, *Bloch* is a nucleus, a talking stick that brings people together. It is a stage and platform to gather individuals and things that would otherwise never come together. Stories emerge through association or invention; they are told, shared, and remembered. A part of our task is to collect them, together with objects, texts, and images. In the future, I envision a large coming together of some of *Bloch*'s people, stories, and objects when *Bloch* returns to Appenzell.

HH: Before touching on the idea of a *Bloch* museum, which I am aware you have thought about a great deal, tell us what was necessary for a project like this to materialize?

JMH: One of the most important moments was the auction during which the log was acquired. Without it, *Bloch* as a project would not have begun. At this point, we need to return to the prehistory of *Bloch* for a moment. Com&Com, which was established in 1997, was initially concerned with strategic and conceptual art making. Our artworks have always been conceptually thought through and thoroughly planned. In about 2007, we began to shift our methods and strategies of art making and, with that, our understanding of art. We wanted to get away from purely conceptual, often deconstructive art making to acquire a more direct approach to the world. In 2008, we created the "Postironic Manifesto," which allowed us to become open to a new programmatic agenda, aspects of which had already been present in our earlier work to a certain degree. We also began to open ourselves to the idea of creating a work that is not predetermined. We wanted to react to the world differently, to emphasize process and deemphasize object, to collaborate and to avoid plan-

ning our art throughout. *Bloch* is a result of this thinking. It marks a full transition from the intricate phase of art as provocation, fake, irony, and deconstruction in our early work to art making underpinned by an open approach to art, nature, and the world.

HH: The idea of using a tree as a natural ready-made and a local custom as a cultural readymade was not completely new in your oeuvre, was it?

JMH: One could say: "Wir sind auf dem Baum gekommen" [We came upon the tree] before *Bloch*. This was manifest in our two exhibitions, *Baum I* and *Baum II* [Tree I and Tree II].[4] We have a long-standing interest in local traditions and customs. Then, in 2010, you may remember our visit to the local heritage museum in Urnäsch [Appenzeller Brauchtumsmuseum Urnäsch]. We saw a documentary of local traditions there that featured, among others, the Bloch custom. Watching this film clicked. I decided that we needed to acquire the *Bloch* at the next auction. I had to convince my partner, with whom I subsequently developed a plan. We also had to learn all the relevant facts, which was difficult because in this region the tradition is usually transmitted orally, and written accounts of Bloch were absent. We depended on ethnographers and local people who actively live and embody this tradition. Bloch is only known in one part of Appenzell and is hardly recognized elsewhere in Switzerland, not to mention abroad. Oddly enough, our research found a similar, still active tradition called *Blochziehen* [pulling a trunk] in Fiss in Austrian Tyrol.

HH: In the absence of a written record, this "dependence on others" in learning about Bloch can be understood as an act of passing on tacit and embodied knowledge, memory and skill—that is, a *virtual* archive. This knowledge is often conveyed through oral accounts and body-to-body transmission.

JMH: Yes, we learned about Bloch from speaking to the witnesses and participants in the biannual processions organized by the Bloch Gesellschaft. We saw these individuals as the "owners" of knowledge, who were willing to pass it on through storytelling and oral accounts. We also learned about Bloch from the employees of the local museum in Urnäsch. And we also relied on locals to learn about the possibility of auctioning the *Bloch*. As an unwritten rule, the auction is a local event; the proceeds, usually around 1,000 Swiss francs, go to the Bloch Gesellschaft to maintain and preserve the custom. Although both my partner

Bloch procession captured between Urnäsch and Herisau, 2011.
Photograph by Com&Com.

and I were born in St. Gallen, only twenty kilometers away, in Urnäsch, we enjoyed the status of foreigners. Not surprisingly, because the locals bid against us at the auction, this year—in 2011—the *Bloch* reached a record price of 3,000 Swiss francs.

HH: Could the auction be grasped as the conclusion of the first performance of the work? And could the enactment of the Bloch custom be regarded as its first performance, one that existed in the context of folklore rather than visual arts?

JMH: In our understanding, the town square auction was part of a tradition until the point when we started bidding—then it became an artistic intervention. Only then can one regard it as a performance, but not before. The existing ritual as a whole was never meant to become an artistic event. We first observed the ritual, documenting it, and then we intervened in it by bidding at the auction.

