

We Never Talked about Death:

Monuments to Intimate Moments

by Markus Landert

The ability to conduct a conversation is a skill necessary to human survival. Animals can, if need be, communicate with each other, exchanging signals and information. A conversation among human beings, though, is more than that: a conversation is based on a common language, leads to understanding of knowledge and emotions, and requires the need for communication and the ability to empathize. A conversation can have a certain purpose, or it can flow freely; it can concentrate on a single motif, or meander playfully from one theme to the next. There is almost nothing else that is as effective as a conversation for increasing intimacy among people, and this intimacy can involve commitment and depth that are seldom achieved in any other way.

The Conversation – An Intimate Moment

Conversations are the core of Karolin Bräg's works. The artist goes up to people and asks them if they would mind engaging in a conversation with her. She asks apparently trivial questions, wants to know simple things. "Why are you here?" she asks people working at various jobs, under various circumstances, in a cultural center located in a former cloister. Or she will go to the cemeteries in Munich and ask, "How do you experience this place?" For a piece in an energy technology company, she inquired, "What gives you energy, and what takes it from you?" The conversations often last a long time. During the conversation, the artist opens up a space that makes it possible to formulate the inexpressible, where people can attempt to capture even the unimaginable in words. Conversations with Bräg are about very personal things: death, mourning, fears, insecurities, and weaknesses.

From Conversation to Text

Bräg does not record the conversations. She simply makes notes of the statements she feels are important, the ones that touch her. She does not focus on the collection of information, but on the moment of trust, of listening, of communication and understanding. The notes are kept confidential. Nobody is allowed to look at them. The identities of the people who speak with the artist remain as hidden as

their stories and their fates. Bräg's work is not about making an intimate show out of the self, or a spectacular presentation of sorrow and shame, good fortune or failure, as in the tabloid papers. It is not about spectacle, but about real emotions.

As she continues to work on the piece, the conversational notes are reworked several times and subjected to a strict selection process. Of the long, intimate conversations, only short sentences remain—succinct, simple statements in which the essence of the conversation is condensed to the greatest possible point. These sentences are Bräg's monuments to intimate moments.

These texts do not really document the conversations, but are more like brief, autonomous texts. In sentences such as, "It all happened exactly the way he didn't want it. The coffin was carried through the village and everything looked so orderly,"¹ stories are crystallized, and their brevity reflects generally valid patterns of life. Here, for instance, the death of a person who was in conflict with the conventions of his environment, who would have liked to break out of preordained structures, but even death itself does not bring him any freedom. Read as the shortest of stories, the texts become parables dealing with the fundamental values of human existence. Each text also contains the potential for complicated images: of the people talking, of the situations they find themselves in, of the spaces in which they live, of the emotions they feel. In order for this potential to be revealed, though, readers must fill out the stories, adding their own experiences and ideas to them. Then, despite their brevity, the texts suddenly become rich and multifaceted.

The Text Needs a Medium

*Now, Karolin Bräg is not a poet or an author, but an artist. She does not write books, but creates works of art that help to make the conversational material visible in a museum, gallery, or in a public space. Each of the conversational works presented here, which she began doing in 1995, are realized in very different ways. Quotes appear as labels on photographs, as postcard phrases, or on panels and tarpaulins in public places. In the piece, *Mir gefällt's recht gut da* (*I really like it a lot there*), the statements are gathered in a book, and in the work, *Abschied ist ein intimer Moment* (*Saying goodbye is an intimate moment*), the texts appear as enlarged, handwritten inscriptions in a monumental stone circle. When it works out, the various materials can also appear in combination—for*

instance, in a temporary intervention at the entrance to the Pragfriedhof (cemetery) in Stuttgart, where, under the title, Nimm Abschied (Say goodbye), the texts, printed on tarpaulins, were hung for a while outdoors in a public place, but also continue to be available in the form of a small book.

Images for the Text

In some of her works, Bräg combines the conversational quotes with pictures. For The Big One: Tokyo, she took statements from conversations and newspaper quotes, and arranged them with either her own or found photographs. A view of the destruction in the city of Kobe or the photo of a survival kit—well-known to everyone in Japan—are visual pendants to quotations, which speak of the horror and uncertainty after the catastrophe.

In Grüße an Daheim (Greetings home) pictures and texts are assembled in a postcard series. However, Bräg's images do not have the same good-weather aesthetic of normal postcards from a spa town or a tourist trap: there are no points of interest, brilliant colors, or idyllic landscapes, but areas without any particular landmarks, views of houses and banal interiors—pictures of everyday life in a town. The thoughts of spa guests about their absence and their relationship to their homes are quoted on the reverse of the postcards. The postcard, a sign of people enjoying their vacations and relaxed travel, is reinterpreted as an instrument for meditating on the meaning of life and home.

