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Editor: ktpress@ktpress.co.uk
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,
Janis Jefferies, Joanna Frueh, Hagiwara Hiroko, Olabisi Silva.
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N.Paradoxa Interview with Gisela Breitling, Berlin artist and art historian

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N.Paradoxa interview with Gisela Breitling

Katy Deepwell

Gisela Breitling is a feminist artist and art historian (b.1939) who lives and works in Berlin. She is a founder of Das Verborgene Museum (the Hidden Museum) in Berlin. In this interview with Katy Deepwell, she discusses her work on a number of different exhibition projects in Berlin and her writing since 1980.

Katy Deepwell: Could I begin by asking what were the themes and issues raised in your first book, *Die Spuren des Schiffs in den Wellen - eine autobiographische Suche nach den Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte* (1980)?

Gisela Breitling: I wrote this book as a basic course for understanding the position of women in art and art history. I was trying to write an accessible book in which the experiences of one woman could be used to reflect debates about women as both viewers/consumers of art and as makers. In Germany, the women's movement began in the seventies without any real discussion of aesthetics - the art world was not well-represented in these discussions - which were more political or sociological. Women artists in Germany at the point, when I started these reflections, were often accused of being infected by middle-class (bourgeois) values by women who followed a Marxist or even a psychoanalytical line of thought. I wanted to highlight the work of women artists because I had gone through my own training in art without any connection with women artists. Sometimes, I had asked myself whether it was even normal for a woman to make art. If I saw a woman artist, I felt she must be an exception. I had in mind the question, is it possible to make art as a woman? I wanted to develop an art historical basis for my own biography - my real life.

It had also been very strange for me to discover that there were women artists often in very badly written books with anti-feminist authors, for example, Hans Hildebrandt's *Die Frau Als Kunstlerin* (Berlin 1928). Other books of male writers, like Ernst Guhl's (1858) *Die Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte* or Ludwig Hirsch (1907) *Die Frau in der Bildenden Kunst* discuss women artists but they always imply that they are not very important. This was both strange and hurtful. I wanted to write about not only that there were women artists but also to explain why they were not there.

In my second book *Das Verborgene Eros* I develop this form of analysis through a discussion of Werner Hofmann's *Zeichen und Gestalt - die Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1957), a Fischer 'tascherbuch' a popular basic art history book, in which of the 252 named artists discussed, there appear only 5 women. Of these 5 artists, however, only Sophie Taeuber-Arp's work is discussed. The other example I used was *Grauzonen-Farbwelten Kunst und Zeitbilder, 1945-1955*, a 1983 Akademie der Kunst exhibition catalogue. In this publication, of the 627 names in the index only 26 women are listed. Of these 26 names, 4 are popular singers, 1 is an art critic, Carola Giedion-Welcker, 2 are designers, 3 are gallery-owners, and another name in the index is referred to in the text in the following way "mein Lippenstift ist nicht kussecht, aber dafür von Elsa Schiapparelli in shocking-pink"! Of the women remaining, 9 are women artists but only 3 have work reproduced in the catalogue. The conclusion drawn is that women artists are again always below the middle-level of male artists and the singling out of one woman, in this case Brigitte Matchinsky-Denninghoff, bears no correlation to the power of other women. It is 'beleibigkeit', almost coincidental. I wanted to explain why repeatedly in these selections, there was a great ignorance against women.

Katy Deepwell: When did you start your researches in 1972 or 1974?

Gisela Breitling: My first texts were written very early. I made a summary of these arguments in 1975 but I did not like it. I was disappointed at how difficult it was to read. I stopped the project. I had no publisher then. Then I went to Italy and I had in my luggage two books, Linda Nochlin's *Women Artists 1550-1950* and Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson's *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal*. I didn't know what I would do in Italy but I had a list of names of artists to research and started my research in archives in Rome by beginning to go through the hand-written catalogues of artists for evidence of work by women artists.

Then I went to the Alinari photoarchive in Rome and bought every photo with a woman's name attached but this was a very confusing exercise as there were photos of works by women as well as works of women. I began to write again but was still searching for an adequate language for this subject.

I wrote a short text about how I felt when I was in an exhibition and this was the

beginning. Only when I began to use the word 'I' could I start. I was approached by a publisher to make a front cover for a novel by a woman of the former DDR, Jutta Bartus and the idea for my book was developed through conversations with this publisher.

