

## Not Alone

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Sun, moon, mountains and rivers are the writing of being, the literature of what-is. Long before our species was born, the books had been written.

The library was here before we were. We live in it.

Robert Bringham, *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology*<sup>1</sup>

Can this mean that we have inherited our relationship to books, and therefore everything that books do to us, they do it epigenetically? What does this mean for our way of looking at things? Do I know things which have been recorded, written down, finalized and discussed intuitively?

I must confess that in lazy periods of my adolescence, I loved my mother's advice to put schoolbooks under my pillow before a test so their contents would flow into me at night. Of course, she meant it as a ritual for finals, and not as a general practice, but there were times when I trusted in this magnificent method. Predictably, the results were not so magnificent. And there were other practices of physical book embodiments in our family: for instance, my grandmother enjoyed teaching us table manners by requiring we put books under our armpits – while eating. My brother and I had to sit upright with our arms pressed tightly to our bodies in order not to drop the books. Luckily, she only used this method to demonstrate table manner methods she experienced when she was a child. Although this took place only two or three times for educational purposes, I can still recall my feeling of concentration trying not to drop the book on the floor. Perhaps sitting upright enhanced my height by a few millimetres, but books definitely helped me to reach things I was not supposed to reach.

Another exercise was walking upright and balancing books on my head to improve my posture. This time I used outdated schoolbooks. Surely my mother

appreciated my balancing sessions as they just added to her idea of how book content is transmitted. In fact, this would have been even more efficient since there was no pillow between book and head.

'We live in it'. I totally agree with Robert Bringham. On so many levels we do. For me this proves that without books next to me I simply don't feel comfortable. I grab a book because I like the look, or the title. I hold it, I embrace it; eventually we form a relationship and live together.

Thinking about my own curatorial practice and its relationship to libraries and books, it feels apparent to me that books can become some kind of spine to an exhibition, and often appear to be the backbone of the artistic process. When in the artist's studio, I might grab a book that is laying around, and the conversation starts from there. Therefore books in artists' practices seem to me like portals to a normally invisible context, but one that is relevant for diving more deeply into the artists' work. Words, lines, pages, books carry ideas and lead to propositions and different perspectives. They become a trajectory – lead or distract, confuse or enlighten, speaking in different tongues among themselves, talking eventually also to me, as well as the public. The same is the case when the genealogy of an artwork is revealed through the artist, their references, catalogues and literature, contemporary #media and the exhibition itself.

In 1920, Aby Warburg described all movable mediums, like graphics, tapestries, books and manuscripts, as 'automobile image vehicles'. His ambitious studies of influences, back and forth movements, the early implementation of popular culture through antique images and figures, can be seen as his private cosmology. He turned his thoughts into a visual argument, leaving behind much more than a library. In that sense, the book is a vehicle that can move in all directions.

When I started to develop my curatorial programme for the Heidelberger Kunstverein in 2011, I knew I would like to take a closer look at the potential of the so-called solo show, as I find it extremely relevant to unravel and unfold an artistic practice for all parties involved: the artist, curator, mediator and public. The term 'solo show' did not feel right to me, because we think in relations, and we live and work in networks. We remember important knots in our lives that made us stay tied together or become untied. Our thinking, action and styles are shaped by these influences and, for some, it's even an idolatrous tie.

This brought me to the idea for the format of 'solo show: not alone'. In close cooperation with the artists, we found very individual ways of including their references in the exhibition to frame the complexity of each artistic practice. The ideas and outcomes brought the backbone of artistic production to the foreground, mediating between the artwork and the public.

In spring 2012 I opened my programme with visual artist Ulf Aminde. To describe, in brief, a complex artistic practice, his interdisciplinary approach enforces dialogues and embodies conversations in specific social and political contexts. For the concept of his show, Heidelberg's history during the NS-Regime became a relevant starting point: namely, that Heidelberg was one of the first cities to joyfully celebrate – twice in 1933 – the concept of the public book burning (*Bücherverbrennung*) when the Nazis took power.

Heidelberg is divided by its river. On one side, on a little hill, are the remains of its medieval history. This *Heiligenberg* (the holy hill) was the desired destiny of the Nazis, who wanted to build a *Thingstätte* on top, in line with its historic foundations. Within a year – from 1934 to 1935 – they built this open-air theatre with a massive sound system and a stage that could seat 10,000 people, with space for 20,000 more standing. Used primarily

for NS propaganda, the Heidelberg theatre made a one-time appearance in 1939. They staged *Die Braut von Messina* (*The Bride of Messina*)<sup>2</sup> by Friedrich Schiller. The first line of the play is 'Der Noth gehorchend nicht dem eigenen Trieb' (Constrained by bitter need, not by my wish).<sup>3</sup> This striking sentence became the title of the show. As a consequence, the main hall of the Kunstverein developed into a stage with two wooden circus stands. The stands transformed the exhibition space into a performative space: five acts with manifold protagonists expanded the space (artistic and curatorial) throughout the exhibition.

