

ANNE PESCHKEN & MAREK PISARSKY

## **The Wandering Buoy – An Open Content, Mobile Anti-Monument**

**How Analysis Generates Form – A Guide to the Art Practice  
of Anne Peschken / Marek Pisarsky (Urban Art)**

I'm not even attempting a definition of what a monument is, let alone drawing the anti-thesis. The existing literature on monuments is far too vast for such a strategy. A short glimpse at the bibliography of that literature feels like drowning in an ocean of definitions, thoughts and reflections on national pride, remembrance culture and historical contextualisation with constant counter-waves coming in, powered not only by artists and art historians but also by politicians who wish to extend the shores of that ocean by including their view of what should be commemorated and how. So in this respect a buoy – to say the least – could be of use.

Initially, the *Wandering Buoy* was developed for Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland in 2005, which had chosen 'Latent History' for its motto. For a preliminary on-site research trip we were driving 500 km west towards the Dutch border, and quite hesitant as to whether we would be able to detect some of this region's latent history. We embarked on this mission with all the more mixed feelings as the cultural diversity within Germany is quite high, and 500 km accounts for crossing at least three, four or maybe even five borders of current cultural self-definition – without taking historical or social strata into account.

Maybe it was due to our already heightened sensitivity but we couldn't even open the passenger door of our car to ask for directions without literally bumping into some kind of stone, stele or statue commemorating the former place of a synagogue, an important local bricklayer, the famous Peace of Westphalia or a plaque commenting on the form, genesis, history and meaning of another

existent monument nearby. It was as if monuments were popping up like mushrooms wherever we went. We got the feeling that in this rather rural region where traditions had been maybe less exposed to social or political upheaval, there was rather a lot of commemorating going on.

While we immersed ourselves in the social life of the Münsterland – a very catholic, rural area, which – after a painful period of de-industrialisation in the 1980s and 1990s when it lost most of its textile industries – has emerged as a clear winner with regards to European integration due to good infrastructure and open borders with neighbouring Netherlands and Belgium. We were surprised by the large numbers of organised groups – often gender segregated – that met in certain pubs on set evenings each week, where they had special tables prepared for them. In the country-hotel we stayed in, the landlord was hosting eight groups of regulars, six associations and more than 40 bowling groups.

Our impression was: Here, people have a strong sense of togetherness and they found committees, clubs and associations for every possible purpose or interest in life. Here, civil society is strong, healthy and blooming. And it is precisely this civil society that feels the need for putting up monuments, to commemorate one of the purposes they are supporting with their association or one of its main activists, good-doers or sponsors.

Having gathered this much information about the local context, and after numerous conversations with the local Kulturamt and the project organisation, we came up with the idea of a sculpture displaying three paramount ideas:

We wanted it to function as a tool that could be deployed universally in various localities and which could change its message accordingly.

These main principles could be achieved through the following characteristics of the *Wandering Buoy*:

- Interactivity, due to its public use free of charge.
- Self-sufficiency, due to the solar panel.
- Pluralism, due to the individual programming of the LED-screen.
- Communicability, due to changing messages on the LED-screen.
- Mobility, due to trailer hitch.
- Unrestricted installation, due to TÜV license.
- High visibility, due to its mobility, light and sound signals and buoy shape.

The concept clearly mirrors our analysis of the situation: In our view there was an ample supply of monuments of all kinds of shape, intention and message, while at the same time the need for putting up new ones did not seem to be quenched at all. Therefore, we thought, why not propose something that can serve multiple purposes: A monument devoid of meaning, an open content sculpture, with the main function of providing the service of commemoration for everyone. The idea was to use the Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland – which was scheduled to last for five years! – as an interactive hub, reaching out to the public and catering to the need of local organisations and individuals who want to put up monuments for a limited time. In this way we wanted to contribute



to a kind of liberalisation of the monument industry by offering the services of an easy access sculpture. We also like to see the *Wandering Buoy* as a tool that people can use in order to express their views, exhibiting what they feel should be highlighted and also drawing attention to their personal remembrance agenda.