The book is written as an autobiography but it is not 'I' but a subject who confronts herself with all the arguments about women's art. So, in this manner, I found a readable form for this material. This is a book which students can easily read but also the public because of this 'I' which people can identify with and because there are many episodes in which both men and women meet together and discuss art.

Katy Deepwell: Can you give an example of how the subject 'I' works in your book?

Gisela Breitling: The painter 'I' meets a colleague and discusses the situation of art and then as she walks home she reflect on the conversation. Later on, she visits the same artist again. He is much better established, he is married and his surroundings are much more beautiful. He lives in a beautiful flat, with his finely made works on the walls and his wife comes in and serves them tea and bread. At their first meeting he was living in disorder, he was drunk and his work was chaotic. During their second meeting, other colleagues come to his flat with their girlfriends and in this discussion it is as if the women present didn't exist - there is only the discussion between men. And she feels as though she didn't exist anymore, she couldn't speak, she feels stupid, incompetent and not an artist. So she was very depressed going home. Although this event never happened in this form in my life it is a summary of many examples like this and I know many women who have had similar experiences.

In another example, she discusses feminist politics and attitudes to the female body with a group of female friends. When they leave, she cleans the house and thinks about what they have said. At that time she has her period and has to change her sanitary towel while she is thinking over the significance of the conversation, she starts to reflect on some of the 1970s exhibitions of work with used sanitary towels.

This is how I tried to bring together events in everyday life and what is said about this life. I made these episodes with 'I' not so abstract and combined this with some more abstract passages in the text.

Katy Deepwell: And in terms of the recovery of women artists, this book is it also a history of other women's lives?

Gisela Breitling: Yes, in a few places. I had one episode where in a group of students, we go to the Louvre and look at the two paintings by women on display. One is by Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun. What is the significance of this? Why are these two in the collection? And why are so many women's paintings not there? This is not

a question about masterpieces. Women's situation in the past is then discussed. I then ask how did women learn? Where did they learn? And what did they learn both as artists & viewers?

Katy Deepwell: How was your book received in 1980? Was it a success in Germany?

Gisela Breitling: In terms of attention, yes, it was a success and to some extent in sales. Half of the first edition did not appear because of printing errors. The editor of the press then sold the book to Fischer to produce a pocket edition of it. It has been on the market for ten years and sold 10,000 copies. It was bought by many women, particularly by female art and art history students, and given by women to other women. There were a lot of reviews of this book in the press and now it is out of print.

Katy Deepwell: What were you doing between 1980 when you published your first book and 1986 when you began Das Verborgene Museum?

Gisela Breitling: To write *Die Spuren des Schiffs in den Wellen* was very important for me as I needed to speak about the problems I had as a painter - being inside the art world and not being there. I had always felt in public like a consumer or an art recipient but not an artist. So, after writing the book, I had more power to concentrate on painting. I had always written small things, a diary, poetry, letters and things, I never took seriously. They were often thrown away or kept secretly.

Katy Deepwell : And then after 1980?

Gisela Breitling: I wrote in newspapers and for books following up my ideas about women artists' work.

Katy Deepwell: What other books were available in Germany which looked at these questions in feminist art history in 1980?

Gisela Breitling: When I published my book, Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* was published in translation in Germany and this was taken up as important as basic information about women artists. Then some smaller books about art performances and happenings and feminist aesthetics were published and then there was Sylvia Bovenschen's two volumes called *Die Imaginierte Weiblichkeit* (1979).

Edith Krull who lived in East Berlin was working on her book *Kunst von Frauen* (1984) and had great difficulties finding a publisher for her book and it became available just before the project Das Verborgene Museum began researching the first catalogue on works of women artists in Berlin collections. We were able to use

Krull's research and made contact with her because we wanted to publish information about works by women artists in the collections of East Berlin. However, because of the political situation then, it was not possible for us, as West Berliners, to research work in East Berlin art collections and it remained an unfinished part of our project. We wanted to continue the research after 1987 when the funding for the first project came to an end but were unable to do so.

Katy Deepwell: You told me earlier that your first book had a relationship to your work for Das Verborgene Museum. How did your work develop through the 1980's in relation to the founding of Das Verborgene Museum?

