

Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing. I refuse any intellectual translations of this laughter, since my slavery would commence from that point on. —Georges Bataille,
Guilty

Portikus is pleased to announce Liberty, Laura Langer's first institutional solo exhibition. The exhibition presents a new series of seven paintings, which are site-specific to Portikus. Liberty talks about limitations, their impact and the desire beyond.

A conversation between Laura Langer, Christina Lehnert and Person Three

CL (Christina Lehnert): This exhibition consists of two separate situations: one painting displayed in the usual exhibition space, and six paintings in the attic. The large painting in the main exhibition space is the bell of a trumpet, a deep, almost abstract opening, which appears to be made of highly reflective brass. The material, as it is rendered in paint, creates the illusion of a reflection. But the white cube we are standing in, bears no resemblance to the space reflected in the trumpet, so the illusion of the trumpet fights with what we know to be true. It contains the potential for both taking in and giving out, through imagery and the suggestion of sound.

PT (Person Three): The trumpet is an analogical object... the trumpet exists to be listened to. It's loud. It's an instrument that can very easily be identified in an orchestra. When played, it has expressivity, modulation and tenderness, and sometimes the capacity to laugh and scream and even cause harm. It imposes respect, it is strict, and it makes clear that there is something that must be heard. This open mouth is not like that of Munch's *Scream*. It is less deteriorated, less desperate and disorganised. This scream is a more discursive one, clean and articulate. Seems easier to be transferred into words. The trumpet has authority. It is from a military order and it gives an order: a type of order makes everybody impotent.

CL: The paintings in the attic all bear the words "Und Ihr?" (And you?). Where did this come from?

LL (Laura Langer): I found the phrase on an Austrian propaganda poster from the First World War. I don't know what I was looking for, but when I saw it, it attracted me. I liked the colors, and I liked the position of the soldier, the poster in general. There's something funny about it. The soldier takes up basically most of the image, he's laying in the trenches, and we see him almost from behind but his face is turning towards us. It's as if he were in front of a TV camera: he's looking at the camera, he knows there is an audience, and he wants to be pitied. "Oh I'm here at war alone but I know you're watching me, look at me, I am suffering for you." It's a kind of perverse glance we get from him, like the cat in *Shrek* attitude. Then this phrase in one corner Und Ihr?, is as if the face of the

soldier wasn't enough. It is so mean. It works with the psychology of people (like all propaganda or advertisement), and that's why it becomes mean. Because it uses our sense of duty to make us feel guilt in order to get us to do something, to join the war game. The idea is so simple and so direct, almost rude, patronizing. It touches us at our very low points. And it's a question we don't need anyone to ask us because it is anyways inside us as members of society. And you? What about you? What are you doing for this or that? I've found it often in my head and I believe that other people do too. I want to believe that I am not alone in this.

CL: So it is a question of the individual and society? Inside and outside?

LL: Or that the voices from the outside actually become yours. It is hard to differentiate. That's the work one has to do all the time, I believe, just to understand how to go on. Figure out: What is from my parents, what is from society, what is from my friends... you know? What do I want to keep from my family or my culture, to incorporate into myself, and what do I want to throw away? It is this cleaning up of voices that one is doing all the time. And when you don't do it, you find yourself confused.

CL: And in relation to the messy room that is shown in all of the paintings, it becomes a metaphor for the many voices?

LL: Could be. Or it could very simply be a metaphor for the inner trouble. What I struggle with when I see the messy room is: you know that it's easy to start to clean up, but this precise moment of starting is the most difficult thing to do. It is a moment of paralysis between thought and movement—not even being able to start doing an action that is so simple to do. At that moment of paralysis, you almost give up and say, “The mess is ok.” But then actually, it's not ok, the mess, you know? You may try to be ok with it, but actually you have to start, and do it, clean it up. I think that the Und Ihr? is a little bit this wake-up call like: “What are you doing with yourself that your room looks like that?” Und Ihr? is this kind of voice—that might be able to make your action start. As if the guilt this question brings up will force you to finally do something.

PT: This is ironic because nobody does anything through guilt.

CL: No. I think that's not true. I think there are a lot of things you may do from guilt... I mean many religions are based on the feeling of guilt.

LL: Guilt comes because there is judgment. I think religion has similar mechanisms as the state: it conditions and controls what we think through guilt. This is how they access our brains and how they construct subjects.

PT: You may react to something, you may perform, but you may not do things out of guilt. What makes you fully do something is desire. If you are not convinced of what you do, if you do not desire it, you will make mistakes or you will hurt yourself. Now thinking about the problem that Laura talks about—action and the messy room—of course they are obstacles. We tend to bind pleasure with desire and that is not always true. Pleasure and desire can be divergent. To conquer

desire, we sometimes need to go through displeasures and efforts, but at the end, when a desire is fulfilled, pleasure is reached on a higher level. Clearly if there is no basis of desire, we wouldn't give a shit about anything, and we would instead be beings of pure duty. A happy world is not a duty-filled—that is to say scientifically regulated—world... it would be a very terrible world, a very dark uchronia. The order of desire is the only one that really counts: to subordinate everything to the desire. The indeclinable quality of desire is the only authority and orientation that is not mistaken.