HH: So the auction can be seen as a threshold between the ethnographic context from which *Bloch* emerges and by which it was made available to creative intervention and the visual arts context.

JMH: Yes, one could say so, I think. The local folk tradition has been shifted and transmitted into the domain of art. It has been explored,

Bloch auction in Urnäsch, 2011. Photograph by Com&Com.

inscribed, and continued with the means of art. Our preparations for this "auction-performance" involved a discussion between my partner and myself considering the price we were prepared to pay. I was open to paying more, but my partner Marcus less so, and our gallerist Bernhard Bischoff had a say too. We arrived with two cameramen and a sound engineer to capture the procession and the auction. It must be said that the documentation of *Bloch* (film, images, interviews, texts, social media coverage) has been a crucial part of the project since the beginning. It is important that what we acquired during the auction was not just a piece of wood. *Bloch* had already been charged with meaning, energy, history, and tradition. It had accumulated the events that unfolded during its procession, the interactions with the villagers and visitors, and the individuals and animals that pulled it through the Appenzell landscape. It stored the music that had been played and the stories that had been told. Because of the role it played in the local custom, *Bloch* had become more than just a tree trunk; it had already become a charged object.

HH: Over the years, *Bloch* has visited many cultures, countries, and individuals. Could you recount the most exciting moments?

JMH: It is difficult to decide on the most exciting moments, since there have been so many of them, but we could start at the beginning. After the auction, a year of preparations followed. Before its world journey

began, *Bloch* became a giant print stamp. *Bloch Print* (2012) was produced at Kunstgiesserei St. Gallen, an art foundry in St. Gallen. We created prints using the trunk's weight by lifting and lowering it from the ceiling—just like a giant potato stamp. The production of *Bloch Print* was accompanied by the Bloch Gesellschaft, which performed natural [wordless] yodeling. I think of this action as the visualization of a *Werkprozess* [work-process].

And then the journey began. First, we traveled across Switzerland to visit its capital, Bern. We marched through the Old City, past the parliament. The modification of the Appenzell tradition continued in this performance. From the ethnographic context—or from the context of use—*Bloch* was confirmed as a work of visual art. Although the geographical context had already changed with the Bern procession, which was diligently filmed by the Swiss TV, an even larger step into the world took place with our visit to Berlin. *Bloch* was pulled by the Bloch Gesellschaft, starting from Berlin's Swiss embassy, past the Reichstag and Brandenburg Gate before finally reaching Bazon Brock's *Denkerei* ["thinkery," a space for debates about art, culture and society] in Kreuzberg. There, a two-day conference titled "Prinzip Bloch" was organized to debate the ideas behind *Bloch*. To participate in these events, many of the mountaineers of the Bloch Gesellschaft visited Berlin for the first time in their lives. The visit left a lasting impression on them. They continue telling their stories about this trip to this day.

In Shanghai, probably the most memorable moment was the performance of the Chinese Kun Opera Troupe with *Bloch* and the fashion show that followed, in which *Bloch* served as a catwalk. In South Dakota, thanks to the long-standing relationship of the state folklorist with the Indigenous population, we could dive deeply into the native culture, their customs and traditions. We also explored the white settlers' culture through our participation in several events with *Bloch*. After the grand experience of nature and landscape outside urban centers, we arrived in New York, where we encountered an enormously contrasting, dense environment and culture. The *Bloch* program changed entirely. *Bloch* became a resident in three art locations in Queens and, among other events, was part of a Halloween séance as well as a comedy event sponsored by the Bruce High Quality Foundation at the Knockdown Center. In South Africa, *Bloch* functioned as a stage for concerts held in the Soweto Theatre and several townships. In Johannesburg, *Bloch* became a platform of engagement for students of the local university.

The making of *Bloch Print* at Kunstgiesserei St. Gallen, 2012. Photograph by Urs Jaudas.

Hao Hao Gu and Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe with *Bloch* at the 9th Shanghai Biennale, February 23, 2013. Photograph by Com&Com.

HH: If *Bloch* accumulates stories and encounters, how does their archiving happen? I guess this is a question about the conservability of this work too.

