

POROUS BODIES

On a Saturday afternoon earlier this year, German artist **Annette Weisser** was joined in a conversation at MiM Gallery in Los Angeles by independent curator **Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer** and *Modern Painters* contributing editor **Chris Kraus**. They met to discuss trauma, false consciousness, and collectivity in relation to Weisser's exhibition "Ghosts, Gates, Spills, and a Fog Machine."

SARAH LEHRER-GRAIWER: Let's start with the title of your new monograph, *Make Yourself Available*. What do you imply with this phrase?

ANNETTE WEISSER: I came across it in an essay by Diedrich Diederichsen on e-flux. I found myself returning to the phrase again and again, connecting it to different constellations in what I perceive as the present moment. The first layer of meaning would be the moral imperative to make yourself available for the "good fight": Don't think of yourself first, but put the less privileged at the center of your life, your work. Rather than writing a poem, go join the protest march. This is an attitude that I grew up with. It's a moral imperative that, in my family, is at the intersection of Socialist political beliefs, a vaguely Protestant ethic, a rural tradition of "help thy neighbor," and a deep disgust with how people had been stripped of their basic human rights during the Third Reich.

Another layer of meaning is that the Western concept of self-contained, "unhacked" subjectivity seems to be outdated. There is the relentless urge to make oneself available on the job market, to become an entrepreneur of the self, with the artist being the role model for this, as has been succinctly researched and theorized over the past 20 years. With this enormous pressure on subjectivity, the question is where to find openings and ways out of this colonized self that

might lead to a new concept of empathy, of solidarity.

SLG: Precisely because of this new reality, if anything, I'd rather make myself less available. I'm at the point where I say I don't need more friends, I cannot keep up with more people in my life. Can you expand on what you mean by empathy?

AW: What I mean is that we have to be able to fully recognize ourselves in the other. Not in the sense of "Here am I, and you are over there, and I sympathize with your struggle." But rather in the sense of "Your colonized self circulates through my porous body and vice versa." We are constantly leaking—information, emotion—into each other.

SLG: And this leaking that constantly pours everyone into one another is involuntary as much as it can be intentional. The interpenetrating happens largely through images and representation—pictures we see of the other that pierce and circulate inside us. Which reminds me of the woodcuts in your show: openings, holes, fluids pouring out.

AW: Yeah, that's certainly implied, but they're also a pun on a vulgarized idea of the Freudian subconscious.

SLG: What happens to the idea of solidarity in your scenario?

AW: It's not that I have an answer, but I'm asking myself how solidarity can be organized around something other than a large unifier like "the working class." Under current conditions, everything conspires to create difference and competition.

CHRIS KRAUS: I can see an expression of this in your video *Karlas Lied*. The piece is about the 2007 May Day demonstration by illegal immigrants from Central America in Los Angeles that ended in massive police violence in MacArthur Park.

AW: It's nice that you say this, Chris. I had just moved to L.A. the previous fall and was drawn into the events by accident, because I lived close to the park. So here I was, a German immigrant of the very privileged kind, who didn't speak a word of Spanish, caught between screaming children and threatening, low-flying police helicopters. I was outraged by the police brutality, but at the same time I was very aware of the distance—economic, cultural, legal—between myself and the demonstrators, including the American activists. This is not my country, these are not my struggles, but yet here I was. I wanted to make a piece about this gap, about establishing a link, of solidarity perhaps, while acknowledging the distance, as a form of respect for the other. The piece is based on a newspaper photograph of a young girl, seen only from behind, who is giving her testimony of the events in front of a row of high-ranking



L.A. officials, including then chief of police William Bratton. While the struggle for legalization is not mine and I don't have the right to claim it for myself, the young girl speaking truth to power is certainly a trope I could relate to.

CK: It's so fascinating how you and I grew up in opposite parts of the world—you in Germany, me in New Zealand—and I can see all these parallels. For example, I used the same expression, "make yourself available," when I decided to stop making films. I began to make myself available to other artists by publishing their work. Would you say that the phrase marks a change in your work as well?

