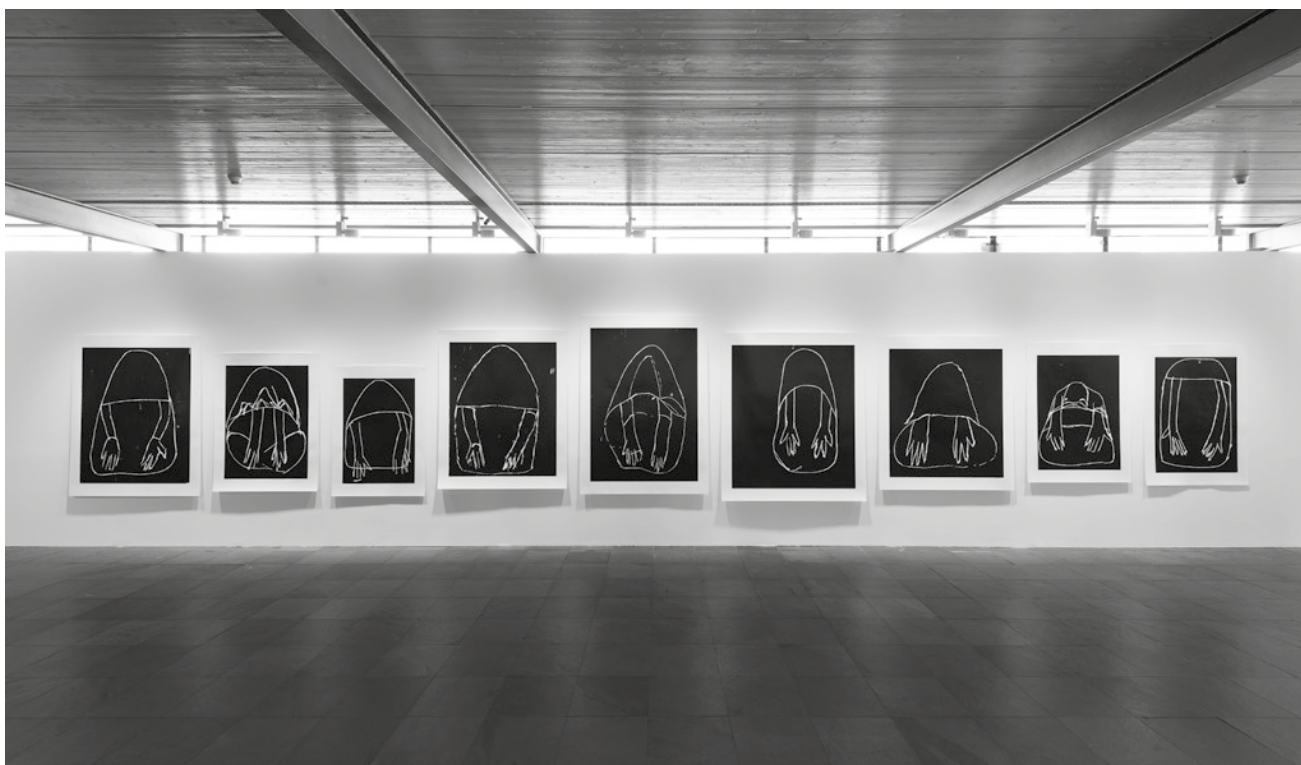


Shame

The Frankfurt-born artist, whose work tackles philosophical, political, religious and art-historical issues, in media ranging from woodcuts to film and video, sees the return to craft and the fetishisation of the handmade as both anti-modernist and reactionary.

Andrea Büttner interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter



Beggars, 2016, installation view, Kunsthalle Wien

Ellen Mara De Wachter: Your current exhibition ‘The Heart of Relations’ at Kunstmuseum Basel sets up a number of relations between contrasting ideas, practices and objects. What narratives have you sought to convey with the show?

Andrea Büttner: The exhibition is a survey, and it came together through a two-year process. Some rooms in the exhibition deal with concerns about labour and anti-modernity movements that I observe in broader culture, but also in visual art. A specific narrative in the exhibition is the display ‘The Most Dangerous Disease’. This is a didactic section in the exhibition about Simone Weil, which I have borrowed from an activist group from the former GDR called ‘Peace Library - Anti-War Museum’ that started in the early 1980s. Weil is a figure I have looked at since I was 19, and I think about her in relation to my woodcuts, my work on nuns and in the way I think about politics in my art. This ties into my work with the Roman Catholic order of nuns, The Little Sisters of Jesus, including *The Archive of the Lives of the Little Sisters of Jesus with Circuses and Fun Fairs, Tre Fontane, Rome*, 2012, which shows an order that shares an affinity with the Worker-Priest Movement, which Weil was close to, criticising the Communist Party for not actually working in the factories in the same way as the working priests, who actually went to work in factories.

