

Andrea Büttner

ARAM MOSHAYEDI

ANDREA  
BÜTTNER:

# THE WOODCUT REVISITED

My first encounter with the work of Andrea Büttner was at the Mandrake, an artist-run bar in Los Angeles, where one of her woodblock prints hangs on the wall. Its rough-hewn white letters, tightly squeezed into a black rectangular background, announce ALL MY FAVOURITE ARTISTS HAD PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL (2005). Installed above a table at the bar's only booth, the line reads as a sales pitch to the Mandrake's typical clientele—young artists and art students who identify success in the art world with the legends of superstar addicts like Kippenberger, Büttner's compatriot, and LA's own Jason Rhoades. Leaving aside the cliché of the modernist tortured soul, the statement—in the context of Büttner's practice—reflects an interest in human weakness as well as Büttner's own identification with the figure of the artist as inherently flawed.<sup>1)</sup> Beyond this, the work hints at a deep discomfort with the discourse of autobiography and authorship.

Büttner began making woodcuts in the 1990s, when the previous decade's wave of neo-expression-



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Left page / linke Seite: ANDREA BÜTTNER, D. ROTH AND M. KIPPENBERGER ARE MEETING AT THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS, 2006, woodcut, 23 7/8 x 11 7/8" / D. ROTH UND M. KIPPENBERGER TREFFEN SICH BEI DER SEUFZERBRÜCKE, Holzschnitt, 60 x 30 cm. (PHOTO: ANDY KEATE)

ANDREA BÜTTNER, ALL MY FAVOURITE ARTISTS HAD PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL, 2005, woodcut, 16 1/2 x 25 1/2" / ALLE MEINE LIEBLINGSKÜNSTLER HATTEN ALKOHOL-PROBLÈME, Holzschnitt, 42 x 65 cm. (PHOTO: ANDY KEATE)

ism in Germany gave way to a revival of conceptualism, and deconstruction took over academe. "I started making woodcuts because they were the most uncool thing I could do," Büttner has said.<sup>2)</sup> The medium was a favorite of the ultimate macho German painter, Georg Baselitz; furthermore, as woodcuts require intensive labor and tend to result in "something beautiful, something like an auratic object," they were out of critical favor.<sup>3)</sup> A seemingly reactionary move, Büttner's woodcuts would appear to stand apart from the rest of her work, which ranges

widely across media and is indebted to the lineages of Conceptual art, performance, and video. Yet, as evidenced by the print discussed above, Büttner's woodcuts comment on the medium's history while simultaneously expressing an ambivalence toward aesthetic judgment, in particular, that moment when critique calcifies into dogma and the particularities of personal modes of inquiry become canonized. Her prints should thus be regarded as another articulation of the school of art that privileges idea over representation, even as they reintroduce a rich

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ANDREA BÜTTNER, SERMON TO THE BIRDS, 2010, woodcut, diptych, each 70 7/8 x 47 1/4" / VOGELPREDIGT, Holzschnitt, Diptychon, je 180 x 120 cm. (PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI)



and vibrant visual logic to the analytical process of making.

Büttner's woodcuts often explore themes found in her work in other media. Communities of faith, a longstanding interest, form the focus of the videos *LITTLE WORKS* (2007) and *LITTLE SISTERS: LUNAPARK OSTIA* (2012); similarly, she has created numerous woodcuts that incorporate Christian iconography

or refer to biblical scenes. These prints hark back to the medium's medieval beginnings in northern Europe, when it was employed for the mass reproduction of religious illustrations. One intricate, five-color diptych, *VOGELPREDIGT* (Sermon to the Birds, 2010), depicts St. Francis of Assisi preaching to birds sitting in a tree; *UNTITLED (THREE KINGS)* (2012) is based on a twelfth-century stone carving of the wise



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ANDREA BÜTTNER, HAP GRIESHABER / FRANZ FÜHMANN,  
ANGEL OF HISTORY 25: ANGEL OF DISABLED,  
CLAASSEN VERLAG DÜSSELDORF, 1982, 2010, xerox and clip frames,  
each 16 1/2 x 23 1/4" / HAP GRIESHABER / FRANZ FÜHMANN,  
ENGEL DER GESCHICHTE 25: ENGEL DER BEHINDERTEN,  
CLAASSEN VERLAG DÜSSELDORF, 1982, 2010, Photokopien und  
Wechselrahmen, je 42 x 59,2 cm.



men visited by an angel as they sleep. Despite their devotional subjects, however, Büttner's bold images stylistically evoke the early twentieth century, when the woodcut was revived by German Expressionists.