So in a way we could add, the *Wandering Buoy* is also extremely sustainable: One tool serving various purposes and many needs.

Easy access for everybody – this also meant no building permission, no land purchase, no applications or licensing procedures, and therefore the sculpture not only had to be mobile, but also needed to take part in normal car traffic, including stationary traffic, which meant that it could be parked anywhere on public ground.

This is the very practical reason for the sculpture's mobility. At the same time, we were all too aware of the fact, that "there is nothing on earth so invisible as monuments" as Robert Musil liked to put it in his famous short prose piece *On Monuments*<sup>1</sup> from 1936. Our gut feeling was that monuments – although they try so hard to seek attention, inevitably fade into oblivion the moment they are permanently installed. The appearing – and even the disappearing of the *Wandering Buoy*, before it ever threatened to become an accustomed landmark, seemed an appropriate remedy for this problem. To draw attention things have to be new – not old – as anybody in public relations will agree on. And – to stay with Musil's stream of thought a little longer – it is easy to recognise "how backwards our art of monuments is compared to the contemporary development of advertising".<sup>2</sup>

This drive for attention, novelty and limelight, as an inherent craving of a modern personality was of course exploited for the arts by none less than Andy Warhol and culminated in his pledge of 15 minutes of fame for everybody. A notion that is also behind our idea of democratising the use of monuments. But in contrast to today's ubiquitous selfie-culture, the *Wandering Buoy* promotes ideas, sentiments and personal points of remembrance – rather than just an image of one's self.

As Christoph Tannert put it; In so far the *Wandering Buoy* by Peschken / Piskarsky is an intervention within the realm of cultural narration, which in Germany is surmised under the rather dull label of 'memory work'. While in fact the *Wandering Buoy* embodies rather the opposite of an exhausting exercise in reassuring one's memories in an act of suppressed self-denunciation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, in order to promote personal ideas, the *Wandering Buoy* needs language, as it is a tool devoid of meaning that serves changing masters. If it wasn't for the *Wanderings Buoy's* multi-functionality one could argue that the sculpture's use of language is quite conventional, as it makes use of the dichotomy of form and

1 R. Musil: <https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/nachlass-zu-lebzeiten-6941/3>, (aufgerufen 15.10.2019), Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten Posthumous Papers of a Living Author, a collection of short prose pieces (1936), transl. A. Peschken.

2 Ibidem.

3 Ch. Tannert, in *Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland*. Kreis Borken, Münsterland: DuMont Kunstverlag, 2005, p. 136, transl. A. Peschken, exhibition catalogue.

content, using in a way a modern variety of the plaque with golden lettering. Inside the buoy there is a (very old, very solid) so-called tough book computer (heavy duty, waterproof and cold resistant) – the input tool for writing and programming messages for the LED-screen. In 2005 twitter wasn't invented yet, but it's actually this type of short, poignant and emotionally charged language that works best for the limitations of the LED-screen.

As far as the pure form is concerned we decided to use one that in itself already contains metaphorical meaning: the buoy. Buoys have a double function: they mark shallows and other dangerous spots in high seas and they give orientation. To do so they have a strong signalling effect, often using light signals. This fits the idea of a wandering buoy within the ocean of history, appearing and disappearing and indicating points of reference.

All other characteristics of the *Wandering Buoy* follow function. The solar panel is obviously needed to make it self-sufficient and universally deployable, which is a necessity for its mobility, and again is a consequence of the demand for its universality. The mobility is very simply achieved by putting the whole sculpture on a trailer so that people can haul it with their own cars to the desired location. And here there is another aspect of the *Wandering Buoy* that is actually quite conventional: We always insisted on the unity of place and action. The *Wandering Buoy* was not to be used in a referential or purely symbolic way – like let's say L'Arc de Triomphe – symbolising victory, national honour and commemorating the Unknown Soldier. The *Wandering Buoy* was to be installed in exactly the spot where the commemorated event had once taken place.

