

*Kerstin Brätsch*

My first encounter with Kerstin Brätsch followed her 2012 participation on behalf of DAS INSTITUT (her collaborative partnership with Adele Röder) in the performance *IWAKI ODORI (Sunbathe Museum)* at the Art Institute of Chicago, with Ei Arakawa, UNITED BROTHERS (Ei Arakawa and Tomoo Arakawa), Nhu Duong, Jeffrey Rosen, and Sergei Tcherepnin. It was part of a series of projects by Ei and UNITED BROTHERS related to Japan's nuclear crisis and its relevance, or irrelevance, in the arts. The performance employed ultraviolet tanning tubes as well as visual, audio, and semi-traditional Japanese dance elements. On my way out of the performance, Brätsch pushed me against a wall and frisked me. Apparently, she was attempting to recover from the audience works by Nhu, which had been borrowed as props for the performance but were never intended as souvenirs. It was an inauspicious, no-nonsense, and not especially pleasant introduction. Brätsch's seeming indifference – also there in the UNITED BROTHERS' video *SUNBATHE MUSEUM*, recorded at the museum earlier that week – was stunningly effective. These two experiences informed my initial understanding of her practice.

Not too long after, in the spring of that year, I found myself working on an exhibition with DAS INSTITUT, Allison Katz, and John Henderson at Family Business, a flexible exhibition space initiated by Maurizio Cattelan and Massimiliano Gioni, sited then amid a contiguous row of galleries in Chelsea. Among its immediate neighbors were Gagosian Gallery, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, and Paula Cooper Gallery. Family Business is a parody – a humorous exaggeration for effect – but it was also staffed in Chelsea by the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College; it must be seen in relation to institutional critique, and to realism. This transitory institution forwards the proposition that for art to be effective requires only a bit of deference and a maybe a sense of humor.

John organized the exhibition and invited DAS INSTITUT and myself to participate; Kerstin and Adele then invited Allison. I offered to do the exhibition scheme for the other artworks and activities in and around the exhibition. This entailed tinting the windows and lights with amber and blue gels and painting the walls a yellowish hue somewhat akin to the colors of John's bronze *Cast* paintings. The effect was palpable and created uncertainty over where the differences perceived were contained. It made it apparent that everything, including the entire exhibition context that would normally be perceived as the background for expression, remained in the foreground of perception and understanding.

John contributed two *Casts*, one large and one quite small, which we installed on opposite walls, to the left and right of the entrance, and adjacent to the curtain wall of windows. This left the main wall and the center of the gallery empty. Kerstin, Adele, and Allison had just returned from Europe, and entered this in-progress situation a little jet-lagged. Originally, they had considered something like scattering fruit on the floor of the gallery. By the time they arrived that afternoon the plan had been adjusted: they would make confectionary portraits of Kerstin and Adele.

I was immediately struck by their friendliness, humor, and comfort in this situation – it felt closer to making an exhibition on the street than in a gallery. In fact, the doors that occupied half of the gallery's façade were kept open during the installation; the continuous plane of the floor and sidewalk was treated as a staging area. While they initially acknowledged John and myself, Kerstin, Adele, and Allison went about their business seemingly oblivious to our presence. This sounds off-putting, but the situation was familiar and intimate and we were ubiquitous in the process.

The next morning, Allison came by the gallery first. Adele followed with stacks of boxed donuts and two large buckets of marzipan, along with brushes, food coloring, and confectionary decorations. Kerstin arrived last, and the three of them set up a workstation on the concrete, sharing chores, rolling the marzipan into flat sheets and decorating it. As I remember it, Allison primarily painted the portraits of Kerstin and Adele, who, in turn, decorated and positioned the marzipan sheets. They started by siting the portraits, and, to my delight, chose to place each at the margins of the gallery, close to and much like we had done with the *Casts*. Interestingly, they measured themselves by lying on the ground and outlining their silhouettes, so that the portraits were literally life-size. This kind of verbatim use of scale was reinforced later as Allison measured her friends' features directly against their faces, before transferring the measurements unaltered to the marzipan.

The gallery was filled with confectionary items, brushes, rolling pins, and photos of both K. and A., as well as numerous images of Alexander McQueen's designs, which were the inspiration for the decoration of the marzipan garments. It was the evening before the opening, and the portraits were complete: they were amazing, funny, poignant, political, and real. We left late, planning to clean up in the morning.

I arrived at Family Business close to 11:00, and was surprised to see Allison, Kerstin, and Adele again rolling, painting, and decorating. I couldn't understand why they were there, except for perhaps a certain artistic anxiety. But as it turned out, the marzipan that had been positioned vertically for Kerstin's portrait had fallen overnight and they were in the process of remaking the work. All without a hint of frustration and only hours before the exhibition's opening and a scheduled conversation between Kerstin and Massimiliano at Gavin Brown's enterprise. I learned a lot that afternoon, about them individually and collectively, as artistic

roles were interchanged and the new portrait was added to each of the existing ones, making each now a double portrait.

