

Leung, Gil, "Andrea Büttner: Artists at Work," *Afterall.org*, May 25, 2010

Afterall

Artists at Work: Andrea Büttner

Gil Leung



Andrea Büttner, Floating Figure, 2008, screenprint, 120x160 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Andrea Büttner works across a diverse range of mediums - woodcutting, glass painting, clay sculpture, screen printing, video and performance - that reflect an ongoing concern with the boundaries between formal and more conceptual critical practices. Her works re-articulate the question of value in terms of aesthetic judgement: what it is to value something, what is acceptable and how it is possible to adequately express this judgement? As such, the works often utilise other people's work in the form of readings, quotation or interviews, and a central focus of the work is theories of reception and the relationship between emotion and visual art. Büttner studied both art history and philosophy, and recently completed her doctorate on the subject of shame and art at the Royal College of Art, London. She is the winner of the 2010 Max Mara Art Prize for Women, which will culminate in a solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2011, and has created a new series of woodcuts for an exhibition up now at Raven Row in London.

In the following interview, Gil Leung and Büttner discuss strategies of artistic practice and the problematic nature of production.

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GIL LEUNG: Though it is tempting to begin with a specific artwork, this interview is about your practice, or more specifically the ways in which you make a work - how you begin to make something. Some of your previous pieces, like *Nestbeschmutzer* (*Nest Dirtier*, 2007) where you used your father's drawings and, more recently your performance *Fallen Lassen* (*Letting Fall*, 2010) at Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg in Stuttgart, have made specific use of other people's work - could you speak a bit about the point at which these referents enter your process?

ANDREA BÜTTNER: It differs from work to work. When I used my father's drawings or asked my father to do drawings of certain subjects like 'dirt sling' or 'birds dirtying their own nests' or 'drinking animals' it was important for the project that my father did these drawings.

GL: And how did you come to ask him? Did you feel like you wanted to draw them but couldn't?

AB: No, it was integral to the project that he draw them. He does really nice drawings and sends me these letters with them, and I wanted to show these. I wanted to work with the impulse of showing something because I like it and it is beautiful, no matter whether it belongs to the realm of contemporary art or not. In *Fallen Lassen*, I had wanted, for a long time, to find a gesture where I let something fall down - where the trace of what had fallen down was the work. But I didn't want it to be deliberate, like pouring a glass of water or smashing a vase. I wanted it to express an affirmative attitude to falling, something similar to what we say in German: 'to let your shoulders fall down'. I couldn't find an appropriate gesture so I asked friends, artists, my gallery dealer, a novelist, to give me instructions on how I could let something fall down in this way. In the exhibition I performed or fulfilled these instructions. Asking other people to contribute allowed me to hear other ideas that I had failed to find.

Basically, it is a question of whether I have to have ideas, how much I need to labour in order to create a valuable work. There is certainly a pleasure in the passivity involved, waiting for others to give me presents or have better ideas than I have or solutions that I myself would not have found.

GL: I would usually associate this idea of falling down, which is in some of your other works (most obviously *I want to let the work fall down*, 2006), with discourses on failure or critical negation. What I find interesting is that in your work this failure has a positive aspect. How does this affirmative quality fit into what you just described as a passive practice, as opposed to a more traditional notion of a critical practice, which is more active and negative? For instance, you have talked previously about this passivity in relation to the act of reading as a mode of production.

AB: On a very simple level, I make works where I read from other artist's texts, and then on a more conceptual level, these readings have to do with the processes every reader or person undergoes when they encounter a work of art or a book or a piece of music that they like: that somehow we feel this book is about us, or that we write this book while we are reading it, or that we add to it. In a way all theories of reception cover this, from Kant on, but this process of reception has always meant a lot to me as a distinct experience. When I see

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a work of art or read a book I really like, I don't feel the need to do something better in a competitive way. It is rather that I want to find forms where I can let efforts to be original or inventive fall down, and then take my own process of reception as something productive. Reading is already an act of production. It is like reading a text you love and saying 'yes'. I have to find answers to the question 'how can I be productive and be adequate to this "yes" I find in myself?'

GL: When you use other people's work, is it that you want to share this enjoyment in the process of looking or reading something?

AB: It is definitely important to accentuate the gesture of showing. With my father's drawings or in *Little Works* (2007), where I gave a video camera to an order of Carmelite nuns in London and asked them to film themselves making their craft objects, this emphasis on demonstration is very obvious because I myself and other people get to see a world that is otherwise hidden. These nuns show a world to us that I then, in my exhibitions, can show to others. The gesture of showing is inscribed into the work.