For the catalogue of the Münsterland Biennale we decided to show two stories that we found worth highlighting, thus setting an example for its potential future use. The *Wandering Buoy* was installed in front of a disused bunker and the text displayed on the screen went:

NATO-Missile-Bolt. Between 1963 and 1987 up to 27 atomic air defence NIKE missiles could be launched from this platform. They had a range of 140 km (up to Hannover). According to the deterrent strategy during the Cold War, they were designed to force potential Warsaw Pact aggressors to use low altitudes.

The second example was more personal. It showed the *Wandering Buoy* in front of a dilapidated former silk spinning factory announcing on the LED-screen, "This used to be my workplace", and recounting the life story of a woman who had lost her work in the textile industry.

Very much the way we had planned it, the *Wandering Buoy* happily toured Münsterland, recounting numerous stories during a period of nearly five years. The funniest use was in a village where the *Buoy* was parked in front of the Church, saying on its display: "It's better to sit in the pub and think of the Church, than to sit in the Church and think of the pub." The background being, that in the 1930s the local pub owner had made the promise that if he should hit the jackpot he would sponsor the erecting of a new church for the village that up to this point didn't have one.

The long and successful duration of the project shows not only how our thorough field analysis generated the shape, function and form of the *Wandering Buoy*, but also that from a sociological point of view we must have hit a nerve and a need for this specific population. The way the sculpture was conceived and developed gives a fine example of our general art practice and how we understand the term 'site-specificity'.

Then in 2009, when the *Buoy* had come, so to speak, of-age, it returned to Berlin. Here, we initiated a big project commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall by telling personal stories people had experienced with the Wall. The stories were then displayed by means of the *Buoy* at the exact spots where they had taken place. In this way we were to circle all of former West Berlin. The project lasted from 13 August – the day the Wall was erected in 1961 – until 9 November, when it had come down nearly 30 years later.

What we had learned about participative work during the past five years influenced the way Marek and I directed the project and we thought up new ways of penetrating public space.

To this end we expanded our team by two very efficient volunteers, because we had realised how tremendously important it is to constantly keep up with and renew personal contact to the public. Distributing flyers is just not enough to engage people.

We needed to be more out-going and to use the buoy not only as a transmitter but also as a vehicle for receiving stories. Therefore, we initiated special action days with the *Wandering Buoy* in prominent places like the Brandenburg Gate where we collected stories. During these action days we approached people directly in the streets and asked them to tell their personal stories about the Berlin Wall. This was easier because the *Wandering Buoy* by its sheer presence attracts attention, and people come up asking what on earth this thing is all about. And this is the best way to open people up! We had soldiers who had sat in the watchtowers, people who had crossed the border risking their lives. Spies, onlookers, escape facilitators and even people who illegally had jumped the wall from the west to the east – only to be immediately expelled by Stasi.

Additionally, all stories were fed into a database and mirrored on the web.<sup>4</sup>

Later, we were approached several times by journalists who wanted to get in touch with these witnesses, but we had promised anonymity to all of them.

In the following years the *Wandering Buoy* participated in several smaller projects, three times traveling to Poland, twice to Poznan within the frame of the festival Inwazija Barbarzyńcow, where it was deployed to engage people in the history of their local districts and then to commemorate the 1956 upheaval.

A new challenge for the *Wandering Buoy* came with an invitation to Switzerland from the Historical Society of Basel (Verein Basler Geschichte). To our great amazement the Swiss were interested in an art project that would use the *Wandering Buoy* as a tool to achieve a political agenda within the Swiss direct

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4 [www.wanderboje.de](http://www.wanderboje.de)

Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy, photo courtesy of the artists