I was in New York again during the closing week of the exhibition, and I went by Family Business to see what was left of the portraits after weeks open to the environment. To my surprise, the marzipan was intact and had hardened to the touch. I texted Kerstin to say hello and float the possibility that the portraits might be conserved. She had seen the work earlier, was equally pleased that it had survived, and liked the idea of conserving it, but was at a loss for how this might be achieved. To make matters worse, we were approaching Memorial Day weekend and everyone was leaving town. I called Sean Moyer, a friend who has a company that assists with artist's installations, to ask whether he might help. He agreed, but because of the upcoming weekend proposed that we do it the following afternoon.

Sean and his partner came by the gallery and after looking at the marzipan they thought that we might be able to scoop the portraits off the floor and position them on a new support for transit and conservation. Kerstin was unavailable, Allison was in Europe, but Adele was in town and came by the gallery and she and Sean began to try to pry the portraits from the floor. Although the surface of the marzipan was dry to the touch, underneath it was still a paste. As a result, the portraits came off the floor in pieces, much as they had been assembled. Adele and Sean arranged them on the cardboard support in a pragmatic fashion, with little regard to their original orientation. The many relocated pieces fit onto the support in a scattered and dismembered fashion. They were taken away to storage and we began to talk about the possibility of doing a subsequent, follow-up, exhibition.

The opportunity to show the portrait(s) again came in the form of the monographic exhibition *Gaylen Gerber* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago during the spring of the following year. Under the auspices of my practice, it was included alongside the work of Cady Noland, Jim Nutt, and H. C. Westermann, among others – and again in a highly hued situation. It was agreed that the marzipan artwork was complete as it existed and that the combination of the two double portraits into one collected work, informed by the residual divides, cuts, and mutilations incurred as the portraits were reconfigured, would be the artwork *Scattered A, Scattered K*. The recognition and understanding of *Scattered A, Scattered K* in its present form of course reveals aspects of its original character.

Brutality aside, the expansion of DAS INSTITUT (already a collaborative partnership) to include “and Allison Katz,” and the move from single to double to a collected portrait(s) is telling; it is a strategy reiterated throughout Kerstin Brätsch's practice. Her first “solo” show at Gavin Brown's enterprise in 2012, *Maler, den Pinsel prüfend*, positioned her among a now-familiar set of collaborative elements: Ei Arakawa and Tomoo Arakawa (UNITED BROTHERS); Sergei Tcherepnin; Adele Röder (DAS INSTITUT); KAYA (her collaborative work

with Debo Eilers); GianCarlo Montebello (a jewelry designer that worked with Man Ray); numerous vernacular Japanese artifacts, including the Iwaki Odori, with costumes from Blacky (Tomoo's tanning salon in Fukushima); and agate shards, souvenirs from Sigmar Polke's glass project for Grossmünster Zürich.

In similar fashion, her subsequent exhibition at the same gallery in 2014, *Unstable Talismanic Rendering*, included master German paper marbler Dirk Lange. Brätsch's collaboration with Lange combined the cosmological with various understandings of beauty, exemplifying her work's ability to invoke connections between the material, emotional, and psychological functions of art.

The exhibition also included work by Mariechen Danz, who designed garments that incorporated prints of the marbled paintings as well as Brätsch's earlier paintings on Mylar. The artists' ongoing discussion about the role of hierarchy in various historical systems of imaging inspired the costumes and the performance *Clouded in Veins: Possible Readings of Kerstin Brätsch's Unstable Talismanic Renderings*. Danz, along with musician Alex Stolze (Danz and Stolze collaborate musically as UNMAP), wore the garments, performed their own score, and used the layers of information in the garments as a guide for their actions.

It seems apparent that the distinction between the individual and the collective is used by Brätsch to underscore a sense of ambiguity or ambivalence about the world, even as an appreciation of multiplicity and community are central to her interests. From her framing of authorship as a network of individuals and expressions to the way that she often literally loads her brush with a graded scale of colors and values, she presents a complexity of interpretations that frustrates easy description. Her attitude of cosmic resignation also goes a long way towards understanding her denial of edification. She asks instead that we determine our own way out of her work's myriad associations. These feel surreal, substantive, ethereal – an unwieldy combination of spirituality and popular culture.

Until the Renaissance we associated artistic activity with discipline and repetition rather than individual expression. Artistic production represented an archetypal body that reflected communal questions of completeness, balance, labor, and normalcy, framed by similarity rather than difference. Expression in our culture now relies on, and benefits from, the strength of a single author and an individual representation of reality. Like others addressing these issues, Brätsch brings together artists and artworks in a representative situation that retains the character and distinctions of the individuals but also raises the expectation that the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts. In an attempt to make visible the things she's framing, she often relates elements uneasily – she disturbs conventional methods of display rather than seamlessly synthesizing elements. This has the effect of making all the elements more distinct and allows her to retain numerous simultaneous positions within a single practice.

The tide of history would seem to be against Brätsch's sensibility if only because

as a culture we're inclined to attribute expression to individuals. Even the "vernacular" – by definition, ordinary communal expression – is now generally discussed in terms of individual artists and their framing of it. If we consider the works of Andy Warhol, Mike Kelley, David Hammons, or Rosemarie Trockel, for example, as representing aspects of the vernacular, the representation of community is a large part of what is explored under the auspices of their practices. This is also why their works, as with so many artists', are often more effectively seen in number, and even as a part of a related field of expression. Brätsch's work is exceptional, but also seems most itself and most individual when understood in the context of others.

Gaylen Gerber