JMH: The archiving depends on the kinds of material that are being produced and this, in turn, depends on the framework in which *Bloch* operates. Let me give you some examples. When we made the first intercontinental crossing to China on the occasion of the Shanghai Biennale, we were refused permission to perform with *Bloch* in the streets, in public. We encountered different forms of artistic and popular expression at the biennale, from traditional to pop music to Chinese opera. We had an invitation to a museum and could invite performers and actors who would "inscribe" themselves onto *Bloch* in a metaphorical sense. *Bloch*'s serving as a catwalk for a fashion show offered a unique experience. We saved the fabric from the fashion show and recorded the music from the Chinese opera to make a documentary of the performances with *Bloch*. We also conducted and recorded oral interviews with the artists, curators, and other individuals. We have yet to assess a large oral history archive of this and other stopping places on *Bloch*'s global journey. Part of *Bloch*'s audiovisual archive will find its way into the final documentary film planned for the end of its journey.

Regarding the archival aspect of your question, it is striking that in China, although a number of performances took place, there was little to no physical inscription on *Bloch*—and hence hardly any remaining or collectible "objects." The performed interventions, we noticed, were contingent on cultural permissions; the Chinese did not want to physically and permanently intervene in *Bloch*—they perceived *Bloch* as a sort of "sacred" object. Instead, the North Americans approached *Bloch* with whittle, saw, and brushes—they continually wanted to modify *Bloch*'s appearance, to leave permanent marks on its surface and in its structure. These traces are preserved directly on the log and the actions that gave rise to them are preserved in the documentary record. There was a moment when the carving actions seemed unstoppable. Conscious of the extent of these interventions, we had to intervene, asking the individuals involved to leave space for future interventions. An Indigenous American flute maker carved a flute out of *Bloch*, for which he prepared an etui. The flute, together with its etui, was reinserted into the trunk. This is a prime example of how *Bloch* stores physical objects. Then bows and arrows were carved out of *Bloch* to serve as part of an archery performance. After the performance, they became a part of *Bloch*'s artifactual archive.

Flute made from *Bloch* wood by Dan and Owen Jerome, North Dakota, 2014. Photograph by Com&Com.

So again, although the performances that have been taking place with *Bloch* are the unifying feature of all the stops during *Bloch*'s global journey, they have differed markedly in how people have approached the log and in the type of material produced. In addition, the travel has often been conditioned by the politics of space. In North America, we could drive on the streets, through cities, and across landscapes—we could stop whenever we wanted. This was not the case in China, where our movements in public spaces were restricted, while events that took place inside institutions were possible.

The political and cultural framework changes the project and its reception. But above all, it also impacts what is being archived. On one of the reservations in North Dakota, secret rituals were performed with *Bloch* that were not to be recorded or spoken about at all. This cultural requirement impacted the archive—the sacred rites of the Native American tribes forbid us even to talk about them and pass on our experience and memories of these events. But deep in *Bloch*, the energy of these acts and actors has been accumulated. *Bloch*'s battery has been charged.

HH: How can a story like this be kept, how can it be saved from oblivion?

JMH: Under these conditions, and when it is impossible to fully share the story, the story is told partially, accompanied by the memory of the events. If I tell you this partial story, the very absence of facts allows you to paint yourself a picture. At times, the absence of the real, known facts renders the image stronger than the full account of the original event would have. Such an image might serve as a starting point for your own story.

HH: Do *Bloch*'s encounters always mean encounters with people, and how can these be accounted for through memory?

JMH: Next to those with people, one of the most fascinating encounters we had during *Bloch*'s journey was with animals. We also regard *Bloch*'s confrontation with landscape as crucial. We like to believe that we worked with animals and with landscape. Animals began to be important in North America when we visited a horse conservancy, where a herd of wild horses "performed" in front of our eyes with *Bloch*. It was a very powerful experience to witness two hundred horses galloping toward *Bloch*, circling it, slowing down, and resting. It was as if they paid *Bloch* a visit, stayed for a while, and then continued on their trail. I understand this encounter between *Bloch* and the animals as a different kind of dialogue. These encounters continued in Africa with a group of elephants, ostriches, and a big herd of sheep. I am curious what will happen in South America this summer. When I speak about the encounters, I also mean the confrontation with nature and the landscape that *Bloch* passes through on its journey. Landscape was there from the very beginning. Some images have imprinted themselves in my mind: the trunk pulled through the undulating Appenzell landscape with the lingering scent of smoke from a woodstove; *Bloch* in the urban gorges of New York; in the barren desert of Karoo. In South Africa, *Bloch* spent a year outside, sitting on a trailer pulled by a car across the country. In this way, it *recorded* the landscape. We have taken many images of this journey but just as many images are absent. So, the memory of these encounters, our memory, is the crucial point.