GL: How does this relate to your recent show of HAP Grieshaber's work at Hollybush Gardens in London, because in this instance you aren't showing his work as your own work?

AB: In the exhibition I showed a magazine Grieshaber published called *Engel der Geschichte* (*Angel of History*), which had 25 issues from the 1960s until his death in the 80s. Each magazine has a different political subject, like *Angel for Martin Luther King*, or *Angel of Psychiatry*, and one is called the *Angel of the Disabled*, which is about an exhibition Grieshaber organised of his own work in two homes for mentally disabled teenagers, one in East and one in West Germany, with photographs of the teenagers looking at his work and transcripts of their conversations. I enlarged and installed these photographs, which aren't mine or Grieshaber's - they just come from a magazine he published - but they are very close to my own practice.

GL: So how do you differentiate between this act of displaying someone else's work in an exhibition you have curated and your use of other people's work in your own practice?

AB: I don't know. I want to show these photos again without the context of the *Engel der Geschichte* magazines, to stress the way they address a vulnerable way of looking at art which is less HAP Grieshaber's concern than my concern with art.

GL: We have talked about your use of other people's work; what about the clay sculptures or the reverse glass paintings? How do these figure in your practice?

AB: With the clay sculptures that I started in 2008, they were a way for me to replace my own body in the exhibition space. I have this image of myself lying in the gallery called *Dancing Nuns; A Stone Schwitters Painted in the Lake District; L, M, A* (2008) and I don't know whether this came from tiredness or exhaustion, but I was thinking about what the place of the body was in the white cube

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- and also of course Valie Export's architecture photos, like *Starre Identität, Körperkonfigurationen in der Architektur (Rigid Identity, Body-Configurations in Architecture, 1972)*. *Clay Sculpture* (2008) replaces this idea of myself and the feeling of myself lying in the white cube. It is just material so it dries and it cracks; it is like a sculpture before you give it a form. The form shapes according to the qualities of the clay itself. I took a photo of *Malin Ståhl*, one of the Hollybush Garden directors, holding a piece of the cracked clay after an exhibition. I used this as a screen print and one doesn't know if this clay is art or just a piece of material. So maybe it is also about letting a work fall down and about the material, just kneading and kneading and not giving it a final shape.

GL: When you made *Clay Sculpture* you wanted it to crack, to give itself these imperfections, whereas with your new clay work *Ahnenknödel (Ancestor Dumplings, 2010)*, which you ask the gallery attendants to constantly keep moist, you wanted to keep it in its state of potential so that it never reaches a state of completion. Previously we were talking about your passive mode of production, this allowing of the work to become flawed or maintain its own potential, but your woodcuts, like *Crib* (2007) or your current project, are very laborious to make, how do you relate that to a passive mode of production?

AB: One aspect of the woodcuts is certainly skill, or the fact that it is important that there is one area in my work where I produce something beautiful, something like an auratic object. Obviously I have to give something to the audience and hard work is part of that giving. I have a fear of simple gestures, or the 'too easy' look of post-minimalist table sculpture. Not only in contemporary art, but since nineteenth-century modernity, we don't tend to put much effort into an artwork, and to do so would be seen as a bad, academic approach. Still, there is one area in my practice where I feel I need to make an effort. I am often unsatisfied with work that is too easily produced, but at the same time there is some amateurism in an overtly labour-intensive approach. I suppose I counter these problems in this part of my practice by making these other works, which I want to let fall down.

For me this whole labour question is unresolved; I am really embarrassed about it. It is such a petite bourgeois approach to demand skill and labour of a work. I don't have a totally amateur approach to art, but I still want to make something people like. I am interested in the discourse of amateurism because art isn't supposed to be laborious, diligent or skilled, like it is in craft. In many other practices, like academic writing, this labour is still very important, but in visual art it is seen as unimportant.

GL: Maybe it is more about the visibility of labour in the context of art and whether this is acceptable or not, than the question of whether labour, in and of itself, is or isn't good. I suppose that this sparse post-conceptual look you mentioned, despite, and in fact directly relating to, its effortless exterior, often belongs to a discourse that tries to deal with very heavy political issues around labour and the conditions of production. What is odd is this apparent inversion; that there can only be work that has minimal labour and maximum concept, or maximum labour and minimal concept. Why can't it be both? They shouldn't be mutually exclusive. Yet, seemingly there is this division that wants to separate the philosophical object of art from its labour of production, even down to the fact that many artists must do other jobs to fund their practices, yet this is something that cannot be talked about. It is unacceptable that someone performs two separate tasks.

