

Karolin Bräg

in Conversation with Florian Matzner

Florian Matzner (FM) When you open this book, the presentation of your work begins with a photo of you and an old woman sitting on a park bench. You're deep in conversation. On the next page you read a quote: "We never talked about death ..." When did you start working on the themes of illness, dying, and death, and what was the reason for it?

Karolin Bräg (KB) *In the first years I worked on objects made of black wax. These were dark, closed surfaces that seemed to swallow everything at first glance. I equated them with the void. This 'void' could only be penetrated by getting very close to the objects. Then you could see familiar things: distinct colors, drawings, lines, and their fragility. I wanted the viewer to be conscious of the distance, that he would only see something else if he allowed himself to get closer. In those days, though, I had no idea that I had already found my theme.*

When I was twenty, the death and the absurd funeral of a person close to me triggered something like an internal protest against being absorbed by social constrictions and existing cemetery regulations. Years later, in Tokyo, I experienced this quiet fear of a possible earthquake—something nobody talked about—and it was just a small step to address these feelings, to share them. I wanted to find a way out of helplessness, into the freedom of language. While I was there, I read a great deal by Kenzaburo Oe, who wrote, "Everyone has to die sometime. And in a hundred years, nobody will ask how someone died. It is best to do it in the way you like."

FM Have you ever worked with the hospice movement?

KB *When I was realizing the piece Nimm Abschied (Say farewell) for the Pragfriedhof (cemetery) in Stuttgart, I saw this beautiful old cemetery, with its tombstones and its seasonal plantings. At the time I wondered what it would be like if there were no gardeners, no stonemason, and we had to bury our dead ourselves. What would that look like? I wanted to talk about the ways of saying farewell with people who often came into contact with death. Then the Christophorus Hospice in Munich gave me the opportunity to meet with hospice workers. These encounters were characterized by a kind of honesty that attracts me, personally. I was profoundly impressed by the work that these people do.*

FM For years, your artistic work has centered on fragments of sentences and text, conversational work, you call it, which you then work into different media. Of course, it's also dependent upon the exhibition context, such as the white cube of museum, a gallery, or an outdoor or public space, such as a cemetery, which already conveys a very particular atmosphere and mood.

KB *I showed the first texts in public in Tokyo. Driven by the desire to share fears, to communicate them; I wanted to trigger something in the observer, regardless of what it was. Any kind of reaction, as long as it would release the viewer from this paralysis. I looked for a form that would not be noticed right away in the streets; it was just supposed to be an image that would add something to the everyday experience. At that moment it did not want to be art, but a gesture toward communicating thoughts. Through this form I try to achieve a kind of immediacy, a maximum feeling of connectedness, knowing that the social distance is great. Some of the works outdoors are protected, but others have been partially destroyed. In Tokyo the triptych with the fortune teller was immediately removed; in Bad Waldsee some people did not like the postcard series because it didn't show the beauties of the town. On the other hand, the view of the refugee home was a different one, and opened up the search there for the right house. In Friedrichshafen one of three text banners on the ferries was removed right after the first trip, due to the indignant phone calls received after people had read, "Honestly, I don't need the lake." On the other hand the texts hung on the embankment promenade triggered discussions among people who would otherwise never have spoken with each other.*

Working in the public space is important to me; it is more immediate, more emotional; however, there are pieces that belong in protected exhibitions. Places like the Ittingen Charterhouse or the Pragfriedhof in Stuttgart are always "found images" for me. I don't have to add any more pictures. The observer can read the texts in the landscape, like an "internal tour guide," as Markus Landert once put it.

FM Markus Landert was right when he remarked in his essay, "Now, Karolin Bräg is not a poet or author, but an artist."

KB *Since I studied sculpture, I see myself mainly in this line. There is continuity, with the works building on each other and developing permanently. Only the form has changed twice, due to changing life circumstances. When our first son was born I discovered wax as a material, and during the time in Japan, without material and a studio, I discovered the conversation.*

FM Is there anything in your personal, conceptual intention and strategy that links you to artists such as Lawrence Weiner?

KB *Before 1995 I always worked with classic materials and forms and so many of these artists were unknown to me for a long time. It wasn't until after Japan that I read about Jenny Holzer's works, whose directness I found genuine. Especially in the public places where her art was not immediately recognizable. Sophie Calle fascinated me, because she creates a sense of intimacy that affects one. In my encounters, however, I look for the greatest possible measure of truth, for the moment in which people can be honest with themselves and with me. I don't want to construct anything, but discover what is already there. I know too little about Weiner; I have to examine his work more closely. I like the fact that he rejects Conceptual Art as a term and instead says, "I make art and if there has to be a name for it, then it's realistic art, because it is about real materials and human beings." I can see myself in that.*

FM What is the significance of the projects that you work on with Daniel Bräg, when you are working as a team or collective of artists?

KB *I wouldn't describe us as a team, or especially, as a collective, since we've developed our works separately and we see ourselves as two artists who, over time, have discovered that there are intriguing places where our concepts and ideas overlap. We've been a couple since our early student days, but it took nine years before we did our first work together. Daniel had already stacked up his Obstgarten (Orchard), heralding the Pomology, and my work, Asyl (Asylum), was the first time I asked other people to write down their thoughts on death in letter form; in 1994 we each came up with the same idea independently, of working on a cemetery in the garden at the Städtische Galerie in Villingen-Schwenningen. These conceptual overlaps are fluid, we don't steer them; they arise out of an inner necessity. In our conversations many ideas are born, some die, and others give us wings, because they have something of both of us. The contradiction and friction keep us awake, and then we get a great deal of joy out of the realization of a work. In retrospect, I can say that all of the works we've made have something to do with each other and together they make up one big whole. They become interwoven over the years. I can't imagine the one without the other. Daniel's Glashaus (Greenhouse) and his Schirm (Umbrella) conducted a dialogue that was completely different than in my work Nimm Abschied at the Pragfriedhof, and yet both ask, in their own way,*

the same question of the viewer: In what way would I personally decide to bury someone? This led to our collaboration, Hinweisschilder (Signs), in which an overriding confrontation with the existing cemetery regulations took place.

FM What are your upcoming ideas and projects; what will you be doing over the next months and years?

KB *As a person of the moment, I live intensively in the here and now, so I cannot look into the future, and I don't want to, either. When I was conducting the conversations at the Westfriedhof (cemetery in Munich), I wanted to continue to develop the question of the meaning of farewell, and also to ask Muslim fellow citizens the question; but so far my path has not led in that direction. At the moment I'm contemplating the word eternity... for a group show next spring. I'd rather answer with a quote from the poem Aprèslude von Gottfried Benn: Niemand weiß wo sich die Keime nähren, niemand, ob die Krone einmal blüht – Halten, Harren, sich gewähren, Dunkeln, Altern, Aprèslude / No one knows where the sprouts feed; no one, if the crown even blooms – hold on, hold out, abide, darken, age, aprèslude.*