Another room brings together works that deal with visual literacy, and they have an art-historical

or archival tone. One work is about painted stones by artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, and lesser-known female artists such as Sonja Sekula, Annemarie von Matt and Fahrelnissa Zeid; another is *Images in Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 2014, an illustrated version of Immanuel Kant’s book. This is the room that deals with a methodology of looking at images, and which takes seriously the iconic turn that started in the 1990s.

Could you say more about the importance of the iconic turn for you?

The iconic turn in the 1990s, when I was a student, was a first moment when art historians and theoreticians, including WJT Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm, looked at images, including the work of Aby Warburg, in an interdisciplinary way. During the historical and political moment of the 1990s, images became very important once again: it was the beginnings of the internet, and the seeds of what we see now with social media were being sown. I was a student at the time, and I found it interesting that the iconic turn was spoken about in academic language but images themselves were not considered as a medium of critique – including of the iconic turn itself. That’s what gave me the idea to start a project on the images in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Kant’s book is a kind of work of auto-criticism, and I thought it would be an interesting philosophical and theoretical project to look at the images Kant evokes and mentions in the text –

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I mean images in a broad sense, including descriptions, examples and metaphors – and to let the images do the ‘business of critique’, as Kant calls it. It was about taking the iconic turn seriously.

It seems that establishing the image as a philosophical tool of critique, rather than a visual artefact or illustration, is foundational to much of your work, beyond the work you made about Kant’s philosophy.

It is true and, in the case of the work about Kant, the way I use images is really not about illustrating. I’m adding a layer, or a set of visual footnotes, expanding what Kant himself does textually, for example when he writes a description of the starry sky above us to signify the sublime. So, the *Critique* is illustrated by Kant himself, which is interesting because Kant’s aesthetic theory is transcendental: it is about the structure of aesthetic judgement and not about the material world as such. However, when you pull out the images from the text, they show that his aesthetic is very much about the material world. Sometimes his images contradict his argument, sometimes they support it. I chose images from the internet, because that is what we have, but also from Kant’s personal library, for example biological etchings, and travel books illustrated by Saussure, the ancestor of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In the collection of images, we see a knowledge world that is black and white, but also images we all share, such as green grass. And there are images of mine included. The project also exists as a book. It was important for me to publish the project with a philosophy imprint, so that it would be available to students of philosophy.

You have returned to particular images or symbols time and again, for example: hands begging, loaves of bread or potatoes, dancing figures, or shepherds and kings (which function as ciphers for the poor and the rich). What draws you to these symbols and why do you tend to revisit them using a range of different media?



‘The Heart of Relations’, installation view, Kunstmuseum Basel

One room in the exhibition is devoted to images of begging figures. The installation unfolds from an artist book I made in 2018 called *Beggars*, published by Koenig Books, which features a series of woodcuts I made of veiled beggars. Alongside these is a slideshow, *Shepherds and Kings*, 2017, showing nativity scenes and carving out images of shepherds as an art history of poverty. There is also a *trouvaille* from the photography archive of the Warburg Institute, which is a living archive that remains open to new inclusions. I was there in 2017, researching images of beggars, and I found that many of these were cut out from auction catalogues. On the back of the images someone has inscribed the copyright, the name of the auction house and date of the sale. Finally, there is material Linda Nochlin gave me before she died, which includes course notes and bibliographies for her course ‘Misère: The Representation of Poverty, Deprivation, and Abjection from Courbet to the Present in France, England, and the United States’, which she taught at New York University in 2010.

When I show begging hands, I don’t think these are symbols. What became clear to me in this exhibition, which is my biggest so far, is that I really look at art history. These are iconographies that reappear over time. I am interested in strong or readable iconographies and becoming aware of how we are standing on the shoulders of these iconographies.

In terms of different media, I think this is a question about practice and what different practices do. I think drawing and filming and cutting and writing all allow for different thoughts and things to happen. There is a room in the exhibition in Basel that explores a more recent concern I have about anti-modernity and craft. It includes material that comes from my field work: drawings I made during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, when I went to asparagus fields and made drawings of the harvest. I wanted to be there and to spend time looking while drawing and not while filming. Why? Because the camera and the crew would come with an attitude, they would come with the gesture of documentary, of knowledge, of the non-manual. They would come with the accepted separation of different types of labour and assumption of positions of critique that come with it. Going there on my own with a pencil and a sketchbook is a pretty questionable position, which I think is helpful.

