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Shared and/or Divided Times: Questions and Answers

Gisela Weimann

Opening Remarks at the Symposium 'Geteilte Zeit: Kunstgeschichte als Internationaler Dialog / Shared Times: Art History as International Dialogue', at the European Academy in Berlin, 25 - 28 March 2008. This conference was organised to launch the book Gisela Weimann (ed.) Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten (Edition Eselsweg, 2008).

Translation: Helen Carter

The book *Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten* concerns seven Berlin-based women artists, all born between 1940 and 1950, who document and comment on work they have produced since the 1970s in dialogue with other women active in the fields of culture, science and politics. They are: Christa Biederbick, Karin Fleischer, Gisela Genthner, Sarah Haffner, Heide Pawelzik, Regina Roskoden and Gisela Weimann.

The main aim of this book is to feature the work and biography of these seven women artists. Each artist presents typical works or groups of work from various phases in her professional life whether figurative or abstract painting and sculpture, photography and film, installations, conceptual art, sound art, interdisciplinary projects or the use of new media. The pages on each indicate the spectrum of contemporary forms of expression over the last decade and the development of the works in question.

The point of departure for this retrospective inquiry is the time they spent as students at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Berlin, now the Berlin University of the Arts, between 1965 and 1975. Their professors were members of an artistic

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circle which included Hermann Bachmann, Alexander Camaro, Alexander Gonda, Hans Jaenisch, Hans Kuhn, Dietmar Lemcke, Ernst Schumacher and Hann Trier, whose influence made itself felt on the cultural scene well beyond Berlin. At that time there were not yet any women professors at the University. This point of departure and the contact they have maintained with one another since then has prompted the artists to reflect on their own development and changes in culture and society.

The title of the book, *Geteilte Zeit*, is intended as a double metaphor, (both shared and divided) as the time each of the artists had at her disposal was used in different ways. Their main areas of life and work developed differently and their individual careers were divided in various stages: starting a family, living abroad, employment outside the studio to ensure financial security, involvement in associations and socio-cultural projects were reflected over many years in the scope, subject and content of the creative work.

Divisions were not only present in the artists' private and professional lives: in postwar Europe upheavals and conflict in economic and social politics led to division of countries and creation of new borders. A divided Germany and the unique conditions within the divided city of Berlin were influential factors in the lives of those Berlin-based artists and intellectuals who took part in this book. The Cold War created a deadlock which brought with it an unnerving sense of insecurity. The process of confronting the repercussions of these repeated, deep-seated divisions, triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall, is far from being complete.

On the other hand, the student movement and the new feminist movement brought people a new beginning, change and new possibilities. In aesthetic terms, especially in Berlin, this was felt in a revival of realistic tendencies and the search for communicative forms of expression with socio-cultural and socio-political elements and on the public art and culture scene for instance, in the foundation of galleries and museums showing work exclusively by women artists and by major exhibitions and symposia with themes and realms of experience specific to women. The insights gained during this time and the demands which sprang from them led to the introduction of the quota system and thus increased representation of women in all areas of society.

The book's focus revolves around the idea of "shared time" like a spiral:

- In a joint introduction 'Thoughts on Time', women active in Berlin's cultural life describe the contemporary background to the project in terms of their training, their success, results of research and initiatives.

- In 'Seven Questions - 49 Answers', other women, active in a variety of professions, each asked the artists one question emerging from their own personal background. The artists' answers compressed these lines of inquiry into a fabric including reflective memories and political and cultural development within Berlin.