LL: I think you have a point. For example, instead of “Uhh, what am I doing?” or “I should clean up. Look at me, I am a mess, I should start to clean up.” Instead of that, you could think: “I want to have a clean room!” It is another way of engaging with it. The problem with guilt is it lasts only five seconds, it will not give you the material you need to actually follow through and do it nicely and feel good about it. I think desire, it's “authority and orientation,” has a lot to do with the show.

CL: What about the authority of the building, its orientation? How is that influencing the exhibition?

LL: I think I am using the building to accentuate what happens in the paintings. The formal decisions mostly have to do with the building. The paintings series upstairs, all hung vertically, work like false reinforcing columns for the building. They don't carry structural weight, but in a metaphorical way they occupy the position of a column that bears the weight of the roof. There is certainly a sort of poetry there: to carry the weight of a roof. What is holding the roof? Is it actually the mess that holds everything in place? On the other hand, the trumpet painting does not touch the building. It obstructs the window, and partially blocks the light that comes through, but you can walk behind the painting, if you want to, and find the window (it is not hidden). The painting accentuates the fact that there is a window by covering it. When the sun shines through the painting's structure (the stretcher bars) it's like we see it naked, its materiality is put into evidence and the imperative power of the trumpet dissolves. The arrogance of the object makes it look like a fool. How does it dare to even try to block the sun? It makes me think of the story of Alexander the Great and Diogenes. Then, the trumpet's hole sort of echoes the opening of the window of the exhibition space. It is so large that you could walk through it, so, in theory, you could go out of the building by walking through the hole in the trumpet. I want to keep that imaginary line not broken: if you wanted to shoot a bullet from the Alte Brücke to the Portikus bridge towards the painting through the window and across the island, you could do it...

CL: So the painting is informed by the architecture and vice versa?

LL: The painting uses architecture to become an object. That being said, I think the paintings could have worked somewhere else as well, even though they are in a way site-specific. They have everything inside them. They are not an absolute abstraction that can only give a feeling. They contain more information than that. So in a different space, it would do something different to the space, it would relate in another way.

CL: How did you think about the relationship between the paintings in the attic and the one in the exhibition space?

LL: The whole show it's sort of doubled. I consider the paintings in the attic also to have the theme of the trumpet, because the phrase Und Ihr? is something that points at you and demands something. The two rooms are complementary or symmetrical opposites, both this big painting downstairs and the series of paintings upstairs are the "same" painting, but painted in two different ways, so to say. Two ways of painting for two different kinds of spaces. The "trumpet" is present in both cases, but the sizes are inverted: in the painting upstairs, the room takes up most of the canvas and the Und Ihr? (trumpet) is very small and sometimes not that visible. Downstairs the trumpet (Und Ihr?) is very big and the room is smaller and hard to decipher.

CL:.. The way you talk about the building, to see it as a whole with all its functions, makes me think about Land Art, or Gordon Matta Clark. For example, yesterday we built a whole new room in the attic just out of light. I think this piercing through many levels and corners of the building is very strong. You do not use the exhibition space as a white cube, but you perceive it as such, and you ask yourself, what can I do with that?

LL: Yes, exactly. I have an anecdote that isn't directly related, but which might take you somewhere, and which I think makes sense for what we are talking about. This summer, in Mexico City, I met this woman who told me about her experience of the very bad earthquakes in 2017. She told me the story of how she was with two people at the moment that the big shake took place, in her apartment, which is on the sixth floor out of seven. She was with a Greek woman, and an Israeli young man, and she is Mexican, so she was the only one who had experience with earthquakes and so on. Well, if you are in an earthquake, you have to go upstairs (if you are near a terrace), or you go downstairs and leave at the ground level, but either way the mission is to get out. The three of them were going up the stairs to get to the terrace, which she said took ages since the building was really moving hard, and the girl from Greece was absolutely in a panic while the guy was rolling a cigarette. Anyway, they arrived at the terrace safely, and the earthquake passed. Afterwards, the guy went on with his life as if nothing had happened whatsoever, whereas the Greek girl took a plane back home immediately, super traumatised. The Mexican girl meanwhile started to help in this ad hoc organization for saving people still trapped in the debris. It's quite tough work, because you have to call your family and say, "Hey I won't be accessible by phone for the next 6 hours. I will be inside a collapsed building." So you write down your telephone number and your blood type on your forearm and you go in, and hopefully you come back out. After the quake, the city itself goes into a state of paralysis, and either you help, or you stay at home with your family. For weeks, she was looking at all this happening, and then some time later she had a crisis. The earthquake was far in the past, but it was at that point that she collapsed. She realised that people react to the earthquake the same way that buildings do: some buildings collapse immediately, like the greek girl,

some buildings behave as if nothing's happened, like the Israeli boy, some buildings get cracks that stay forever, and some buildings stay standing, but collapse some weeks or months later. The buildings are built as a body, it has bones (beams), windows, doors, orifices, a skin, pipes, they have all these things... the building suffers the shake as the body suffers it.