Certain figures reappear in my work, for example figures bending down with their hands visible. As with every artist’s work there is something unconscious about this return to a form or a theme. After a few weeks of working on the asparagus harvest drawings, I realised that the curves of people harvesting asparagus, bending over, often wearing hoods, were close to those in drawings I made in 2006, when I drew nuns praying in the Carmelite convent in Notting Hill, as hooded figures with their hands together. It’s something I realised afterwards: beggars, nuns and harvesters are all figures where hoods and hands reappear, and I think this has social reasons.

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What is so terrible about craft? / Die Produkte der menschlichen Hand, 2019, two-channel video

A subject you have turned to over the past couple of decades is monastic life, and you have created several videos, including *Little Sisters: Lunapark Ostia*, 2012, and *Karmel Dachau*, 2019/2022–23, which invite viewers into the cloistered space of the convent. You give voice to nuns, and you hand over the camera to them so that they can film segments for the videos. In your two-channel video from 2019, *What is so terrible about craft? / Die Produkte der menschlichen Hand*, you juxtapose the words of a nun and a religious service on one screen with, on the other screen, images of products for sale, many of which have been crafted or produced by monastic workers.

These videos reveal tensions or paradoxes at the heart of monastic life, whether between solitude and community, mechanisms of desire, lifestyle choices, or participation in orders or systems. More generally, your work seems to notice dichotomies at play in the world, and how they are often instrumentalised in and by art and culture. In the case of *What is so terrible...*, the work exposes different kinds of value conferred to products. Even the title means something different in the two languages. What attracted you to the overlapping and contradictory space shared by consumerism and monastic, human production?

I have made several videos with nuns in convents, and what I am interested in is working with an affirmative attitude, and not an attitude that wants to reveal something, let alone paradoxes. Rather, it's an attitude that the camera is like a beloved animal that sits on the lap and is there, but it's not a position that reveals. And when I hand over the camera to the nuns this is because these are often closed communities, and handing over the camera is a way to bring the viewer in to see from the nuns' position. It's not about me revealing paradoxes but about the camera being witness to a structure that is inscribed and old and also has to do with architectural history: the cloister.

What is so terrible about craft? / Die Produkte der menschlichen Hand is a different type of work because it abandons this affirmative attitude. This is also why the nun whose voice features in the film is not seen. She shied away from it, because she felt I had a critical position – a position that is very common in our secular society. I usually don't adopt that position for my work, but in this case I was interested in my own critical position. I saw the nun in an upmarket department store in Germany called Manufactum, which sells 'authentic', good-quality products, as well as a line of goods made in convents, and whose ethos is 'advocating sustainable consumption'. I was interested in this beautiful-looking nun working as a salesperson. I was interested in the question of selling out. I don't want to criticise the nun, or the convent, but the situation helped me understand something about my woodcuts, and about current capitalism and my role as an artist within it. It's a work about how religion, politics and consumerism, as well as a fashion for high-quality craft objects and products, overlap.

The video turned out to be my first Marxist work, and the question 'what's so terrible about craft?' is not an ironic question. It's a real question: what is truly so terrible about craft? I'm interested in criticising the fashion of craft in contemporary culture and art. We often think of craft as a critique of hierarchy, for example by looking at weaving as a way to bring feminist perspectives into contemporary art, but I am looking at this as a reactionary move.

What about the aura of nostalgia in some craft practices and products? Does craft really bring back the good old days, or is nostalgia used to generate profit?

My angle is not a critique of nostalgia or of profit. I think about warmth or coldness, and questions of retreat. I am interested in the reactionary roots and the reactionary potential, politically speaking, of the retreat into craft that is happening everywhere and that signals a form of anti-modernity. In his 2020

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Shame is a complex emotion, and it shares its triangular structure with being an artist: I do something in my studio, I show it to others, who will judge it. I think culture, and especially art because it is a visual effect, is shame-prone, and there is so much shame-avoidance in art.

I wanted to draw attention to the discourse of a supposedly left-wing interest in ecology, local knowledge, plants and gardening, which is very active in contemporary art at the moment, and hints at the brown roots of green movements. Of course, there are other roots too, but national socialism is one of them.

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book *Enrichment*, the sociologist Luc Boltanski discusses an overlap, within the latest stage of capitalism, of nationalism (Boltanski calls it 'patrimony'), craft, luxury industry, tourism and fine art. The middle classes in the West think that buying organic food and becoming interested in pottery or nicely woven stuff is part of a left-wing tradition. I am interested in the fact that it actually is not.

In Germany, white asparagus is part of the national food culture. It has to be harvested by hand, and it is usually migrant seasonal workers who harvest it. During the pandemic crisis, when nobody could travel, workers were still brought in to make sure the crops were harvested. My 2021 woodcuts *Harvest* and *Harvesting* both refer to the fetishisation of the handmade, and the poorly paid manual labour of migrant workers. I find this fetishisation of the handmade very uncomfortable and problematic.