As Büttner reflects on the position of woodcuts within the history of art, she also considers the conditions of their production and reception, a central concern throughout her work. The eight photocopies that make up *ENGEL DER GESCHICHTE 25: ENGEL DER BEHINDERTEN*, HAP GRIESHABER/FRANZ FÜHMANN, CLAASSEN VERLAG DÜSSELDORF 1982 (*Angel of History 25: Angel of the Disabled*, 2010), for instance, present archival images of groups of teenage boys from psychiatric homes looking at woodcuts by HAP Grieshaber, the renowned German printmaker who had died the previous year. The analytical lens of re-picturing the photographs allows us to see the process of interpretation between subject and object; furthermore, critic Louise O'Hare writes, the work reflects on "embarrassment as a condition of viewing."<sup>4</sup> Grieshaber himself stands for another historical moment in the lineage of woodcuts that Büttner constructs: He studied art in the 1920s, was banned from exhibiting by the Nazis, and became an outspoken pacifist and political activist; more personally,

he led printing workshops at the monastery where Büttner would later attend school.

Although many of Büttner's woodcuts display the skilled technique handed down to her by way of Grieshaber, at other times, she has opted for a reduced approach: Simple lines illustrate the title subject in *TENT* (2010) and *TENT (TWO COLOURS)* (2012) while the triangular space of *CORNER* (2011) is printed from three separate boards that fit together. In these crude approximations, a formalist preoccupation is foregrounded as the communication of extraneous ideas recedes. Despite their seemingly handmade quality, however, the craggy outlines of the tents were in fact made with an angle grinder, a power tool more often employed to cut through the material entirely. The print's nearly solid fields

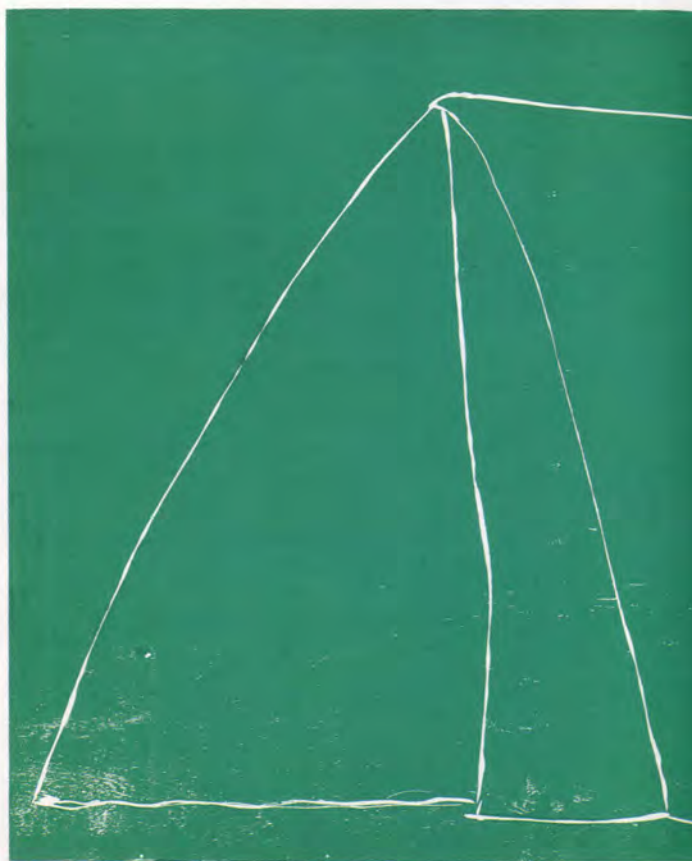
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ANDREA BÜTTNER,  
*TENT (TWO COLORS)*, 2012,  
woodcut, 56 x 91 1/4" /  
*ZELT (ZWEI FARBEN)*,  
Holzschnitt, 142 x 232 cm.  
(PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST)

of color reveal the plywood's natural grain in a smattering of speckled dots and dark striations, recalling the "truth to materials" approach of the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought to attend to the intrinsic quality of each medium. Indeed, these woodcuts are as much representations of the plywood from which they are constructed as they are of any outside referent. In *KEYHOLE* (2013), a small white shape opens at the center of the print, presenting a stark contrast with the expanse of black ink that envelops it, which is only interrupted by a static-like noise—the irregular grain of the block's surface.