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AB: Yes, for me it was important to maintain this skilled labour - carving and working by hand. Philosophy is always so interested in art as the object of thought, but of course every artist goes through the same process of reflection and production when producing work. For instance, when I am making something I am always stepping back and looking at what I am doing. I would deprive myself if I stopped carving - I would stop being a conceptual artist, I wouldn't be thinking. In a way, I started making these woodcuts in a very strategic manner in Berlin in the 90s. I was making work in this context of straightforward political art, and I was interested in notions of shame - so I started making woodcuts because they were the most uncool thing I could do. Now I am no longer interested in reacting to commercialised visual culture or in criticising a discourse of commodified coolness so directly. The last statement I made using these notions was a graffiti on the shop window of fashion art brand Bless in Berlin; one of their collections that year was based on the theme of 'uncool', so I just wrote 'I was uncool before you were uncool'. This was in 2004 and for me it marked the turning point of a political visual culture of cool. I still make woodcuts, but I don't have the initial strategic reasoning anymore; I do the woodcuts now because I like them.

GL: They don't have this kind of obvious oppositional political strategy, which informs that kind of rigid separation or total collapse between high concept and low craft, or that pits critical practice against beautiful objects.

AB: Yes, they are much richer in their codifications: woodcuts are the first popular medium of mass production, in the fifteenth century, and they have religious connotations from their depiction of devotional images during the Middle Ages. They are also part of the history of German Expressionism, and HAP Grieshaber related to this history as he was responsible for the continuation of woodcutting in the 1950s. He is also connected to my interest in nuns, and 'nun-artists', because he taught a group of nuns how to do woodcuts, and one of these nuns was my art teacher at the Franciscan school I attended. In this respect, the woodcuts offer an alternative art history rather than a theoretical strategy.

GL: Do you find it harder to make work without some kind of strategic oppositional stance?

AB: Well, maybe this is like the first question? I think one thing that is important to me is that I am interested in complicated things; if I find something difficult - let's say when looking at things or doing things which can be shameful - then I won't avoid it. These complicated and troublesome things become quite productive. Sometimes I find it difficult to produce work, or certain kinds of works, so the cracking clay or using other people's work produces the shape for me; like how Dieter Roth spilled liquids on his drawings because he could not bear how ugly they looked, but then these disgusting moulds are quite beautiful, and they did the work of beauty for him.

GL: Although there are a lot of notions of falling and fallible and shame in your work, there are also a lot of notions of joy, like *Tanzende Nonnen (Dancing Nuns, 2007)* or *Little Works (2007)*, a childlike wonderment or praise. These notions seem opposed, this suffering and joy, and likewise they have this similar relation in your practice as difficulty and affirmation, passivity and production. You face something difficult. How do these difficulties or vulnerabilities manifest themselves in your current work?

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AB: I will go to Italy in April and work on a project about notions of poverty in the legends of St. Francis and Franciscan theology and mirror this in notions of poverty in Arte Povera. Maybe this is also about difficult things and joyful things, because both in Franciscan and monastic theology and Arte Povera, the awful state of poverty is seen as a positive, revolutionary, cleansing, critical state to be in. These ideas from the twelfth century reappear in the late twentieth century. St Francis, for example, was a rich man and similarly the development of Arte Povera as an anti-museum, anti-art world project very much took place in the museum and in the art world. Both come from this privileged position to embrace poverty.

GL: How do you relate these anti-museum strategies to your own abandonment of an oppositional strategy of critique?

AB: At the moment, I am more interested in traditional political content - in what is conventionally deemed to be a political agenda as opposed to the singularity of aesthetic judgement. That is why I was interested in showing HAP Grieshaber as these magazines *Engel der Geschichte* have these very old-fashioned ideas that art can change attitudes. I find the discourse on political aesthetics very empty at the moment; you have to at least perform aesthetic judgement's singularity so that it relates to politics.

GL: The problem is that even if you identify the political potential of aesthetics, you still have to do something or take a stand. It isn't enough to demand politics from a work; you have to put yourself in a vulnerable position, you have to speak about it.

AB: So, maybe you could say what you like about my work?

GL: I find it genuinely very difficult to say why. I suppose I would say I like it because I find it quite honest. I find the way you approach things generous, but not to the degree of an altruism, which can be quite self-aggrandising. I'm not saying it is totally selfless at all - in fact it is quite aware of how selfish it is, and that is what I mean about the honesty. In your work you seem aware that you are getting something as a gift and that you are using it for something, and you make that visible within the work. In terms of a conceptual or determinate commentary, that is what I could try to say about why I like it, but in another sense I like it because some of it is beautiful. So that is as close as I can get to a reasonable answer.

AB: Thank you. I think that is a very good ending.