In other works, pictures are only used on the periphery, as if hidden. In the small book about the cemetery piece, Nimm Abschied, there are just a few, very small pictures of people at the cemetery. The photos are not printed in the booklet, but placed inside a little envelope of transparent paper and laid inside the book, so that readers can simply place them in the booklet wherever it suits them. In Mir gefällt's recht gut da, the photos are dealt with in a similarly reduced way. Here, two souvenir photos taken by the artist convey a very different atmosphere of the town than the one seen in the pictures in the advertising brochures at the cultural center.

Even though they are so unobtrusively implemented that they seem almost invisible, the images in these works by Karolin Bräg take on an important task. They provide impressions of the places where the conversations have occurred. "The place in which a conversation occurs is important," says the

artist, “because it has a crucial influence on the intensity of the tête-à-tête. The site influences the mood of the conversation and determines the questions I pose.” The images assigned to the texts are not really meant to show the place objectively, but to convey the atmospheric background behind the conversations. A touch of the mood still echoes in the little photographs, reflecting something of the intimate space that helped to shape the conversations.

Texts in Space

Works such as *Abschied ist ein intimer Moment* or *Ein Spiegel ist der See* (*The lake is a mirror*) do not need pictures. In these cases, the texts are staged in the places where the conversations have taken place – they are inscribed into the space, as it were. Bräg found an elegant way to combine text and space in *Ein Spiegel ist der See*, where the sentences could be read on transparent tarps hung on the railings along the promenade next to the lake. The words seemed to be written in the lake. In these kinds of presentational installations, the site and the text combine to become an inseparable unit, creating open stages where readers seem to be able to enter the text. Cemetery or lakeside promenade form the background vistas in front of which the texts can be read, or perhaps even spoken out loud. The book *Mir gefällt’s recht gut da* is similar, in that it can be read as a very unconventional tour guide through the former cloister. Book in hand, one wanders through the idyllic spot, hearing the voices of the people working there as frequently irritating commentary on this seemingly—some are mourners at the cemetery, some are tourists on the lake, or at the cloister—become, either consciously or unconsciously, part of the staging, a drama, a performance dealing with the meaning of life.

Critique of Rituals

Bräg refers to ritual patterns for her works. In *The Big One: Tokyo* the photographs are shown as if they were part of a medieval altarpiece; the flowers recall items left on or in graves, which most religious communities probably regard as a sacrificial gesture. References to ritual and religious patterns are also obvious in the piece *Abschied ist ein intimer Moment*, at the *Westfriedhof* (cemetery) in Munich. Inscribing the text on a stone ring is a way of playing with the forms and material of European cemetery culture. Inevitably, the ring is a symbol of eternity and a reference to the types of European commemorative architecture, from the *Church of the Holy Sepulcher* in Jerusalem

to the Pantheon and their many imitators. Bräg's references to cemetery and commemorative culture, however, are dotted with unobtrusive, yet disturbing maneuvers. For instance, she does not inscribe people's names and dates of birth and death in the stone ring, but excerpts from her conversations with mourners. And she does not engrave the texts into the stone using a classic kind of typeface, but her own handwriting. Both the intimacy of the conversational quotes and the use of handwriting allude to the notion that mourning today is regarded as a very personal, individual process, and society's rituals and the representative monumentality of historical burial grounds are limited in their ability to keep up with it. By making the intimacy of the conversations public and presenting them with all of the emotion surrounding cemetery culture, Bräg questions traditional notions of behavior and bravery in the face of death, and encourages the development of more contemporary ways of dealing with strong emotions.

In Friedhofsgespräche (Cemetery conversations, 1997) at the Kunstverein Radolfszell, Bräg's analytic, critical way of dealing with the formulaic cemetery-related emotions is much more direct. The installation of plant containers could be interpreted as an obvious model of a cemetery, although in the context of art, the combination of improvised plantings and the serious character of the conversational quotes at a cemetery could only be read as an ironic, fragmented, close examination of middle-class burial rituals. For the knowledgeable visitor, the fact that the rectangular flowerpots were a side comment on the actual Minimal Art of the time period, elevated the complexity of the ironic refraction.

