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interview by
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EWERDT HILGEMANN

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Some artists truly are born and not made. Internationally renowned sculptor Ewerdt Hilgemann is a born visionary — he has made a name for himself creating remarkably vibrant works out of the simplest of materials: metal and the very air we breathe.

Hilgemann is a product of WWII and post-war Germany, born in Witten in 1938. He grew up among industry and saw first-hand the effects of economic growth on the rivers and streams of his homeland. He was fascinated by gardens and growth, a passion that developed into true interest in art from childhood visits to museums. He blossomed into a serious art student, taught by a leader of the German Zero Movement, which he retrospectively calls the Zeitgeist of the 60s. He learned about Zen and finding a unity between life and art.

He would go on to become part of another Zeitgeist — that of New York City.

At the time of this interview, Hilgemann's sculpture collection, "Moments in a Stream," is on display on Park Avenue, drawing eyes with its massive forms and fascinating angles. The seven sculptures range in size from 8 to 20 feet and are on display as part of New York's Art in the Parks program. All seven sculptures represent the artist's signature vacuum technique that "implodes" the metal according to natural laws of physics.

Hilgemann refers to himself as an airsmith, a term he says he first heard from a critic. "I weld geometrical volumes and decide the circumstances for the air to 'deform' those perfect shapes," he says. "Together we transform the into 'soft' looking, yet powerful sculptures."

The sculptures are certainly powerful. They have an unmistakable presence along Park Avenue, modern and yet speaking to the industrial landscape of Hilgemann's youth.

When asked about the intended meaning behind his sculptures, he admits it began with no such agenda. But as time progressed, he says, he connected the sculptures and the vacuum technique to the lessons he learned back in school — the Zero movement's merging of outlook on life with artistic creation.

“I was just looking for a way to deform a perfect shape without me hammering on it,” Hilgemann explains. “I was looking for a transformation from perfection to the intangible.”

He recalls a meaningful moment when he witnessed a group of blind tourists putting their hands on the statues and seeing them with their hands. He says he is still, to this day, unable to fully put his work into words. He is inspired by New York and feels he is becoming a part of it through “Moments in a Stream.”

His own thoughts as to what makes a truly great artist is very telling about what matters most to him:

“An autonomous attitude, an unspoiled vision on the nature of things, independence,” he says. “Fully participating in one’s time and a strong belief in one’s ability to convey through works of art what is most important, regardless of success.”

The interview:

At what point in your life did you begin to consider yourself an artist? How would you describe that revelation?

From childhood on I’ve considered myself a creative maker and always was an outsider in the group! It was 1959 after a break-up with my parents over the Holocaust issue, which was minimized by my father, that I realized I had to find out things for myself and not trust or follow what the world around me tried to impose on me.

You were born in 1938 in Witten, Germany. What effect did growing up in the aftermath of World War II have on your artistic vision?

Let’s first mention the war itself, when I lived in Dortmund (the middle of the industrial area called Ruhr zone) up until the bombing became too heavy and my parents sent their five children to various relatives in the country side. I landed with my grandmother at the Hilgemann farm, which I loved. After the war it meant shortage of everything until the Marshall Plan took effect, bringing economical growth, yet at the same time led to pollution and destruction of nature, the fields and streams of my youth. I had thought of working with plants and become a garden architect, but visits to the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany and Kröller Müller Museum in Otterlo, Netherlands aroused my desire to become a visual artist. So, I tried my luck and found a place at the Art School in Saarbrücken, which then was still the capital of a neighbor country called Saarland.



*Park Avenue between 52 & 53 St. 'Cube Flower'
4 parts, Stainless Steel
8x4x4 ft each*

You were influenced by Germany's Zero group of artists, led by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene. Why did their philosophy appeal to you?

My teacher at that school (1959-61) was Oskar Holweck, a co-initiator of the Zero movement, also represented in the upcoming Guggenheim exhibition.

He taught us about Zen, how to find aim in ourselves, make life and work an entity.

E.g. in order to draw a perfect circle we had to 'become' a circle through exercising, skating circles, eights, etc. It was all about process, using simple elements and playing with light. The philosophy appealed to me, because it was new and totally different from what I had known before. By the way, we

did not consider ourselves followers of Zero, but part of a movement, without belonging to the so-called Zero Group. Looking back, for me Zero was Zeitgeist of the 60s.