CL: I think that your works express these physical and emotional aspects of a building. It seems to me that there is a very straight forward exhibition space, and then a very intimate one in the attic.

LL: The "attic" of this building becomes somehow a head. I like to think that by opening or allowing the public to go there we are surgically opening the building's head. But, as you say, in an emotional or psychological way—opening it up in order to see what's inside. To confront oneself with oneself.

PT: That's right. The attic is a very straight-forward metaphor for the head. The attic is usually a dark space, where you put things that are important, but which maybe you will forget about, or lose track of. Like memories, old things, new things which you don't really use. There are always some valuables and some trash, and it's all mixed up. It's messy and it allows mess because nobody really goes there so much. It is a storage. It's a cerebral space. To be heard, thinking about the trumpet, also means to occupy the attic, the head. You occupy it, and you take care of it, and you find a mess there. A mess that you say can be easily solved, and yet...

LL: It's funny. It's a triangle upstairs, and two sides of the triangle are glass—the ceiling and the wall. And the third surface (the floor) is not glass, but wood. It's a lamp if you look at it as an object, it is totally a lamp. That is also why there is so much glass, glass is on two sides, it is definitely a lamp. You can light the space downstairs from the attic and you can light the bridge at the same time. And this is why you cannot have things stored there, because it would be visible from the big exhibition space. It's not an attic, it's a lamp.

CL: So what does having access to the attic, or lamp, mean for the exhibition?

LL: To give access to a new part of a building is a very beautiful thing. Think about every time you've been to the roof terrace of a building, and it was like: "Ah, I feel good!" You feel that you own it somehow. Or even if you were in a shopping center and you took the wrong staircase and found yourself in the parking lot, you think "Oh, that's a strange place!" Places are there, they are in the city, and we don't have access. It's nice to access, it's a gift, and it reconfigures the brain map that we have of the cities we live in or visit. It's a sort of reconfiguration of memory.

CL: The staircase seems to be a key element to change the perception of the whole space. It came from the desire to access the attic, and a need to connect the upper floor with the ground floor. But how do the paintings, as images, reconfigure the space in their settings?

LL: Putting the picture of a messy room upstairs perhaps makes us think about the idea of a house attic space. And that's a magical thing. When you put two eyes on a fork it becomes a toy, like in Toy Story 4. There is this simple thing, you can transform things with images. You can reconfigure

the building towards images.

CL: It is a simple gesture, just through placing an image in a space, you can create new meaning. It is also about the potential something has in its location. It is what it is, but it can be different things in different places or define different places with what it is. I think it's important to remind ourselves how things are defined through settings, and those settings have histories that define them. "Forbidden", for example, has taken on a new meaning for me since this exhibition.

LL: Of course! It's words. Words make it happen or not happen. But it's not only words. Of course it wasn't allowed to go to the attic before, but it's only once you open the door that you realize something was being kept from you. It's those small actions, they let the air come in. Maybe also then some heat will come in. It is like blood that flows to organs or parts of the building. The heating, the blood makes it alive.

CL: What about the word "Liberty"? You have chosen Liberty as the title of the exhibition. There is the liberty that is achieved through physical, political or social freedoms, such as human rights liberty. Then there is the liberty that assumes that humans are self determining, are autonomous, that their choices matter. Then, Liberty became a brand, a monument, and a cliché. Liberty stands for promises and revolutions, but can also be a company name. How did this title come about for you?

LL: Liberty resonates in different ways thinking about the show. It has a positive reputation, but it's pretty dark to me.

PT: "Liberty implies a system of rules, a 'network of restraint and order' (...)" Hanna Fenichel Pitkin. Liberty entails the responsible use of freedom under the rule of law without depriving anyone else of their freedom. Liberty implies/contains its own limits. Liberty is not that liberty. It is a delimited playground that makes you feel that that's all there is. A circle or a square within which to play. As if there was a limit to imagination. Liberty resonates with the idea of the separation of one's outside voice and one's inside voice. The limits of the self. Liberty is opening the upstairs and, engendered by desire, breaking the boundary of the limits imposed by liberty itself.

Laura Langer (*1986, Buenos Aires) lives and works in Berlin. In 2017 she graduated from Städelschule. Her works have been shown at Piper Keys, London (2018) and Weiss Falk, Basel (2017.)

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