In 1994 Karolin and Daniel Bräg collaborated on a project titled Die Ruhezeit ist beendet (The break is over), and it showed how consistently the artist
—even before she began her conversational work
—dealt with rituals at the cemetery and the communications mechanisms usually employed there. Here, too, the Brägs reconstructed a model of a cemetery within the context of art, which, in this case, proved to be a communications field. Mourning and its related rituals turn out to be an analyzable arrangement of communicative props; among them are the bench, the refuse container, and the water spigot. In the neutral space provided by art, the cemetery is simulated as a weave of communicative acts and requirements, in the form of little rituals—hauling water, watering the flowers, sitting down to mourn, keeping the site clean.

This thoroughly ironically fragmented analysis does not occur without the artist's sympathetic participation, and this is seen inside the gallery, where Bräg has created flower arrangements dipped in wax. These small, ephemeral gifts have been mummified, as it were, by the wax treatment. Solidified, as if frozen, slowly fading, the bouquets lie there: not simply thrown down, but carefully laid out, as if they were relicts in a ritual, whose meaning inside the art space cannot be comprehended. In these waxy, eternally conserved flowers crystallizes a feeling that includes both discomfort and fascination alike. Made before the serious conversational work began, Bräg's creation is also distinguished by the simultaneous existence of analytical distance and direct emotion in the process of dealing with ritualistic forms.

Questioning Rituals – Questioning Art

*The affiliation of critical analysis and the fascination for ritual phenomenon is also a distinct characteristic of the piece *Beichten gehen* (Going to confession), which Karolin Bräg and her husband realized in fulfillment of a commission from the Catholic churches in Weingarten and Munich. *Beichten gehen* invited the public to discuss contemporary art, with the ritual framework being the confessional. Closely following Catholic ritual, Karolin and Daniel Bräg developed a kind of "confession manual," which guided the conversations with art lovers, self-confidently stating, "The artist can forgive artistic sins." In this way, they claimed a kind of priest-like position, sitting across from the people participating in the conversations and listening to them. Here, too, nothing of these conversations was publically revealed, because they were held "under the seal of confession." Accordingly, there are no textual versions of these conversations. The only relicts left to prove that this action was ever carried out are the artists' "confession manual" and a photograph.*

By joining the conversational form of the confession, taken from Catholic ritual, with the question of how to deal with contemporary art, the artists created an explosive mix, both for the Catholic church, as well as for contemporary art. Catholic hardliners regarded this piece as an abuse of the ritual of one of the seven sacraments, wrongly used for an exploration of a theme that had nothing to do with religious faith. Reformulating one of the church's instruments—the confession manual—for another purpose ridicules the seriousness of this instrument of faith, and for some of the faithful, the appearance of the artists in a priest-like role probably bordered on sacrilege. But the piece also disturbed the

self-concept of art lovers. Doesn't the narrow ritualistic framework of the confession contradict art's comprehensive demand for freedom? Does this freedom actually exist in art at all, or are the rituals of art just as narrow as those used in the Catholic church? Or "is art really a pseudo-religious system?" These kinds of questions inevitably arise when an art lover is leafing through the Brägs' confession manual, but their work provides no answers: it simply poses questions. It is an open bid for conversation, and not an ideologically constricting position taken by the artists.

The Existential Questions

*Bräg's creations are always justifiably linked to the themes of "dying," "death," and "mourning." In order fully to understand her work, it makes sense to expand the thematic horizon, since pieces like *Meine Energie*, *Mir gefällt's recht gut da* and *Beichten gehen* do not fit into this pattern. In *Ein Spiegel ist der See*, for example, Bräg involves people at Lake Constance in discussions about how they experience the city and the lake. And then there are answers such as, "You can be born here, grow up here. Spend your whole life here. Your name betrays you; you're not from here." These kinds of statements echo fundamental themes of self-inquiry that have accompanied mankind since its beginnings: "Who am I, and who do I want to be?" "Where do I come from, and where am I going?" "Where am I, and what constitutes this place?" Everyone, at some point in their lives, will find themselves challenged by these questions. The contemplation of one's own existence and identity is part of the complex of questions that cannot be delegated to anyone else, and which each person must answer for him or herself. The statements Karolin Bräg cites do not provide answers to these questions; they simply offer possible thoughts, which are not obligatory models of any sort, but remain, on the contrary, radically personal and individual. When we read Bräg's texts, it is as if we are also listening to other people, to the ways that they answer important questions for themselves. Even if individual statements seem trivial to us, as non-participants, we are still experiencing an intimate, existential process. This leads to that unusual emotionality that distinguishes Bräg's work from all of the commercial works offered by the advertising and film industries.*