

## "Word-images" on balustrades and columns – Public Art Project

*Project at the Federal Department for Refugees, Wabern Berne (Switzerland) 2000 Commissioned by the Federal Department for Buildings and Finance*

For the building newly taken into operations in 1999, the artist Nika Spalinger, who has frequently been involved with projects for art in public space, created a committed intervention. In the process, she attempted to put herself "in the place of the refugees received there, but also in the role of the employees who work there in the various areas," - as she emphasizes in her project outline.

Although the entry hall would be entirely suitable for a representative artwork, the artist decided to use supporting columns throughout the building and walkways in the entrance hall as "art carriers."

Her starting point was what happens in this building. Here in this immediately relevant location, Spalinger uses a visualization of a global multitude of languages and written characters to illustrate the difficulty of communication and understanding. At the same time, she arouses a certain curiosity and a need to decipher and understand all these scripts and languages.

After initial design drafts, the artist contacted foreigners - most of them seeking political asylum - from the most varied different countries and asked them for a list of 25 - 30 words that were most important to them. These individual lists of words revolve around leaving one's home and the respondents' current situation in Switzerland.

The most frequently occurring words in the lists collected in this way were compiled to form a distinct "word-image." The survey resulted in a wide-ranging, yet relatively compact vocabulary, which was to be put to use: whereas terms such as Euphrates, Zarathustra, or Ararat, for instance, only figured in the individual vocabularies of Kurdish-speaking people, and other expressions were mentioned exclusively by people from countries such as Azerbaijan, Burundi-Kinyarwanda or Laos, there are other recurring expressions that connect refugees around the world with one another. Regardless of whether the respondents came from areas such as Armenia, Georgia or Lebanon, from Serbia, Sri Lanka, Sudan or Zaire, word structures such as grief, sadness, fleeing from home, separation, hope, parents, friends, war, life, studies, work, peace, authorities, etc. occur again and again and were associated by many of the respondents with their present state.

The words from both the "individual" and the "universal" lists (in 42 different languages and 18 different scripts) were written in the computer formats needed to make templates and formed into a "word-image" by the graphics artist H. Gantschnigg (Individuell, Bern). Then it was a matter of transferring the horizontally and vertically arranged terms in varying sizes to the 136 white and gray columns supporting the entire building. Words in various sizes were also affixed to the glass-covered balustrades of the walkways in the large entry hall - on the left and right sides of which there are offices in two four-story blocks. Spalinger succeeded in using the uniformity of the script and language types as an organizing element, evoking multilayered images, ideas and emotions with the different characters, yet without losing optical multiplicity. The "babelic" confusion of languages that has been predominant since the dawn of time is diffused symbolically throughout the entire house.

*Text (abridged): Therese Bhattacharya-Stettler: «Kunst am Bau - Wortbilder der Migration Nika Spalingers Installation für das Verwaltungsgebäude des BFF», in "Berne Kunstmitteilungen" Nr. 326, Sept./Oct. 2000*

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