The subjects pursued by these lines of inquiry: were from Dr. Brigitte Hammer,

art historian, curator, author, on the woman artist and children; by Ginka Steinwachs, a poet, on Different experiences of time and how its limitations are overcome; Sabine Zurmühl, journalist, film maker, mediator, on Confronting fascism and feminism; Marianne Pitzen, visual artist, director of the Women's Museum in Bonn, on Solidarity among women; Hannah Kruse, from Goldrausch, the women artists' project, on Ways of public presentation and self-management; Renate Grisebach, art promoter and chairwoman of a private art association, on Artist galleries and private art sponsorship; and Alice Ströver, spokesperson on cultural policy for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen on Options and activities in cultural policy

A third element builds on the perspectives gained by the Berlin experience through 'International Comparisons'. With insights drawn from their own research work done during the same period as the project and their descriptions of their own career paths, women art historians from the US, Mexico and West and East Europe contribute a comparative reference to the situation of the women artists and writers in Berlin.

Contributing authors to the international commentary were: Professor Dr. Eli Bartra, philosopher and author specializing in the female aesthetic, teaches at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Metropolitan Autonomous University) in Mexico City, Mexico; Katy Deepwell, art critic, editor and publisher of *n.paradoxa*, who teaches at the University of the Arts in London; Sanne Kofod Olsen, art historian, author and curator, rector of the Fynske Art Academy in Odense, Denmark; Dr. Ramona Novicov, art historian, art critic and curator, teaches at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Oradea, Romania; Professor Dr. Mercedes Replinger, art historian, author and curator, teaches at the Faculty of Arts at the Complutense University in Madrid, Spain Professor; and Dr. Moira Roth, art historian and author, teaches at Mills Women's College in Oakland, USA

Each of the women artists profiled in this book project *Geteilte Zeit* has reacted in her own personal way to the events and changes in society; each has still carried on working undeterred. Forty years on, it's time to take stock and analyze.

This text is the start of the book Gisela Weimann (ed) *Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten* (Edition Eselsweg, 2008) and is available in German.

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Europe in Exile

Gisela Weimann

Translation: Liz Crossley

It is a tremendous pleasure for me to welcome you here to this meeting which has been made possible in this beautiful place. For this I thank the many partners who have cooperated on this venture: The Berlin Senate Department for Business, Technology and Women, The Federal Central Department for Political Education, the Berlin Cultural Furtherance Initiative, the Karl Hofer Society, the Berlin University of the Arts, and all the embassies and cultural institutes of the countries from which our lecturers come. I thank you all once again and especially our hosts here at the European Academy and the friendly staff. To the participants come from 11 European countries, as well as countries further afield - England, Italy, Mexico, Austria, Romania, Switzerland, Spain, Turkey and the USA - a heartfelt welcome to you all.

I have entitled my introduction to this symposium 'Europe in Exile' because there have always been individuals and groups of people in exile in Europe. There were always those who were being chased, robbed, raped and killed in all kinds of ways. Inhabited lands were often considered no-man's-land and whole nations were conquered and regarded as fair game by rulers, generals and power hungry adventurers, whose names were later followed by the words, "The Great". "The Great" and those who became "great" with these rulers, acquired fame, power and riches, mainly through fanaticism, ignorance, oppression and exploitation and very seldom through tolerance, co-existence on equal terms, with equal distribution and fair-shares to all.

That this was not only happening in Europe, as we will gather from, to name but one example, Amaya Ecalera's lecture: she will be telling us how Mexico, which was once brutally subdued by Spaniards, became a haven for refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War in the 20th century. The irony of history!

Today we are going to present the book, *Geteilte Zeit*, which deals with the history we have personally experienced: from time and experience spent together and apart from one another's simultaneity in various places all over the world, under very different social conditions, caused by the Second World War, which took place mainly in Europe. The starting point for our visual and verbal research is, as explained in the foreword, the fact that we were seven Berlin women artists who studied at the former State High School of the Arts in Berlin, now University of the Arts. In collaboration with contemporaries in Berlin, artist colleagues and theoreticians from eastern, central, western and southern Europe, as well as Mexico and the USA, we questioned each other, recounted of our experiences during the last forty years and reflected on our condition as artists, scientists and women.

