

# On Beams and Lines: Installation as Drawing in Space

Notes on Christian Helwing's *cruX*

— Text by Karin Schulze

An attentive viewer entering the installation, *cruX*, will certainly not miss a small work in the very first room: a bright red beam on a white background. Only at close range do the words “flexibel in allen Bereichen” (“flexible in all areas”) become legible. On the one hand, the work and its beam-like form seem like a miniature preview of the entire installation, which is defined by its beam-like structures. On the other hand, it is also a rupture, because in this exhibition, as in Helwing's earlier works, black and white are the dominant colours. In this respect, the red beam is exactly what it proclaims: a badge of flexibility.

When the Stadtgalerie Lauenburg was rebuilt in 2020/21, according to Christian Helwing's design, an agile response was necessary. Helwing's radical artistic vision for the space was implemented precisely, but a generous amount of flexibility was required in the construction process.<sup>1</sup> Helwing's artistic concept for the architectural fusion of the two adjacent but previously separate buildings presented a challenge to the craftsmen in its structural implementation: The wall between the houses had to be broken through to create a diagonal spatial axis via a wall – starting from the entrance of one building, located in the corner to the side – in order to create a large, open space.

Two years later, with *cruX*, the artist intervenes in his own architectural environment. While his previous projects have reacted to existing architecture, such as a Kunstverein, a museum, or the church of a monastery, for example, he is now appropriating a space for the second time. To do this, Helwing inserts two spatial axes that intersect the breach in the buildings, one of which runs parallel to the diagonal of the architecture and suddenly changes course in the rear rooms. Black, beam-like elements hang diagonally from the ceiling, forming, breaking and fragmenting these axes. As the viewer moves through the space, the beam-like bodies are repeatedly seen as X-shaped crosses, seemingly x'ing out the architectural spatial axis that runs behind them.

The daylight view from the entrance door through the exhibition rooms to the rear windows, overlooking

the Elbe River, presents a sequence of rooms grandly opened to the light. The black beams, however, interrupt this path of light – all the more so because their Styro-foam core is covered with light-absorbing black carpet. Segments of the same black carpet form the second dominant element of the installation's spatial modulation: They divide and delineate the floors of all the rooms, creating mental shifts in their contours. In this way, Helwing suggests spaces of possibility – similar to the American Minimalist Fred Sandback, for example, who drew virtual surfaces and volumes in space by stretching delicate strands of coloured yarn.

## The Revenant Right Angle

Over the past decade, Helwing has repeatedly worked with carpet, activating the surface that Carl Andre, another American Minimalist, transformed from a floor into an energy field with his serial floor elements in the 1960s. Like Andre's accessible, panel-like sculptures, Helwing's carpet segments erase the gap between the viewer's space and that of the installation's elements. Visitors inevitably come into physical contact with the installation, feeling the softer floor surfaces under their feet and experiencing the consequences of their movement in space more intensely through the often diagonal sections of carpet.

In Helwing's work in and with the Dominican Church in Krems, Austria, where white carpet was an essential element, visitors were allowed to walk on it either barefoot or in slippers provided. In *cruX*, the carpet segments have an additional meaning: they revive the orthogonal system that was broken by the architectural environment. At a central point, the flooring omits a right angle. In this way, it reintroduces the element that was counteracted by the placement of the diagonal spatial axis.

## Space as Accessible Sculpture and Graphic

In *cruX*, the artist combines graphic works with a spatial installation for the first time. The drawings that usually

1 See also the text by Marita Landgraf.

result from the planning process of his spatial artworks do not have the character of a work for him. Helwing cuts out price tags, photos of goods or even slogans such as “Guten Morgen, liebe Ordnung” (“Good Morning, Dear Order”) or “Designerleuchten für Ihr Zuhause” (“Designer Lamps for Your Home”) from advertising brochures of supermarkets or jewelers that landed in his mailbox during the pandemic. These are then pasted onto A4 sheets of paper, in the same position as in the brochures. Lines drawn from the corners of the cut-outs to the corners of the paper, span and locate them in the pictorial space. For this purpose, some of the newspaper clippings and the areas created by the lines have been blacked out.

The beams of text on these casually created sheets, held in place by lines, appear as the visual equivalent of the panels suspended on wire in the installation. Here, the graphic works are positioned to create an interplay of infiltration and complementation of genres: the *Stars* series (2020/22), with its more closed forms, hangs where the two panel tracks meet, while *Stars – broken* (2020/22), with its more fragmented, splintered forms, is positioned by the window. In *Stars – Like Me* (2020/22), the cut-out slogans are legible rather than blacked out. This “louder” series has found its place in the spatially separated cabinet. All three *Stars* series transform the structures of banal marketing materials into quasi-spatial constructions that could also be read as sketches for future installations.

In any case, the layout of the *cruX* carpet panels is strikingly similar to the *Stars* drawings. In this sense, the panels and carpet segments can be read as a graphic reworking of the physical space. Knowing that the artist originally had the idea of undoing the spatial axis for the duration of the exhibition and closing the breach with drywall, the installation of the x-shaped panels can be read, as it were, as a walk-through graphic and as a temporary virtualisation of its own architectural setting. Finally, Helwing's earlier projects can also be understood as attempts to expand and set architectures in motion.