Gisela Breitling: When I published my book, I was not thinking of developing any other projects on women and art. The initiative began when Evelyn Kuwertz, a woman painter, asked me if I would collaborate on a woman artists' project. I did not really want to make a women artists' show as there had already been several women artists' exhibitions. I did have the idea to make an analysis of the work of women artists in the collections of Berlin because of my first book and the questions it raised. I wanted to have a more historical dimension because until now the lack of historical basis or the lack of a visible presence of women in museums is a major problem. This is why I proposed a research project into the public collections of Berlin because I wanted to reconstruct the art history by women starting where I lived and with what was to hand.

1986 was the 750th Anniversary of the City of Berlin, and we had the opportunity to present this as a historical project to the Berlin government as something which represented 750 years of Berlin and a valuable project because women are not well recorded in the city's history. It took us two years of work to raise the funding for this project.

Katy Deepwell: How many people worked on this first Das Verborgene Museum project, which resulted in an exhibition and a catalogue?

Gisela Breitling: When we began the research, I wrote a proposal and then Evelyn Kuwertz and I worked to establish the project. We had to have a 'protecting institution' so we approached the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende der Kunst which was then ten years old. In order to convince them, we had to educate them and to do this we gave them reading lists of feminist literature: Linda Nochlin, Germaine Greer, K.Petersen and J.J.Wilson, Kate Millett, Simone de Beauvoir. We had to make them competent in order that they could understand what we were trying to do. Once we had achieved this, we needed a specialist crew of women art historians - so we formed a group of ten women, each with specific research contracts.

We added a contemporary part to our project as the Neue Gesellschaft in their

structure did not work with historical themes. As we worked on this project, we also thought about women artists whose works were not in the museums. The contemporary part of the exhibition acted as new suggestions for public collections.

The project received a lot of criticism from feminists here because Evelyn Kuwertz and I showed our own works in the exhibition. The criticism from women was awful and they even said we had arranged this whole exhibition to present ourselves. We had discussed our inclusion in the show with the group, which included art historians who had also been members on other juries (selection panels for exhibitions) and we had agreed the selection together. I was very offended by these criticisms because when one edits a book and collects texts from many authors, one is allowed to publish one's own texts amongst them. Men collect together other men around them and organise an exhibition project and being artists, they do not exclude themselves. This criticism from women insists upon modesty amongst women. I have to take the consequences of my choices as a curator but am I also obliged to defend myself if I include myself as an artist in those shows?

Katy Deepwell: Did you feel such criticism ignored all the other questions you were raising ?

Gisela Breitling: What was interesting for me, was that the further away people came to see the exhibition - from France, from Italy, from Britain - they were very impressed. They found the catalogue very useful as a source for information which does not exist in any other context as these are discussions of only Berlin collections. In this respect, it was a very important project and the catalogue remains from it. This was the main idea - to make an intervention in history - which will remain. Most of the other cultural anniversary projects of this time had only the actual importance of a one day event. They did not leave behind such records. This project was really something which helps women research other women artists. Then in 1986 we founded the working group of Das Verborgene Museum as a not-for-profit arts organisation with a gallery and we made our first exhibition in 1987 of Louise Rösler.

Katy Deepwell: How is it that out of this much bigger project your working group came to focus on the 1920s and 1930s?

Gisela Breitling: There were two reasons. When we founded our group after the first exhibition, we wanted to show the full biographical life of women artists. With Louise Rösler we could show a part of the work from her exhibition in the 1930's which was closed by the Nazis and the other works by her up to the present. With the next exhibition, our idea changed. We decided to focus on the group of women who had entered the academy for the first time in the 1920s and then as we researched

we learnt that it was because of the political situation with the Nazi's that their careers were stopped. This became a symbol for us of why women were not well-known and often forgotten. The struggle of women's attempt to enter the art academies had finished and just at the moment when they should be enjoying the fruits of their labours the political situation meant that they did not arrive in the art world because of the Nazis. Some were forbidden to paint. Unlike the younger generations of women who could fight for themselves and promote themselves to galleries, these older women could not and did not. The men of this generation have been rehabilitated but not the women. Therefore we felt this period - the lost generation - was very important. It is also the historical point at which modernism realised a new aesthetic and made a step outside the shadow of the 19th century. The 19th century has cast a long dark shadow which goes through the whole of the twentieth century. Nazi politics remains one of the darkest points in this shadow.

Katy Deepwell: Did none of this generation manage to re-establish their career in the 1950s?