A number of prints titled *PIANO*, also from 2013, are made from the direct application of a piano's wooden parts onto paper. The prints were first exhibited alongside *PIANO DESTRUCTION* (2014), a performance and video installation that contrasts gendered representations of the musical instrument. Traditionally considered an appropriate leisure pursuit for the bourgeois female, the piano became an object of aggression in works by male artists and musicians in the 1960s, variously burned, smashed, and dropped. Büttner's prints could be seen to bridge this divide: She disassembles a piano, but then uses its components to produce an attractive wall-based artwork.

Büttner's approach differs from that of Sherrie Levine, whose *Knot Paintings*, first made in the mid-'80s, demarcate the plugs embedded in plywood with



the direct application of paint or lead, forcing an encounter with their physical properties. Or think of Wade Guyton's works in wood, such as his 2008 edition for *Parkett*: a standard sheet of two-by-eight-foot plywood swathed in solid, shimmering black ink that varies in intensity according to the wood's grain. Unlike these sculptural examples, in which wood forms a base structure that is obscured by pigment, Büttner's prints provide access to the wood's image but not its material presence. The keyhole offers a view of the white surface of the paper while the flat field it pierces indexes the material upon which the entirety of the encounter relies. In truth, however,



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ment, echo the relentlessly affirmative language of digital culture—Facebook and Instagram, after all, provide the ultimate forum for “liking,” for pledging an allegiance to a consensus of tastes. But while woodcuts are historically associated with accessibility and populism, the medium is decidedly out of touch with the speed and spread of today’s image production. Büttner’s prints instead speak of slowness, materiality, and preciousness, insisting on a modesty of means seemingly at odds with the demands of the global art world.

And yet, these very qualities situate the woodcuts squarely within our contemporary moment, as the rise of the digital has been met by the forceful reassertion of the “beautiful, auratic object,” which now proliferates in numerous analogue forms.<sup>6)</sup> Even critical discourse has shifted in parallel, as exemplified by Jan Verwoert’s hypophoric proposition, “Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they think it’s a good idea.”<sup>7)</sup> In the end, it might be impossible to maintain a contrary position in today’s all-embracing, all-consuming art world. Büttner thus grapples with the very notion of what it means to be contemporary, and the contradictory demands placed on artists in the hypersphere that defines contemporary art today. If the question of relevance were to be asked of Büttner’s woodcuts, the answer would probably have something to do with an uncool faith in the power of art and, paradoxically, the conceptual gestures that propel this faith forward into the future.

Büttner often attempts to even out the block’s surface, filling in its holes and depressions, before she makes her prints. To her, the roughness no longer looks authentically handmade but instead appears “too finished-looking”—like a Photoshop filter intended to make a digital image look like it is from a bygone era.

If ambivalence and antagonism initially led Büttner to woodcuts, her reasoning has since evolved. “I am no longer interested in reacting to commercialized visual culture,” she explains. “I do the woodcuts now because I like them.”<sup>5)</sup> Büttner’s words, which propose subjective taste in place of theoretical argu-

1) These themes have been written about at length by Martin Herbert, among others. See Herbert, “Angle of Repose: Martin Herbert on the Art of Andrea Büttner,” *Artforum* (March 2015), 269.

2) Andrea Büttner, quoted in Gil Leung, “Artists at Work: Andrea Büttner,” *Afterall.org* (May 25, 2010), [www.afterall.org/online/artists.at.workandreahttner](http://www.afterall.org/online/artists.at.workandreahttner) (accessed August 4, 2015).

3) Büttner, quoted in *ibid.*

4) Louise O’Hare, “Not Quite Shame: Embarrassment and Andrea Büttner’s Engel der Geschichte,” *Afterall* (Summer 2014): 110.

5) Büttner, quoted in Leung.

6) See Claire Bishop, “Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media,” *Artforum* (September 2012), [www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201207&id=31944](http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201207&id=31944) (accessed August 4, 2015).

7) Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea,” *Afterall* (Autumn/Winter 2005), [www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because](http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because) (accessed August 4, 2015).