## Language and Abstraction

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Even before the *Stars* series, Helwing often worked with text. In London, he discovered the inscription “EAT.” as the name of a fast-food restaurant. He used it as the title of an exhibition on the door of the Kunstverein Ruhr – a translation, so to speak, of “Essen,” the location of the exhibition, where he showed a spatial installation in 2010. In his 2015 intervention at the Gerhard Marcks Haus in Bremen, he covered a wall with all the titles of works that

could be found in the catalogue raisonné of Gerhard Marcks: a tribute to the sculptor's many permanent works and a reference to his, Helwing's, own work, which is always temporary and preserved only in the form of memories, photographic documentation, catalogs, and an Internet presence. (*B)EAST!* (2021) in Krems, Austria, included not only a presentation in the Dominican Church but also a plotted text work in the local Kunsthalle: the alphabetical list of all the nouns in an art historical essay on the Dominican monastery. The artist is fascinated by the abstract nature of language. As we read, we visualise and spatialise words; as we read we translate the artwork into concepts.<sup>2</sup>

## The Productive Power of Obstacles

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The interplay between reality and concept can also be found in the development process of Helwing's works. The work is created in response to what already exists, unfolding from a dialectic between pre-existing forms and materials, and artistic composition. After extensive contextual research and analysis of the architectural specifications, the artist overlays the floor plans with cross sections, redefining visual axes and pathways. His aim is to overlay actual conditions with imagined spaces, paying particular attention to the viewer's movement through the space. As walk-in sculptures, they stimulate spatial and self-perception – just as the small red beam mentioned at the beginning invites the viewer to come closer and read.

Initially disturbing features or restrictions are often productive for Helwing. In the case of the (*B)EAST!* project, for example, the Historic Preservation Office did not allow a single nail to be hammered into the Dominican Church. This restriction resulted in the installation of curtains suspended from existing lighting tracks, while large areas of the floor and the pedestal boxes loosely enclosing the columns were covered with white carpet.

For the American Minimalists Sol LeWitt or Donald Judd, deviations from the original idea of the work were considered taboo. In Helwing's work, for all its rigour, there are also small breaks, and he celebrates them.

In *cruX*, a productive break from the original concept occurred when one of the beams was to be suspended in the passageway between the two houses. Because of the steel beam there, mounting it would have been technically complicated, and the mounting point on the ceiling would have been conceptually unsatisfactory, right in the lintel of the passage. The artist responded by

<sup>2</sup> See Christian Helwing's comments in the catalogue for the exhibition (*B)East!*, Kunsthalle Krems 2021, p. 96.

understanding the problem and its origin as the fundamental crux of this work, and instead of attaching the panel to the ceiling at the point in question, he lowered it to the floor. In this way, he created an additional refraction of his idea of the work, which is based on irritation and ambivalence, and at the same time found a doubly significant title for his work: “*cruX*.”

In Helwing's work, refraction functions as a deviation from pure form, as a post-minimalist marker of an intrusion into reality. *CruX* also makes such a reference to reality productive as well, where the carpet in a sharply angled segment doesn't smother the light in its rich black pile, but rather refracts it through a smooth, iridescent coating. The carpet chosen by the artist is a product made specifically for trade shows. To ensure that it is protected during the trade show installation, it comes with a protective film. By not removing the film in one place, the artist further fragmented the carpet segments. At the same time, he has created a connection to the graphic works, whose framing also has a light-reflecting effect.

### Overwriting spaces

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As interventions in space, Helwing's works are always site-specific. In Krems, the white pedestals, carpets, and curtains emphasised the early 14th-century frescoes, while the black curtains in the choir, for example, dissected and partially obscured the inventory of images. In the case of the Künstlerhaus and the Stadtgalerie, the location of the installation is the idyllic old town of Lauenburg, specifically the Elbstraße with its buckling cobblestones and centuries-old framework houses. Detailed spatial structures, idyll, and nostalgia are at home here. Day tourists and their longing for the picturesque bring them here on weekends. Helwing sees this atmosphere as a condition of production and responds to the rectangular rooms with a deliberately modern counterpoint, a spatial axis, that he partially crosses out with black beams suspended in the room. By no means do these beams cancel out the axis, but rather they are a clear addition to the liquefaction of the existing structures. It would also not be entirely absurd to see the panels as a reflection of an exposed framework structure freed from masonry, in which the beams are also often diagonally aligned.

Operating somewhere between graphic art, sculpture, and architectural intervention, the work explores a fading out, an overwriting of space, a quasi-graphic intervention in real space, whose previous transformation it playfully x'es out. The “X” of *cruX* can

certainly be interpreted as a structural sketch for the specificity of Helwing's working process. The lower half could then symbolise a broad exploration of architectural and historical contexts. The narrow, point-like constriction in the middle embodies the reduced forms of Helwing's post-minimalist approach, while the upper opening could stand for the abundance of aesthetic and actual associations within his complex installations.