HH: Is there a sense that not everything can be saved, cherished in a documentary form? How much of this is dictated by the collaborator or by a partner institution?

JMH: Many things are not recorded, but they are important. I mentioned the Native American tribes' secret rites that could not be recorded for cultural reasons. There was the spectacle and comedy performed with *Bloch* in the Knockdown Center in Queens. Although these two events were not recorded, they nonetheless became a part of *Bloch*'s intangible archive; they entered it in the form of memory. The decisive element is often our partner institution or on-site curator, whether in Asia, Africa, or the Americas. These individuals enable contacts and interactions with local artists, performers, and scholars and thus influence the character of the events that occur with *Bloch*.

It is important to realize that this is not only an art project but also a cultural project that functions through communication and involves both high and popular culture. For instance, sometimes the project enters an

Bloch at the Nokota Horse Conservancy, North Dakota, 2014. Photograph by Com&Com.

Bloch with Table Mountain in the distance, Cape Town, South Africa, 2017. Photograph by Com&Com.

industrial context. When we worked with the wood industry in South Africa, they showed a distinct interest in the wood. *Bloch* was seen there as a material—a piece of wood. At the beginning in Urnäsch, it was very difficult to advocate for the project as an art piece—the locals took us for art nerds. When we worked with Troyd Geist, the state folklorist in North Dakota, he was interested in an intercultural exchange and dialogue between traditions and customs. He was less keen on exploring Bloch's contemporary art context. For the Native American tribes as well, *Bloch* was irrelevant as an artwork. But during the Shanghai Biennale, the art context in which *Bloch* was presented dictated the way in which the interaction took place. So although *Bloch* started as an art project by Com&Com, it has been going in and out of this context, making impact in nonartistic circles.

HH: My theory is that the way in which the locals impart their trace to *Bloch* is also contingent on whether *Bloch* is understood as artwork in the Western sense of the word. One does not usually interact with a traditional work of art by leaving a durable trace. An ethnographic context, however, makes it available for physical interaction and the production of a trace that endures. But let us discuss further the form of records that *Bloch* generates.

JMH: I have already mentioned different forms of records, texts, images, films, and interviews that *Bloch* generates. Beyond these more conventional forms, we have commissioned a painter from the Gonten district in Appenzell [Marc Trachsler] who paints *Bloch*'s journey in what could be described as a naïve *Bauernmalerei* [rustic] style. The painter creates a narrative through his images; it is as if he were telling a visual story through paintings—a story based on my story. He chronicles *Bloch*. But rather than accompanying *Bloch* on its travels, he bases his paintings on films, photographs, and my narratives. This is possible because each stage of *Bloch*'s journey is thoroughly documented. So his material emerges afterward, after the stage has been completed and the primary documentation accomplished. I also visit him regularly to make sure that he is being told the stories of *Bloch* in person. In this way, he develops a sort of parallel consciousness of the events needed to create his paintings. So far he has created eight acrylic paintings on wooden supports. Not only do they form a separate archival category, they are also autonomous works of art created in the course of his individual artistic acts of painting. They function similarly to the way the copies of *Bloch Print* have contributed to *Bloch*'s archive and ultimately find their way into the Bloch Museum.

Marc Trachsler and Com&Com, *Bloch Painting New York City*, 2016.

HH: Speaking of which, how do you envision the Bloch Museum? Will this be the ultimate location, where *Bloch*'s life will come to an end? And, how do you envision its "final" product?

JMH: Currently, we maintain a *Bloch* website that documents *Bloch*'s journey and makes its story accessible.[5] This website is linked with social media, where a considerable amount of *Bloch*'s documentation has been published. There are also short films that convey information about the stops *Bloch* has made. These are available on our YouTube channel.[6] I envision the project's generating several end products. First, there will be a closing event, possibly combined with a tour across Switzerland, accompanied by lectures, performances, and exhibitions. Second, we will produce a ninety-minute film documentary for a broader public. As a further development of this film, I am also keen on creating a moving image interactive and an immersive installation that would consist of multichannel video projections, sound, and music. To realize this piece, we have to create a digital archive of *Bloch*'s recordings. Third, we are planning to publish a periodic *Bloch* journal, an evolving, growing print publication series that will lead to a *Bloch* book—a logical continuation of the project. Fourth and finally, the Bloch Museum will be created in the form of a small *Wunderkammer* [cabinet of curiosities]. The *Wunderkammer* will exhibit the projects, objects, materials, relics, and leftovers associated with *Bloch* and will potentially also include part of the audiovisual documentation.