In Basel, next to my works relating to the asparagus harvest, I have installed a photographic work from my series 'Former plant beds from the plantation and "herbal garden" used by the SS for biodynamic agricultural research at the Dachau Concentration Camp', 2019-20. The SS and one part of National Socialism that came out of the '*Lebensreform*', or life-reform movement, was very interested in biodynamic gardening. The head gardener of the plantation

next to Dachau concentration camp, where slave labour was used, had previously been the head gardener of Weleda, the anthroposophical cosmetic brand. The work pulls out this history and places it within a contemporary art discourse. I wanted to draw attention to the discourse of a supposedly left-wing interest in ecology, local knowledge, plants and gardening, which is very active in contemporary art at the moment, and hints at the brown roots of green movements. Of course, there are other roots too, but national socialism is one of them. Anti-modernity is very present in contemporary art at the moment, and I find it super dangerous, politically. We shouldn't turn a blind eye to it.

Your video *Karmel Dachau* takes us into the Carmelite convent of 'Heilige Blut', which was built in 1964 next to the Dachau concentration camp. It is an extraordinary artwork, which gives living voice to the historical contradictions, vanities and hypocrisies, personal doubts and certainties, and quiet individual reckonings with the atrocities and collective trauma of the Holocaust, but it also foregrounds the solace of nature, faith and community, amongst other things. A text at the end of the video explains that the presence of the convent at Dachau has preoccupied you since you were young. Could you explain this?



Karmel Dachau, 2019, video

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'The Heart of Relations', installation views, Kunstmuseum Basel



My mother comes from a farm close to the convent, so I know the place from attending services there since I was five years old. We would go for Easter night services and there would be a fire lit in the courtyard.

At what point did the history of the concentration camp come into your understanding?

Very early. I experienced as a child the charge or friction of these two things being so close together.

Shame is another subject you have returned to in your work, and which you have written about, notably in your 2020 book *Shame*. Do you possess a simple definition of shame?

I find it strange to speak about shame, given how topical it is at the moment. This is odd for a subject such as shame. What I am critical of is this: I observe the way emotional discourses are taking over within the discourses of politics right now, and I find this deeply problematic, not to mention unpolitical.

I started to think about it in the 1990s, before this emotional turn. I was interested in political art and institutional critique, and I was asking: where is subjectivity in all of this? Art seemed to be a narrow space, and I was interested in carving out a wider space for my practice. The main question in the discourse around art at that time was: how do you legitimise your practice? The presumption was that art, as such, is illegitimate.

I find shame interesting in terms of visual discourses. This has to do with the definition of shame as a triangular feeling: I am feeling ashamed, of something, in the presence of others. This is different to rage, for example, which does not have this triangular structure. Shame is a complex emotion, and it shares its triangular structure with being an artist: I do something in my studio, I show it to others, who will judge it. I think culture, and especially art because it is a visual effect, is shame-prone, and there is so much shame-avoidance in art.

Schamstrafen, 2022–23, is a new work that deals with shame punishment and censure by public humiliation. It is based on a collection of images – both historical and contemporary – that I have had pinned up in my studio for years now. I screenprinted a selection of these images directly onto the walls of the gallery in Basel. The crucifixion is a very important image in western art history, and it shows a shame punishment: the violent death of a person that was designed to be

very visible and last for a very long time. The torture of crucifixion was a common punishment in Roman antiquity, and it was designed to humiliate – the exposure is part of the punishment. Other examples include the representation of pillars as places for shame punishment; the Italian tradition of *pittura infamante*, which uses art to shame, because the people the artist wanted to shame were too powerful to reach, so they hanged them in the painting; and paintings of the Last Judgement, which depict shame punishments in hell. The work also looks at contemporary shame punishments in the US and China, where signs intended to shame people are put up in front of their houses or on bus stops and train stations. These kinds of punishments are on the rise around the world because they are very cheap to do.

Within art, shaming is also used, for example the shaming of companies and sponsors, because companies can't be reached or punished any other way than by shaming them. This method is quite problematic, but often there are no other legal tools.

Shame punishments are interesting in terms of art because these punishments use or develop exhibition techniques. Shame punishments are furthermore interesting because visibility is normative in our culture. In many cultural institutions today, visibility is considered a good thing, something to be looked at. But if you look at the history of shame punishments it becomes clear that visibility as such is not always positive. On the contrary, it has been used in very painful ways, as a tool to pain people. To think of shame punishments is to implicitly critique the cult of visibility.

Andrea Büttner's exhibition 'The Heart of Relations' continues at Kunstmuseum Basel to 1 October.

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer based in London.