**Wandering Buoy**

**attention-grabbing**  
due to striking  
buoy shape

**mobile**  
due to trailer hitch

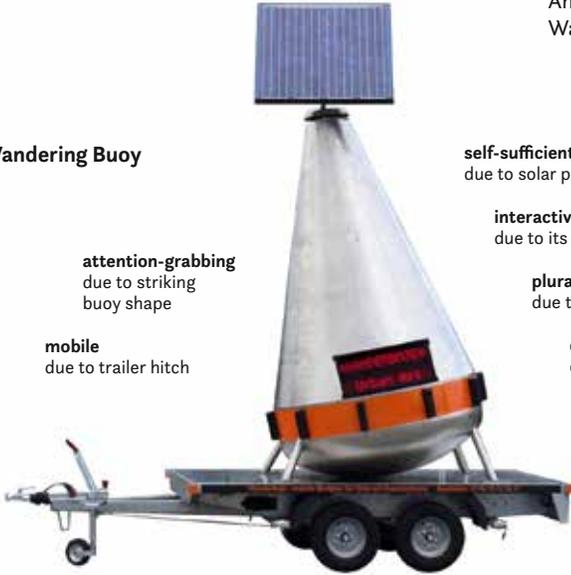
**self-sufficient**  
due to solar panel

**interactive**  
due to its public use free of charge

**pluralistic**  
due to individually programmed LED-screen

**communicative**  
due to changing messages on LED-screen

**everywhere installable**  
due to TÜV licence



Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy in Potsdamer Platz, photo courtesy of the artists



Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy in Potsdamer Platz, photo courtesy of the artists



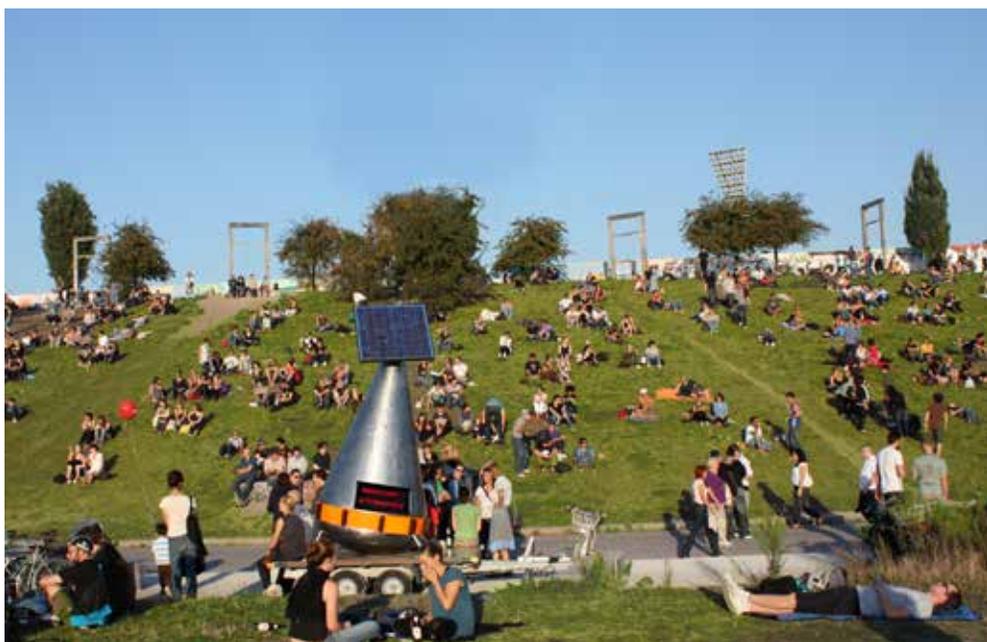
Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy, Basel, Messe, photo courtesy of the artists