Currently, we are discussing a location in Urnäsch, possibly in close proximity to the existing Brauchstum Museum, which has planned a room already, although its main focus would be the Bloch custom. For now, the fate of *Bloch*'s physical trunk remains unclear. The municipality of Urnäsch has shown interest in *Bloch* since the first media reports of its global journey reached Appenzell. *Bloch* is a topic of regular chronicles in the local newspaper. The authorities are keen on preserving the project by endowing it with a permanent place, one of which might be a square in front of the new town hall. This space would be ideal, since it would keep the log close to the *Wunderkammer* that we are hoping to install in Urnäsch.

HH: So the idea of the Bloch Museum is linked with the conservation of the work.

JMH: Not only. For me, it has also to do with a desire to explain *Bloch* and tell its story, to convey what *Bloch* is—or was—rather than the physical conservation of the object proper. Of course, I would like to keep what will be left of *Bloch*, but I am less interested in keeping all *Bloch*-related objects simply for their own sake. Even if *Bloch* were to burn up sometime or degrade badly (which I hope it won't), the work would still exist through remembered images and stories, encounters, experiences, and events along with objects that *Bloch* generated and all the things that happened during its travels. They cannot be undone, obliterated, or forgotten.

HH: Are you implying that if the physical object, *Bloch*, vanishes, the *Bloch* project could still exist?

JMH: If this happens, much would change, I admit. But the project would not die, because beyond the physical shell, which is important, we also have the meta level that *Bloch* makes possible and unforgettable. The physical object can be seen as a means to an end, if you wish. It is a platform for generating stories, and they will not vanish as long as they are being told. By the way—and this might be especially relevant for the conservation-oriented aspect of our conversation—*Bloch* was scanned before it began its travels. The ur-shape of *Bloch* exists as a 3-D data model. So potentially, this data set could be used to create a duplicate of the trunk. In a way, *Bloch* could live on in a surrogate. Of course, there are some obstacles to the idea of a perfect replica: first, the materials

used to fabricate a duplicate of the trunk would be different; second, the scan was made when the ur-trunk was still covered with bark and without any traces of the material interventions that took place during its journey.

HH: To think of this ur-*Bloch* recorded in digital 1s and 0s as a slice of time, a piece that once had been but that ceased to exist at the moment when the first performer laid his or her hand on it is intriguing. This recalls the idea of the impossibility of returning to the "original state" of any object, the pursuit of which has been an important tenet of traditional conservation. As the example of *Bloch* demonstrates, a work can only be understood as a trajectory of transitions, a conglomerate journey of interventions and encounters, and as a process and event rather than an object.

JMH: Yes, I agree. *Bloch* can also be seen as having been endowed with many lives. The trunk has had at least three lives—or life cycles. In my view, the first life cycle was the time when the tree lived in the woods. The second life began with the felling of the tree, when the tree became a trunk, which in turn became the custom—a decorated *Bloch* that was pulled from village to village and auctioned on the town square of Urnäsch. We intervened in this custom and prevented *Bloch* from becoming a piece of furniture—this is when the third life began. *Bloch*'s lives can be observed in the trunk's structure, by counting its yearly growth rings. The first life was 120 ring-years; the second, only one ring-year; and the third would comprise circa twelve ring-years, but because the trunk does not grow biologically anymore, the later rings are not physical but imagined or metaphoric. This also applies to the rings of *Bloch*'s fourth life—its museum life.

HH: Or rather an "afterlife"? At times, musealization is seen as an act of stabilization of the artwork or destabilization of its inherent mutability and vitality.

JMH: I don't think of the Bloch Museum as a grand finale. Rather, it is a continuation of the storytelling through objects accumulated by *Bloch.* Together with the trunk located in front of the new town hall, it could become a monument and a memorial—a totem pole—a witness to *Bloch*'s journey and the culture from which it arose.