But before we came up with the idea of the stage intervention, we spent a lot of time in dialogue about how to transform the space for a curatorial setting that employs dialogues, discourses and participation, all of which heavily inform Ulf's practice.

The space itself created the question: how do we present an artistic practice that is based on video art in a hall which is full of light and designed for large-scale



Ulf Aminde, *Prison (excerpt)*, drawings by inmates of the women's prison Schwäbisch-Gmünd, ball-pen on paper, 2011.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.

sculptures? We found several solutions for it. Two to mention here: first of all, we did not exhibit single artworks but rather his artistic practice. Further, we screened the video pieces publicly in the presence of the artist, watching them together from the beginning to the end, followed by a discussion with guests.<sup>4</sup>

During our meetings in his studio, I encountered various materials, like photographs and props from different projects, texts in the form of photocopies, and plenty of theory books. I asked him if he could imagine including the books, and certain excerpts from different projects, in the exhibition. Eventually his arrangement under one of the circus stands turned the books into a poetic object on top of a pile of drawings<sup>5</sup> (see image on the left). The excerpts were assembled on a display that matched the width of a central wall as a material collage (see image below). Throughout the five acts, the face of the exhibition changed: makeup was not added, but instead pages, layers, reminiscences of the performative interventions.



Ulf Aminde, *I acted on my fantasies and that's where everything went wrong*, 2012.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.

In the next exhibition at Heidelberger Kunstverein I presented *Echoes*, the work of Heide Hinrichs. Heide's approach to sculpture can be read as a translation process. I understand her works as a fragile bodily and a spatial reaction to the literature she is intensely dealing with. Her exhibition brought together works from two main series: first from her long-term body of work dealing with the novel *Austerlitz* by German-born author W. G. Sebald, a recent interaction at the time with the text *Dictée* by Korean American artist and author Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Both try to bring untold pasts into resonance, to find language for trauma, cultural loss and exile. Heide took the architectural conditions of the Kunstverein into account – the architecture is impossible to ignore – and responded as an echo to the building with woolen blankets to cover the rather cold postmodern-style glass. For Heide's work – which is a response to language and a language itself that reflects on the impact of exile(s) –



Above: Exhibition view of Heide Hinrichs, *Echoes*, 2012. Video: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Mouth to Mouth*, 1975. Photo: the artist.

Right: Heide Hinrichs, *Blankets*, installation on the outside of the building, 2012. Photo: the artist.



the Kunstverein felt like a massive glasshouse where she decided to place her works on a bed of blankets and other tactile components comparable to seeds. In response to my question of how to give her roots visibility in the exhibition, we decided to show an early video work by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha<sup>6</sup> in which the artist filmed her mouth forming vowels and their representations in the Korean Hangeul alphabet (see image on page 120). Seeking representatives for her relationship to Sebald, we went to Marbach, to the German Literature Archive, and looked at his archive boxes which are kept there. I remember my astonishment that Sebald himself documented his process and sources meticulously and chronologically in archive boxes. Everything seemed prepared for the transfer from England to Germany. Further, I remember that I fell asleep next to the boxes while Heide was continuing the research which became a selection of what we planned to include in the exhibition. Finally, it was a showcase filled with key images from *Austerlitz* (see image below). The selection from Sebald's work, in relation to the poetic texture of



Detail of display case with images from W. G. Sebald's folder related to *Austerlitz*, German Literature Archive, Marbach.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.

Heide's artwork in the exhibition, created the reciprocity of echoes for which the show is named, capturing how intrinsically everyday materials speak through their genealogies.

When I invited artist Annette Weisser into this format, she took my question of influence as a challenge, and quickly responded with a brilliant idea: the complete private library of her aunt Anneliese Weisser. Her good spirit accompanied Annette Weisser during childhood and youth. It was through these books that she began her art education, by looking at reproductions in lavish catalogues of antiquity and Renaissance artworks. And here she internalised the canon of pacifist post-war literature by writers like Heinrich Böll, Bertolt Brecht, and Christa Wolf, among others. We picked up the books, packed up in wooden crates normally used to store apples, at her family home in the Black Forest area. When we arrived, her aunt had already emptied all her bookshelves and I rather felt like an intruder, taking such an important



Detail: Annette Weisser, *Anneliese Weisser's library*, sorted by date of publication, 2013.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.

part of her everyday life and history out of her private space. But luckily there was also her happiness and pride present in the living room that her niece was going to take her books into an exhibition to Heidelberg, and not only the void of the now emptied shelves.

Back in the Kunstverein, the roughly 500 books were sorted by their publishing date. Arranged on an eleven-metre-long shelf, they turned into a timeline beginning in 1904 (a catechism), with the last bit left empty for new books to come, the acquisition not yet finished. The shelf was installed in the main exhibition hall as part of the exhibition *Make Yourself Available*. For this show, Annette reproduced four architectural fragments of her childhood room (*Jugendzimmer*) located underneath the roof (as those frequently are) complete with slanted ceilings. Some of the fragments were turned upside down or flat on the floor and acted as displays for her woodprints and drawings. They were repainted in the colours Annette had chosen for her room back then, minus one: black, which her parents wouldn't accept.