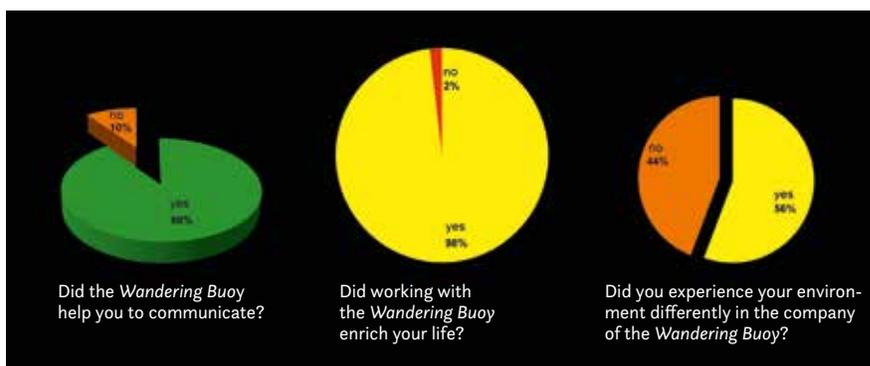
Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy in front of the Brandenburg Gate, photo courtesy of the artists



Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy in Poznan, photo courtesy of the artists



Anne Peschken & Marek Pisarsky, The Wandering Buoy in the park, photo courtesy of the artists



Ankieta dotycząca doświadczeń związanych z Wędrującą Boją, dzięki uprzejmości artystów

democracy political system. This we found very intriguing, as we had always postulated that the *Buoy* was pluralistic and democratic in presenting its content.

The Historical Society of Basel is an assembly of all the city's museums, deans of history departments, university professors and independent historians, and as their immediate political goal they wanted to gain the support of the cantonal parliament to finance a research project into the city's history that would eventually lead to a new comprehensive edition of a general history of Basel.

Any historian or scientist can probably imagine that kind of desire for professional recognition, money, influence etc. a 10 million Francs project like that involves. And also what kind of resistance and opposition it can encounter.

To us, this was a completely new situation. In an interesting way we had left art's playground. Instead, we were now out in the open, in the arena where political and social influence spheres meet. The cantonal parliament had signalled that it was willing to decide in favour of the New Basel History, as the project was called, if the Historical Society could document a vital interest of the public in this project.

And this is where the project co-ordinators, the historian Beatrice Schumacher and the anthropologist Dr. Gerhard Hotz, decided not to work with a classical PR-agency specialising in communications and marketing, but with us, an artist duo. Maybe this was due to the fact that Basel – The Art City as its marketing slogan goes – has such a long tradition of supporting the arts and believes in its own image.

As our cooperation developed further, we were asked to train the society's members in how to use the *Wandering Buoy*. And so we provided them with all the experiences we had made so far in initiating a dialogue with the public, in working interactively and in realising art projects. During this process we made it quite clear, that while we could present various possible ways of how to work with the *Wandering Buoy* and explain how the tool could work, it was completely up to them to devise a suitable strategy. We could only teach them how to use the tool, but they would have to do the work themselves.

The strategy the Historical Society finally decided on in order to document the required 'vital public interest' was an approach on three levels:

On the most obvious level the *Wandering Buoy* was to mark different places within the city that were related to on-going historical research projects, each headed by one or two scientists organised by the Historical Society. These experts were responsible for the knowledge transfer of the specific research topic connected with the location. The Jewish Museum for example wanted to highlight a small inauspicious strip of land surrounded on three sides by German territory that during the Third Reich was a renowned loophole for Jewish refugees. This site-specific information was displayed on the LED-screen of the *Wandering Buoy* – but not as a didactical background story but rather in the form of provocative slogans that could also have been borrowed from the latest newspaper headlines, like, "Basel swamped by foreigners".

A second task of the experts was a 5 to 15 min talk on their specific research topic in connection to the present location of the *Wandering Buoy*.

On the next level, each expert was supported by a team of volunteers, headed by a buoy manager, responsible for practical and organisational issues. These teams varied from location to location – and there were ten different locations during the project's duration. Each team was meant to interact with the public, to ask questions that would somehow make a connection between the specific site, the research project and the need of a New Basel History. All volunteers were trained and made familiar with a certain argumentation in favour of a New Basel History.

On the third level the volunteers were expected to extract from the public statements about people's personal wishes in connection with the New Basel History. What would the public be interested to read in a potential New History of Basel? All statements were taken down in writing, re-read to the respective person and either marked as anonymous statements or had the person's name added.

