

From here

From Here: A Commentary on the Work of Dagmar Pachtner

"Life can only be understood by looking back, but it can only be lived looking ahead", so Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his diaries.¹

The show case exhibition titled Dagmar Pachtner: From Here is taking place on and for the occasion of a personal anniversary: Twenty-five years ago she began to work in Landshut, her first studio being located on Neustadt. In 1999 she purchased an old carriage house on Gabelsbergerstrasse. Her renovation and almost archeological visualization of earlier uses and users of the building tells us much about Pachtner's attentive and mindful interaction with the world around her.

Twenty-five years in Landshut. Yet not a retrospective.

The artist decided to concentrate on showing the work of the past five years. In the two larger spaces, the gothic portico and the large gallery hall, she has placed two installations: the space-related work *Inside-Outside* in the portico, in the gallery itself *Memories*, a work independent of the space yet dominating it by its sheer volume.

From Here:

The title of the exhibition may well be taken programmatically - also in the sense of the Danish philosopher. It marks the point of view from which Dagmar Pachtner looks out onto the world. The conscious act of looking at her work and at the world from a critical intellectual distance, staging it and in the staging exposing it to another analysis - that is how Pachtner operates.

This type of reception as an artistic method is inconceivable without decades of artistic development and progress, a process during which Pachtner has tested the most diverse pictorial means and processes and has translated her experience into conscious artistic decisions.

Some of her earliest objects work with the contrast between organic and technoid materials. They often distinguish themselves by a self-referential, classical concept and by a tactile composition in the sense of an individual "fingerprint".

In the course of her progress she has come to focus on

an increasingly conceptional approach, by which she transforms objects and mechanisms of daily life into objects of art. Such a transformation is possibly only with a well-conceived concept of aesthetic reflection in the complex and charged relationship between art, science and every day life.

This type of internal and external reflection and constant re-evaluation is an imminent part of her artistic biography. *Looking Back Ahead* was the title of an exhibition at the Neue Galerie Landshut in 1998, an exhibition that she wanted to be understood as a comprehensive review of what had been, what is and what might possibly be.²

An inexhaustible incentive for Pachtner is her interest in the human being, in its Gestalt, its identity and its movement: particularly the movens of the anonymous human body or of its detail coalesces into an analysis of modernity. She does not engage in a comprehensive, encyclopedic documentation - instead her works are segments and uncommon details of lived reality.

A retrospective in the sense of an opportunity to follow the development of her work is offered by a digital documentation that presents in chronological order singular works, series, temporary installations and works in public spaces and thereby shows the long-term development and the extraordinary volume of Pachtner's work.

For Landshut one may recall as exemplary the literally space-filling installation *Transgression in the Church of the Holy Spirit* in 2002. There she installed tons of heavy soil and a blue transcendental light as the space for the presentation of a number of naked puppets marked with barcodes.³

A number of works in public spaces are also documented as examples for the complexity of Pachtner's work. Often they are spaces of remembrance in which she has realized works after winning their competitions. They are thus created for the perception in these very spaces.

Any attempt to document such a complex work in a single exhibition runs the risk of becoming academic, a danger of which Pachtner is always cognizant and

¹ The quotation from the Diaries reads: "It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. From Soren Kierkegaard, *The Diaries 1834-1855*; Feb. 8, 1839, selected and translated by Theodor Haecker, Munich, 1948, p. 157

² Stefan Offenhäuser: *Erde durchragt die Welt*, in Dagmar Pachtner. *Blick zurück nach vorn*, From the exhibition catalogue, Neue Galerie Landshut, Landshut 1998, without pagination.

³ Niehoff, Franz (Ed.): *Dagmar Pachtner: Überschreitung*. Documentation of the installation *Überschreitung* by Dagmar Pachtner in the Church of the Holy Spirit, Landshut 2002

which she counters by means of a very limited, concise "listing".

This is particularly apparent in the memorial Paths of Remembrance for the victims of the Concentration Camp Echterdingen-Bernhausen, close to the Stuttgart Airport, which she realized in 2010. Two long white walls focus the view; the names of former inmates, spoken by people from the region, accompany the visitor on her passage through the memorial.



One has to take that long passage through the Stuttgart memorial to reach the open space, all the while enduring, pausing, fathoming, listening to the names:
Mordka Rozenberg
Werner Heinrichs
Dawid Harra
Elias Cohen
and of all the other victims who are memorialized here.

In her memorials that always relate to their location Pachtner focuses inevitably on the individual singular fate and wrests it from oblivion. The memorial for the victims of National Socialism in Ingolstadt that was initiated in 1998 and extends over several locations is a telling reflection on changing concept of bringing about remembrance.

In her independent works the artist follows a different principle of which her works *Mummies I* and *Mummies II* of 2015 are poignant examples.

The subject of these photographs is an anonymous human body, slightly greater than life-size, wrapped in silver and gold foil. The wrappings, well known to us all as rescue foils, evoke at the same time a real sense of protection as well as a precious cocoon. The lacing into this protective, preserving material raises associations with the Egyptian mortuary cult in which the deceased at the threshold to the realm of the dead is opulently furnished, prepared and preserved for eternity. Rarely has the hope for the continued existence after death been

manifested so unequivocally.

Dagmar Pachtner's *Mummies* are exemplary for her use as well as for her perception of the human figure and of the individual. To the often-posed question about the identity of the person wrapped in the foil she replies: "That is of no importance".

And indeed, it is not.

Here as well as in other works the individual retreats behind the archetype - or more precisely - it is the topos human that commands all her attention.