AW: Yes, it has changed quite a bit since I moved to L.A. In the niche of the 1990s German art world in which I was socialized, artistic production was organized around social or political issues rather than the artist's subjectivity, which was regarded as bourgeois and reactionary. For me, that worked great for a while because it linked the morality of my childhood to my desire

to become an artist, which up to that point had always been at odds. In various constellations, I made work about gentrification and the commercialization of public urban space. But more and more, I came to question this form of artistic self-denial. Something essential seemed to be missing in the work. In 2006 I came to L.A. as artist in residence at the ArtCenter College of Design. I was assigned a windowless studio, and that became my deep well. I climbed down to find out what is at the very bottom of my motivation as an artist, and for better or for worse, at the very bottom I found the images of Nazi concentration camps.

CK: That's classic Freudian displacement ...

AW: Yeah, I guess. It's almost impossible to address National Socialism in Germany beyond the ritualized speech patterns established in each field of the political spectrum. It's really, really unsexy. So you'd rather make work about homelessness, colonialism, or social and political struggles that take place elsewhere on the

planet. But at the same time, every public discourse in Germany is permeated by National Socialism. Take, for example, the current refugee situation. Our chancellor, Angela Merkel, made it clear that Germany has a historical responsibility towards the refugees, and I couldn't agree more. Anyway, as I arrived at this point, I decided to stop evading the real issue and instead confront it head-on.

For example, my motif of the young girl with the sheep mask is a reference to the film *Not Reconciled, or Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules*, by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. In my opinion, it's the best film about postwar Germany. It's based on a novel by Heinrich Böll, a writer who is almost forgotten today but who was very popular with my parents' generation. In the film as well as the novel, the cult of the sheep is a grotesque allegory of Germans' self-adulation as innocent bystanders of the Nazi regime.

CK: It looks like you took a long detour to give yourself permission to put yourself in the center of your work.

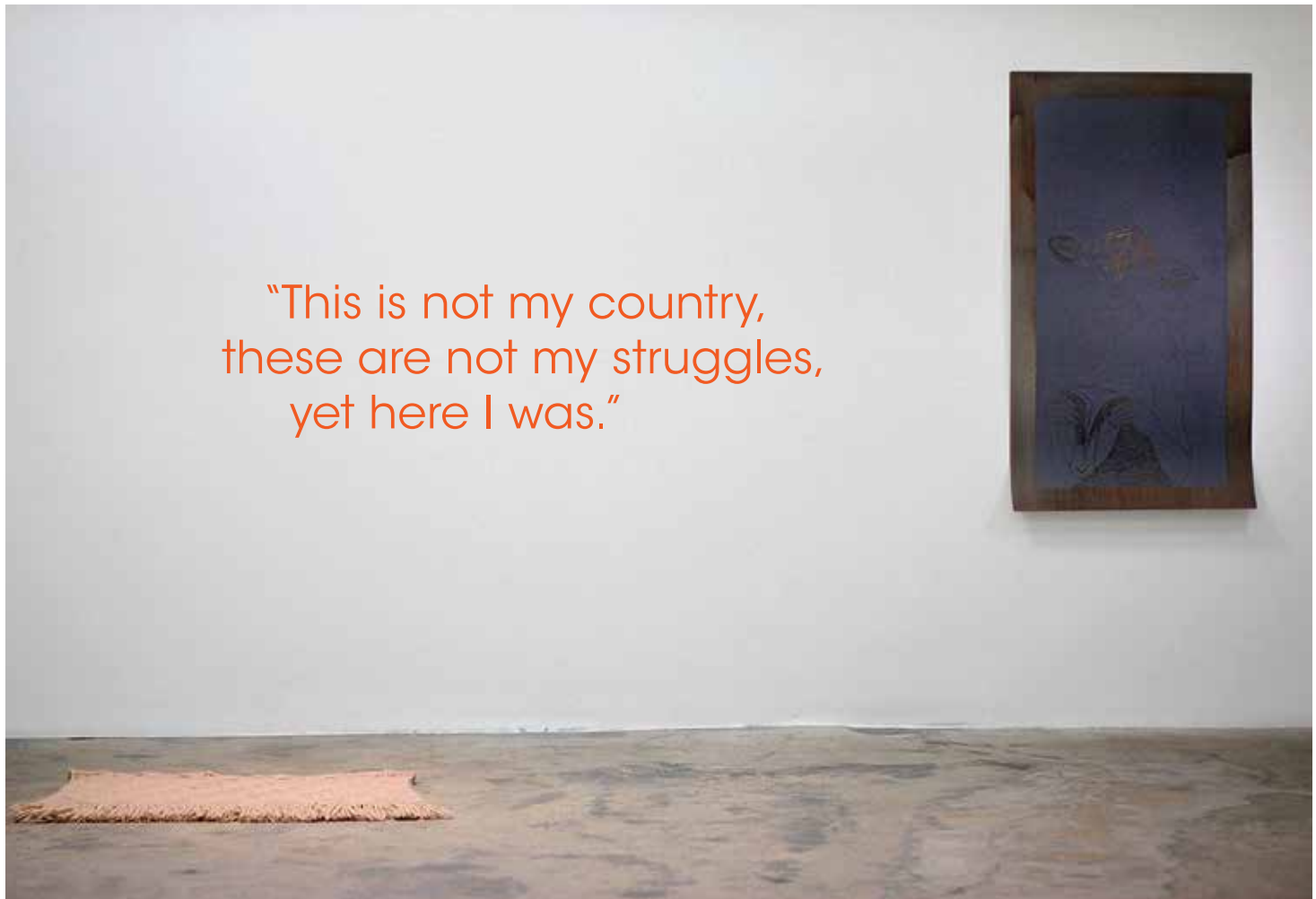
Annette Weisser
Installation view
of "Ghosts, Gates,
Spills, and a Fog
Machine" at
MiM Gallery in
Los Angeles.