The best thing about these books were the dialogues they provoked with the audience, as they turned into representatives and echoes. Stories entered the Kunstverein about certain books, about when they had been read and, most interestingly, the experiences surrounding the reading. The personal testimonies about what this and that book meant for the audience enabled a personal connection to Annette's artwork. The link was made and the view opened.

Her motifs are universal yet specific. It is easy to relate to Annette's figures that demonstrate democratic post-war values – from the obedient to the disobedient. Weisser, who dedicated the show to her upbringing

Exhibition view:  
Annette Weisser, *Make Yourself Available*, 2013.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.



and the related topics of the 1970s and 1980s like the Cold War, acid rain, and the movement against nuclear power, developed the exhibition with a view from her first-floor Los Angeles studio.<sup>7</sup>

Thinking about it now – nearly ten years later – the format probably enabled a more direct engagement with the world inside and outside the studio as there was no mannerism presented but rather personal, social, and artistic testimonies that underlined an understanding of influences in artistic production.

There have been a lot more exhibitions where books, archival material, pamphlets and texts played an important role. One more I would briefly like to mention: the amazing work of Ceija Stojka was published in 2014 in the comprehensive monograph *Even death is afraid of Auschwitz*.<sup>8</sup> Without the work of Lith Bahlmann and Matthias Reichelt I would not have been able to develop the exhibition *Wir leben im Verborgenen (We Live in Seclusion: The Memories of a Romni)*.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition title is borrowed from her autobiography which she published in 1988. Ceija Stojka passed away in 2013 but through her testimonies I was able to bring her strong voice into the Kunstverein.

The display, which I developed together with Marei Löllmann, was a response to her hospitality and intimate ink drawings. A generous table built the social centre of her everyday life. On a twelve-metre-long concrete table we presented her deeply disturbing ink drawings. Stojka finds images for the horror and the cacophony she experienced as a child. Her directness of speech alongside her ink drawings and paintings, depicting figures like herself, her siblings, her mother, ravens, barking dogs, shouting NS-soldiers, barracks,

Exhibition view:  
Ceija Stojka, *We Live in Seclusion*, 2015.  
Photo: Markus Kaesler.



and the woods, form a unique representation of the horror she experienced as a small child in the German concentration camps with her family.

Stojka started to break the taboo of silence in the 1980s. Her artistic work on the brutal past turned into a political intervention in the present. Together with her brother she became a spokesperson and an active political protagonist. As I couldn't ask her about her references and influences, I decided to ask others about important voices within the medium of film. "Kino Romanes" (Cinema Romanes) turned the studio space of the Kunstverein into a temporary cinema. Its programme was curated by many protagonists, each of them expert in the context and medium. The chosen films gave the Porajmos (the Nazi genocide of the European Sinti and Roma people) another voice but also presence to the contemporary conflicts, tragedies and everyday life stories within the broad and diverse Sinti and Roma community.

Personal, biographical and aesthetic conditions underlay all of these curatorial experiments. Earlier on I talked about ties and knots. I find it important to mention that of course ties represent relationships. These relationships can inform the production of an exhibition. The three exhibitions described here were developed with artists I am also friends with. I've known their work over a long period of time, which was very helpful for a mutual understanding that is also based on trust. Ideas could be discussed without being judged. This opened a space for experimentation and reflection. Nevertheless, this space is meant for sharing in the format of an exhibition. To close with Robert Bringhurst: because *we live in it*.

Berlin, October 2020

- 1 Robert Bringhurst, *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), 143.
- 2 *The Bride of Messina* is a tragedy by Friedrich Schiller. It premiered on March 19, 1803, in Weimar. It is one of the most controversial works by Schiller, due to his use of elements from Greek tragedies (which were considered obsolete at the time it was written).
- 3 For full text: <https://archive.org/details/bridemessinaatrooirvigoog/page/n14/mode/2up>.
- 4 This format was entitled 'Kommentiertes Sehen' (*Commentary Viewing*) and showed selected video works in the presence of a guest (an expert in a related field) who entered into a public dialogue with the artist.
- 5 The drawings resulted from a workshop Ulf Aminde did with imprisoned women in 2011.
- 6 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Mouth to Mouth*, 1975. Video, black-and-white, sound, 8 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.
- 7 Annette Weisser lived in Los Angeles from 2006 to 2019. During that period, she held a professorship at ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena. In 2019, she returned to Berlin and in the same year she published her first novel entitled *Mycelium* with Semiotext(e).
- 8 Ceija Stojka, *Even death is afraid of Auschwitz* (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2015).
- 9 Ceija Stojka, *We Live in Seclusion: The Memories of a Romni* (Vienna: Picus, 1988).