Yet, very quickly the organisers realised that the immediate questions from the public didn't refer so much to the messages on the LED-screen but to the *Buoy* itself: what was this thing, why it was in this place and standing in their way?

And this was precisely what we had hoped for: To attract attention, to be there for people to ask questions, to be responsive. Again and again we had the experience that it was the aesthetics combined with the sudden appearing and disappearing of the *Wandering Buoy* that kept people interested and added a playful aspect. This fun-factor with the *Buoy* popping up in new parts of Basel lasted for the entire duration of the eight weeks of the project.

In the end, after a big summer festival that presented among other things all the comments and suggestions from the public that had been collected and displayed on the LED-screen of the *Wandering Buoy*, a parade was organised headed by the *Wandering Buoy* and leading up to the City Hall, where more than 8,000 statements from the public regarding a new history for the city of Basel were handed to the local authorities.

In this way the *Wandering Buoy* played a vital and in the end decisive role in securing public money for a citizen driven project within the direct democracy of Switzerland.<sup>5</sup>

Campaigning for particular political agendas is widespread in Switzerland with numerous plebiscites being voted on every few months. Usually, the campaigning takes on quite conventional forms like street stands and handout flyers – although this is changing rapidly with the advance of social media.

The scientists, museum people and historians of the Historical Society were in the beginning hesitant to 'act up' in the streets and be mistaken for radical activists and campaigners. But the art aspect of the whole project seems to have saved the project, which in the end was successful not only in that it secured the money, but also – in what was to us even more flattering – honoured during the

<sup>5</sup> see also: <https://www.stadtgeschichtebasel.ch/index/das-projekt/verein/wanderboje.html>

famous Basel Fasnacht (Carnival of Basel) with its own lantern, something that is reserved only for the most prominent events in the town that year.

With mounting respect we watched the seriousness and devotion in which the historians not only had prepared the project but also worked on it on a day-to-day basis. And while the project was drawing to an end we decided to turn things around and monitor from our own perspective, what was happening to the *Wandering Buoy* in the hands of so many learned experts. How did they perceive the *Wandering Buoy* and what could be learned from this interactive process for future art projects in public space? In this situation we devised a questionnaire asking the members of the Historical Society and their volunteers how they assessed working with the *Wandering Buoy*.

With a return rate of 72% of all participants we managed to receive statistically relevant information. And our impression was that as polite and reserved, yet always friendly, as the buoy-activists had come across in our day-to-day contact, so they were open and unbiased when they expressed their opinion in our questionnaire.

For example we asked how the participants had perceived the *Wandering Buoy*, how they had used it and how they had felt while using it. As the survey showed, 90% of all participants answered the *Wandering Buoy* had helped them to communicate their concern.

Throughout the project and while training the various groups of project participants it was a recurring question whether the project would succeed to transgress the boundaries not only of various historical scientific subdivisions, but also of those dividing arts from sciences, public relations from street-working, or political campaigning from educational concerns. Therefore, we included a question as to whether people felt involved in interdisciplinary work. Although nearly 60% of the participants confirmed that they had worked in an interdisciplinary fashion, surprisingly, among those who saw the *Wandering Buoy* predominantly as a tool the opinion was divided into two equally strong groups. Surprising because defining the *Wandering Buoy* as a tool leaves the largest possibility to create an open context for adapting the tool to one's own needs.

We also asked whether participants had experienced their environment differently due to contact with the *Wandering Buoy*. To that a slight majority agreed. With the exception of the buoy-managers where the ratio was 2:1, i.e. twice as many buoy-managers did experience their environment differently, whereas others – possibly not so familiar with the effects of the *Wandering Buoy* – didn't perceive any differences.

Yet, when asked whether working with the *Wandering Buoy* had enriched people's lives, 98% agreed and only one person from all participants answered that they disagreed.

We therefore conclude: As with every tool the *Wandering Buoy* works best in the hands of well-prepared masters with a well devised strategy – yet what it always provides is quite a bit of fun for the on-lookers as well as for *Buoy* activists. Aesthetics do matter!