Gisela Breitling: Some of them tried to do so. There were some successful photographers from this period yet Das Verborgene Museum still organised their first one-woman shows.

Louise Rösler, for example, managed to achieve a certain reputation, very much with small paintings, beautiful paintings, experiments with colours etc. Her reputation, however, is not adequate for what she did. She had a big exhibition at the Haus am Wandsee in Berlin which opened after her death but when she was alive she had helped to organise the exhibition at Das Verborgene Museum in 1987.

Lidy von Lützwitz, who died in 1996, continued all her life to carve wooden sculptures. When she and Louise Rösler were young they made some objects which suggested ideas they continued to develop through their lives. This is not always the case. The Expressionist painter, Else Lohmann, for example, produced work for ten years and then she stopped. This is not only a woman's problem but one common amongst male artists of this generation.

Many of the women Das Verborgene Museum has exhibited were outsiders. They had exhibitions but this was not enough to become well-known as an artist. It is absolutely necessary to write about these works to make them more accessible.

Katy Deepwell: So do you see the role of Das Verborgene Museum as consolidating women's achievements - bringing them back into view - offering opportunities to reassess and critique their works?

Gisela Breitling: Yes, and also to interest museums in acquiring works. And we had some success with the Marianne Bresslauer photo-exhibition. This was also

shown in the Nationalgalerie but in all the press coverage no one spoke about the fact that one year before Das Verborgene Museum had shown this work - not even the journalist who spoke at our vernissage (opening).

Katy Deepwell: Do you feel Das Verborgene Museum (the hidden museum) is subjected to the same process of marginalisation as the women you have shown ?

Gisela Breitling: In this case, it was interesting that a male critic in the Tagesspiegel (Berlin) wrote about the fact that it is irritating that no one wrote about this earlier exhibition at Das Verborgene Museum.

Katy Deepwell: How has Das Verborgene Museum come to work with the Gedok in your gallery?

Gisela Breitling: This is for economic reasons. We couldn't produce as a group one exhibition after another. It was beyond our possibilities. We made a sub-contract with the Senator für Kulturelle Angelegenheiten. The Gedok hold talks and organises exhibitions at our gallery in Schluterstrasse. They also run other programmes of readings, exhibitions and discussions elsewhere as it is an inter-disciplinary group.

Katy Deepwell: What was the relationship between Das Verborgene Museum and Carola Muyser's exhibition & research project *Profession Ohne Tradition* in 1992?

Gisela Breitling: In 1986 Karoline Müller published a major compilation about women in the arts in Berlin, *Zür Physiologie der Bildenden Kunst*, and she collaborated with Carola Muysers. Karoline Müller was also curator at the Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen and this is another association for women artists founded in 1867. And it was the 125 years from the beginning of this group that the exhibition traces. They founded a painting school in the 19th century at which, among others, Paula Modersohn-Becker studied as she was not allowed to go to the normal academy of arts. Karoline Müller wanted to bring more attention to this group and reanimate it. When the idea for this anniversary exhibition came up, I was consulted and then the collaboration grew from there. I had the opportunity to write a text for the catalogue. I wrote a fictional story, 'Porträt der Anna Charlotte Netthlinger' about the painting of a portrait by a woman artist, and I showed my work. Many of the artists which das Verborgene Museum had researched were members of der Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen.

Researchers interested in the Archive from *Profession Ohne Tradition* and Das Verborgene Museum can find details on n.paradoxa's Women's Art Organisations

Gisela Breitling has recently completed a large mural project for the tower of the St Matthaus-Kirche, Kulturforum an der Philharmonie, Berlin.

Gisela Breitling's publications include:-

Die Spuren des Schiffs in den Wellen - eine autobiographische Suche nach den Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte (Berlin: 208 S.,1980)

Das Verborgene Museum - Dokumentation der Kunst von Frauen in Berliner Offentlichen Sammlungen (Berlin,1987)

Der Verborgene Eros = Weiblichkeit und Mannlichkeit im Zerrspiegel der Kunste (Frankfurt: Aufsätze,1990)

Gisela Breitling has contributed to many of the exhibition catalogues of Das Verborgene Museum and to C.Muyser (ed) *Profession Ohne Tradition* (Berlin: Martin-Gropius-Bau,1992); Gisela Ecker's *Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press,1987) and Karoline Muller (ed) *Zur Physiologie der Bildenden Kunst* (Berlin, 1987)

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