The poet Reiner Kunze expresses this in an unsurpassed manner when he writes:

"At the center stands/the human being/Not/the individual."⁴

Highly frequented areas such as train stations, bridges or pedestrian zones as crossing points of society are of special interest for the issues with which Pachtner concerns herself.

The video *Bloom* is part of a series of works that deal with formative impressions from her residencies in Japan and China. In Shanghai she openly installed a camera in an area frequented by pedestrians. The excerpt chosen is a highly unusual one: it only shows the legs of the crowd of people that in the ceaseless rhythm of the metropolis evolves into a "choreography of life". A moment in the flow and the course of life, of motion and impetus, of having the goal in sight, is "excerpted".⁵ The viewer only very gradually becomes aware of the vegetation in the background, moving much slower than the crowds in the rhythm of the wind.

Her interest in the ritualized passage of daily life is also the basis of a conceptually related 18-piece photographic work titled *Things are beginning to happen* in which she explores directions and flows of energy as well as the question about the relationship between the individual and the human mass.

The video work *Stream*, created in Beijing, adds another facet to the theme of internal and external impulse: the camera records from the perspective of the (co) driver who in the protected space of the car apprehends the exterior world as well as the conversations and movements within the car. The stop and go of the endless traffic of the Megapolis forms an almost poetic foil. The people in the car remain invisible. Fragments of conversation are woven into a soundscape and succumb to the

⁴ Kunze, Reiner: *sensible wege. 48 Gedichte und ein Zyklus*, Reinbek, Hamburg 1976, p. 35

⁵ Dagmar Pachtner in her concept paper for the exhibition, 2016

mass traffic.

The individual is shrouded by the highly technological testimonies of his existence. At the conclusion of the endless loop of these images we encounter, almost as a counterpoint and a remembrance, images from along the Great Chinese Wall: *et in Arcadia ego* (even in Arcadia I am).

All these works also deal with relations with one's self, with the reasons for our day-to-day actions and the energies released in these daily activities.

In the installation *INSIDE-OUTSIDE* for the gothic portico the artist pursues a principle that closely relates to the work *Nothing will be as it was* presented 2012 in the context of the exhibition *On to Red* at the *Galerie der Künstler* in Munich.

The entire floor of the portico is covered with silver foil that in some areas is condensed into sculptural formations. A narrow footbridge made of raw wooden pallets leads across this glistening "sea".

A wall projection of the lettering *OUTSIDE* blinks rapidly and fleetingly, only to quickly disappear into the dark. On another wall, by contrast, the lettering *INSIDE* appears as a permanent drawing, implying stability and persistence.

The room for interpretation of this installation, that these days is dominated by the discussions about the "Fortress Europe", is to be an open one - even if we probably are only able to think of it in terms of our daily politics. The space for associations that this "sea" of rescue foil and the contrast between the fleeting *OUTSIDE* and the permanent *INSIDE* offer is obviously defining.

Still, the artist hopes that the viewer will free herself from such determinants. She talks about her quest that each viewer may engender her own images in sight of the installation and that "the personal perspective will only be a fragment of the whole."⁶

One's personal images and the interplay between individual and collective memory are also at the core of the *Memories I - VIII*, created in 2016. They are numbered in the sequence of the dates on which the photographic images were taken that they incorporate.

They are image carriers as well as intricately canted sculptural objects, each individually designed in relation to the image they carry. Every one of these photos, taken during the past twenty-five years, has been selected during a protracted process that included

the determination of the image detail and, what may be even more important, the segmentation of the images with the exception of one.

Over these fragments she has placed a veil of pigmented varnish - just as a recollection over time may become obscured, blanketed or irrecoverably lost. Through the segmentation each image takes on its own rhythm while individual fragments of memory protrude more succinctly.

They are indeed concrete excerpts of reality - experienced individually or collectively.⁷



Some belong to the canon of our collective conscience such as the building site at Ground Zero. It raises the question why mankind undertakes time after time anew the effort to render the destruction invisible. This touches on one of Pachtner's central concerns.

Some of the motifs may appear vaguely familiar - which could also serve as proof that our individual experiences and recollections may not be as unique as they appear to us.

Others do show specific memories, such as the plaster gnomes with grotesquely repainted faces behind a balcony lattice or pictures of landscapes that for some may be reminiscences of a vacation, to others of moments in childhood.

All these fragments of lived and remembered life show that memory is not a confined space. It changes with the distance of time and with the procession of one's own life. That change may occur more slowly if the event has been momentous or if life seems to offer little worth remembering. Change comes faster if these experiences and recollections - even if they are merely virtual - occur in quick succession, if they chase each other and become inextricably superimposed.

These days the world is constantly renewed; everything is fleeting and continually new. For this state the philosopher

⁶ Dagmar Pachtner in an interview with the author, August 2016

⁷ Giesen, Bernhard: *Kollektive Identität*, Frankfurt/M, 1999, p. 39

Zygmunt Bauman has coined the phrase "liquid modernity", a state in which changes occur in ever shorter intervals. According to Bauman we find ourselves in a transition from "solid" modernity to "liquid modernity" in which social structures, institutions and patterns dissipate before they can stabilize and offer support and direction.⁸

Dagmar Pachtner, with all due consideration, would harbor some reservations for Bauman's cultural pessimism as the fascination for the humane seems to prevail in all her work.

Her pictorial deliberations about the liquid structures of our being never lead her to a valuation. It is the analysis of the complex structure of "human and world" that concerns her most.

Thus she offers us a new and always different view on the world and on ourselves within it.

Stefanje Weinmayr, M.A.

English Version: Jörg Ludwig

⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt: Flüchtige Zeiten. Leben in der Ungewissheit, Hamburg 2008