I asked all the artists and authors for a subjective presentation of their experience, because we did not want to create a history book, but a book about the present for contemporary readers, interested in art and for cultural scientists in the future.

In almost all cases the authors are important pioneers from the women artists' movement that started in the beginning of the sixties in the fields of feminist theory and practise. In Moira Roth's lecture we will hear that this feminist revolution is being enthusiastically celebrated in the USA today, where, last year, the influential art critic, Holland Cotter wrote the following about the huge *WACK!* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles in the *New York Times*: 'One thing is certain: Feminist art, which emerged in the 1960s with the women's movement, is the formative art of the last decades'. More on this we will hear from Moira Roth.

The selection of the Berlin women artists as well as of those women from the seven countries, who are lecturing in this symposium and have been published in the book *Geteilte Zeit* is based on continued friendships on the one hand and the concept of showing the dramatic political coherences, which have divided and bound our countries, on the other.

What a time that was - and still is!

Fascism in Germany till 1945, followed by flight, upheavals, revolts and division of the country - Civil War and dictatorship in Spain until 1975 during which time at least 25,000 Spanish people fled to Mexico - The Basque freedom movement ETA carried out bloody assassinations, the last to date being on 7th March 2008 - In Ireland the IRA fought for independence from the British - In the USA, McCarthyism was followed by the Vietnam War, nuclear armament in a showdown with the USSR - In Romania Ceausescu and a world divided into communist and capitalist camps - In 1989 the fall of the ideological wall, with unforeseen results - Religious wars like in the Middle Ages and Balkan wars right up to this moment! And so on and so on.

It seems that it is very difficult to forget one's experience of injustice and the damage done to what one perceives as one's own right and rightful way of thinking. This lies like a sediment at the base of the emotional life of both nations and individuals, and leads to ever new conflicts. A further continued conflict is that between the genders.

It is based on the traditional conviction that men are superior to women. In this respect, many men from very different cultural backgrounds who would on other issues fight each other to the death, are in agreement. When women present their concepts, as in our symposium, and critically analyse their social status, men do not feel as if this has anything to do with them although they are the ones who are being addressed. This is the jumping off point for the life experience and the resulting efforts at emancipation and demands of the women artists and scientists in the book *Geteilte Zeit* and the symposium 'Art history as Dialogue, 1965-2008'.

Unfortunately there were no means to translate the exciting 'Thoughts on Time' from 1960 to the present by 8 women from public cultural life in Berlin that are gathered in the introduction to the book. Furthermore the personal 49 answers by the 7 Berlin artists in response to questions they were asked by seven contemporary women from different professions are so far only available in German.

As publisher and editor of this book, I have read all the texts a number of times and read them with shock and fascination again and again. In the answers to the questions asked almost all the Berlin artists described unsettling experiences like displacement and flight, fear, a difficult reestablishment in a strange environment and anger at the restorative tendencies in Germany after the war. Again and again, the central conflict is the theme - being a mother, wife and artist.

'What significance have family and being a mother had on your art work and your life?' Here is a glimpse into the answers of the artists to this question formulated by Dr. Brigitte Hammer.

Christa Biederbick - 'There were moments when I had a guilty conscience and asked, 'May I work on my sculpture so intensely. Am I giving my daughter enough of my time?'

Karin Fleischer - 'As an orphan who also lost her home in the east through the murderous and destructive war, I always looked at intact families around me. Having lost my own family, I naturally developed the wish and expectation that I would start a family.'

Gisela Genthner - 'While I was studying, it was common thought that there are enough children in the world who are hungry. If one wants children, then one can adopt them.'

Sarah Haffner - '...in the spring of 1960 I dropped out of college, as I was pregnant - that was like that at the time. My son was born in July 1960. A year later I separated from his father, who was of the opinion that he was a painter and I a mother. From then on I was alone with the child.'