ROUNDTABLE

Annette Weisser

RIGHT:
Installation view of
"Ghosts, Gates,
Spills, and a Fog
Machine."

BELOW:
A still from
Kartus Lied, 2012.
HD video,
13 min. 31 sec.



"This is not my country,
these are not my struggles,
yet here I was."



AW: Only in the sense that I put this particular condition in parentheses, to be able to look at it. I make myself available as a case study. That's what I learned from you, Chris!

SLG: Investigating your own subjectivity and psychology as a case study is also behind your experience with systemic

family constellation therapy. I find it pretty fascinating but difficult to understand how that works. In an interview you did with Gabriele Baring, a Berlin-based psycho-therapist who is a practitioner of the method, she explains how traumatic experiences may travel between generations via energetic transmission, like epigenetics. Is this the Jungian collective unconscious that is being tapped into?

AW: From what I know, it's more related to Rupert Sheldrake's concept of "morphic resonance." I became interested in Baring's writings about repressed trauma in German families as an underlying cause of what she describes as "self-harming behavior," what is known here in the

U.S. as German angst. She even links it to the declining birth rate in Germany. Because the concept of family as such has been misused and tainted by the Nazi regime, "society" became the only acceptable frame of reference in the postwar period. Plus, this had been a way to avoid the actual entanglement of one's family with the regime. But in this ideological

abstraction, issues that have their roots in family histories could no longer be addressed. Baring is using systemic family constellation therapy to unearth events in my grandparents' generation—the war generation—that had been erased from family memories but, according to her experience, shape the way parents interact with their children from one generation to the next, thus re-creating trauma over and over again. I am quite skeptical of the method, I must say, but the experience was very powerful.

SLG: One last question: What's the role of the recorder in your work? Why is it emitting smoke?

AW: I'm kind of obsessed with the figure of the young girl playing the recorder. For me, it's the perfect allegory of an earnest girlhood, of performing in homes for the elderly during Advent season, of all the goodness that we leave behind when we grow up—and of which we feel slightly embarrassed later in life. My installation *Inga, Kathrin, Judith, Christin* is about that moment when the recorder-playing girl is putting down her instrument and taking up a cigarette instead. **MP**

FROM TOP: ANNETTE WEISSER AND MIM GALLERY; ANNETTE WEISSER