You have often described yourself as an “airsmith.” Why did you decide to experiment artistically with air pressure?

After various experiments, using phenomena such as gravity and explosives, amongst which my ‘Rolling Cube’ in marble was the most important, I had the idea to use air pressure as a means of sculpting. I like to refer to myself as ‘air smith’, a term that was first used by a critic, because I make use of the air as my co-creator. I weld geometrical volumes and decide the circumstances for the air to ‘deform’ those perfect shapes; together we transform them into ‘soft’ looking, yet powerful sculptures.



Park Avenue intersection at 54 St. 'Threesome (Caryatids)'

3 parts, Stainless Steel

20x3.3x3.3 ft / 18x3.3x3.3 ft / 16x 3.3x3.3 ft

Why is the role of air so crucial to your artistic vision and creation?

Water (rivers), air (clouds) and natural forces have always fascinated me.

The air is so vital to human beings and yet is hardly looked at other than serving the purpose of breathing in and out.

However, when using it as a tool, the air pressure from outside is capable of deforming my metal shapes through deflation by a simple vacuum pump, causing the strong metal to fold and shrink powerfully, yet soft, not brutal, like folds in a dress. I like to use extremes, showing both at the same time – the positive and the negative – and through this process, I feel I've reached that.

Because of the nature of your craft, chance seems to play a significant role in the final outcome of the "Implosion" sculptures. As an artist, how does it feel to have an aspect of your work out of your direct control?

People always think that I'm not in control, but it's the contrary. I design my sculptures in such a way that I can premeditate what will happen according to physical laws. I create the circumstances, the rules, and since my work is symmetrical, it is of no importance where the first fold will appear. A sculpture is three-dimensional and the audience has to walk around it to see all of its aspects; a sculpture has many faces!

How would you describe your Park Avenue sculptures to someone who could not see them?

This is an interesting question, because what comes to mind, is that I've watched a group of blind people touching a large cube of mine in public space all over in order to understand.

I would have to use many, many words and still not be able to convey what my eyes are seeing and my body is feeling.



*Park Avenue intersection at 57 St. 'Triple'
Stainless Steel, 20x4x4 ft (sold)*

Was “Implosion” intended to convey any specific message?

No, not at first. I was just looking for a way to deform a perfect shape without me hammering on it. I was looking for a transformation from perfection to the intangible. However, when I continued, I came across the philosophical impact of it, described by Marshall McLuhan in “The media is the message,” in which he holds ‘implosion’ symbol for a changing world that is interested in the core of matter rather than expansion. I’m following my intuition and am glad to notice that my way of looking at life merges in the act of creation.

Park Avenue is an iconic part of New York City life and culture. How does it feel to see your sculptures lining the avenue for all to see and experience?

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

I feel very honored to have been invited by the Park Avenue Sculpture Committee. I love New York and came to visit on many occasions since 1969. Through this exhibition in public space, I feel I'm becoming part of New York.

I'm happy to see that my sculptures hold up against the overpowering buildings.

They seem very natural there.

How do you feel your work fits into the Zeitgeist of New York City as a whole?

Well, what is Zeitgeist? Isn't that a term we can only verify afterwards? New York is a vibrant, energizing city and I like to be inspired by it. Besides, I feel that my technique of production is unique and only possible in our age of technology.



*Park Avenue intersection at 64 St. 'Double'
Stainless Steel, 20x5x5 ft*

Your career has taken you all over the world, from Germany to Italy to Los Angeles, CA. Do you find your works influenced by the places you have lived?

Yes, very much so. Moving and seeing places widens one's vision. Nevertheless, I cannot directly pinpoint how my brain and body bring those things together. I do know, however, that every time I felt the need to move on, my work would also change into a new phase.

In your opinion, what characteristics make an artist truly great?

An autonomous attitude, an unspoiled vision on the nature of things, independence, fully participating in one's time and a strong belief in one's ability to convey through works of art what is most important, regardless of success.

In your spare time, what is something you enjoy?

Football (soccer), swimming and cooking.