Heide Pawelzik - 'I believe that each woman ripens by being a mother and that this also shows in her artistic development. By taking responsibility, one's viewpoint is changed. The strain of being a mother and an artist is, however, great. I saw myself as a bad mother and a bad artist in the years when I had to be very present for the children.'

Regina Roskoden - 'I have to admit that I had little time for my art in those years. But I refilled my energy reserves that I needed for family life in the studio. Ideas for new sculptures developed while I did the housework. The carrying out of the ideas took place, when there was time and was a pleasure. Due to lack of time, I learned, in my visual work, to concentrate on the essential.'

Gisela Weimann - 'The environment communicated no security. The neighbouring city, Osnabrück was bombed out and my route to school was flanked by ruins. Everything was broken, fragmented. It seemed there was no future. The unconscious memories of the war, the unsettling post-war experiences, later the conscious recognition of the inhuman horror and the escalating threat of the cold war in the sixties all created in me a deep fear of life and of people. How could one bring children in the world at this time!'

Later, you will note that the authors from outside of Germany share many experiences with the Berlin women, complement and extend them and so allow us to deepen the discussion.

Exile makes one strong.

Life in a strange environment, which questions one's own identity makes one uncertain, but at the same time makes us aware of our otherness, strengthens our convictions and motivates us. To hold one's own in an environment of rejection or antagonism requires strength, ideas and subversive action. That is certainly an explanation for women's strength and ability to achieve so much under such difficult conditions.

Energy and strength of character are still required, because when I think about the content of the texts we will be hearing in the next few days, I ask myself what has really changed with regard to equality of opportunity for women artists, apart from politically and economically motivated statements?

I receive the newsletter from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research. In it, on 18 April 2007 Minister Schavan was quoted under the heading 'We must use the potential of women!' At the Berlin conference 'Gender in Research - Innovation through Equality of Opportunity', she demanded that 'promotion of excellence' in science and innovation should be strengthened and that half of the nation's talents should not be neglected. Highly qualified women should be adequately integrated. Schavan exhorted her audience to a change of mentality, in order to make the German scientific system fit for the future... . 'Research which focuses on gender specific questions, is the basis for innovative technologies, products and services for the markets of tomorrow.'

Empirical, innovative and socially critical research by women artists, who have focused on "gender specific questions" for decades and have long been demanding a change of mentality, is not recognised or accepted as serious research. If the involvement of the potential that women have is seen firstly as relating to products and service for the markets of tomorrow, then there remains little room for a change

of heart.

The much quoted 'change of mentality' sounds to me very much like a standard formula in the programs of the institutions in charge and often remains there. I quote a talented young artist colleague with a child:

'Yesterday I went to a preview of films about women with children - mainly from the creative sphere. It was somewhat depressing. 50% are single parents, the others complain about too little help from their partners - all of them want to work creatively and feel very overextended...'

It is as difficult as it was before, for young artists, especially if they have children. Many artists of my generation, whose works do not promise a great profit on investment, experience a constant battle to survive and continue working creatively. The pensions received from the Artists Welfare are low, because most were only able to pay in small contributions over the years. Most competitions, grants and artists' residences are aimed specifically at younger artists, both male and female. And even where it is said that there is no age barrier, there is in fact one. Social assistance programmes, on which most older women artists are dependent, allow for only limited living space and force many artists to give up their studios when they reach the retirement age.

What to do with one's life work? This is another problem shared by many.

Given the present inner political injustices and horrors in the world outside, the question which occupies me among others, is whether a Europe which is claiming to be built on the ideas of fairness, egalitarianism and equality will remain a "Land in Exile" - I look forward to the answers.

This paper was presented at the Symposium *Geteilte Zeit: Kunstgeschichte als Internationaler Dialog / Shared Times: Art History as International Dialogue*, at the European Academy in Berlin, 25 - 28 March 2008. The book Gisela Weimann (ed) *Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten* (Edition Eselsweg, 2008) is available in German.

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