HH: The idea of creating a specialized Bloch Museum is fascinating. I assume that *Bloch* will never achieve the status of a "collectible" in the traditional sense—one that could satisfy the requirements of the art system?
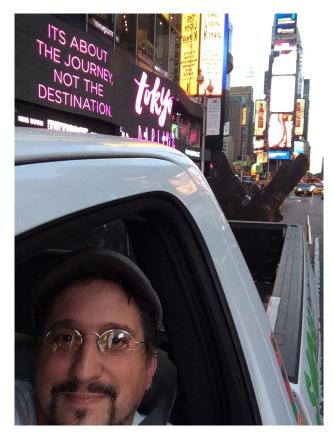
JMH: The work challenges the art and museum system on multiple levels because it cannot be hung on a wall and decorated with a label that would summarize its story in a concise way. Perhaps with the exception of *Bloch Print*, copies of which have entirely sold out, the project refuses to be circulated on the art market. Films are difficult to circulate too. Often considered as nonart, the confluence of encounters, memories, stories, traces, and objects that *Bloch* generated over the past years cannot be commercialized either. One can be inspired by and take a share in *Bloch*, but *Bloch* cannot be owned either in the traditional sense or in its totality. This fact has a dark side. There is hardly any surplus value that can be expressed in a monetary way, so for us the project is financial suicide. We have tried to address this problem through selling shares of the project, but it has become more and more expensive. To maintain *Bloch*, there would have to be a patron, collector, or museum that supports the project financially and receives a share in exchange. Crowdfunding and applications to foundations offer yet another solution. *Bloch* may require a mixture of all these modalities. We are currently thinking of new ways to monetize *Bloch*, through a shared ownership among investors or tokenization on a Blockchain—a "*Bloch*-chain."

HH: Returning to the idea of *Bloch*'s final presentation in an open space in front of the town hall, I cannot help but wonder whether this solution would not lead to the physical obliteration of the trunk? Once exposed to environmental conditions, wouldn't *Bloch* rot?

JMH: Construction of a shed or a roof to protect *Bloch* could certainly be considered. Although equally problematic in the sense of protecting the physical substrate of *Bloch*, the plan to erect *Bloch* in front of the town hall parallels yet another idea for its final phase—returning it to the forest, where it came from. The cycle would close exactly where it had begun. Independently, I have also been entertaining the idea of having *Bloch* contribute to the old tradition, which, in its next run, could feature a new trunk that would travel with *Bloch* in a parallel procession of sorts. This would mean a radical intervention in and alteration of the existing custom. But I bet that *Bloch* also has its own plans. Again, we are open to contingencies.

   In 2015, in Times Square, New York, one of the densest cityscapes through which *Bloch* has traveled, I took a selfie in a pickup, while pulling *Bloch* through the streets. Waiting for a green light, I directed the camera toward the back to capture in the frame both myself and *Bloch* mounted on a trailer behind the car. When I returned home and looked closely at the photograph, a billboard that found its way into the background of this photograph read: "It's about the journey, not the destination." I cannot think of a better way of expressing our experience of traveling with *Bloch*.

HH: Thanks for sharing *Bloch*'s stories with me, Johannes.

Bloch selfie in Times Square, New York, 2015. Photograph by Com&Com.

NOTES

1. Hedinger (b. 1971) and Gossolt (b. 1969) launched Com&Com in 1997. The artists, who live and work in Zurich, St. Gallen, and London, create interdisciplinary projects that often push the boundaries of our understanding of what an artwork is. The artists, who have participated in several biennials, including the Venice Biennale in 2001, have engaged with the concepts of artistic autonomy in the twenty-first century, the challenges of artistic production, and the question of the artist's role in society. Venues for their solo exhibitions include Kunsthaus Zurich, Kunst-Werke Berlin, and the Knockdown Center, New York. They are best known for their projects *Mocmoc* (2003–8), *Gugusdada* (since 2004), *Point de Suisse* (2014–15), and *Tektonik* (2018).
2. The conversation was conducted in German and Swiss German. Translation by the author.
3. These groups form the Bloch Gesellschaft (Bloch Society). No women are involved in pulling the trunk—a reminder of the traditional division of labor.
4. *Baum I* and *Baum II* (both 2010) were exhibited as ready-mades, objects transposed from nature into culture in the white interior of an exhibition space.
5. "Bloch: A Spruce from Switzerland," http://bloch.art/home/about/.
6. "Com&Com Video," https://www.youtube.com/user/comcomvideo/videos.