

# Andrea Büttner: The Shame of Culture

*Richard Birkett* discusses the sensitive work  
of an enquiring artist

‘Here should be written about art,  
how ashamed I feel about it  
(whether good art or bad art),  
and about everything connected...,  
but a big depression — it has  
lasted so far for 2 years (?) —  
that sits in me does keep me from  
writing anything clearly about  
this art thing [...] so I write,  
here, a page filler, to fill the pages  
reserved for the foreword.’

Dieter Roth, *A Diary*  
(from the year 82)

In her 2008 audio work ‘Roth Reading’, Andrea Büttner recites passages from Dieter Roth’s 1982 diary, singling out sentences and paragraphs in which the Swiss-German artist expresses feelings of anxiety and shame. Roth’s written diary formed an intrinsic component of his exhibition for the Swiss Pavilion at the 1982 Venice Biennale; the conceit of this project was to exhibit his everyday life, through hours of Super-8 footage, annotated Polaroid photographs and reprinted excerpts from his diary as an accompanying ‘catalogue’.

This gesture would seem to be inherently contradictory. Roth’s diary repeatedly returns to a crippling concern with how he is perceived by others and how he perceives himself, yet he chooses to exhibit the private expression of such anxiety on a mass public stage. In ‘Roth Reading’, Büttner’s hesitant Germanic voice assumes and magnifies this display of self-doubt. Her compilation of quotes performs a discreet interpretation and amplification of Roth’s confessional project, as she picks through the grammatically off-hand text, returning its insecure syntax to the intimacy of the spoken word.

This mimicry could be seen both as a form of performance and comprehension—not of the exact causality of Roth’s shame and embarrassments, but of the paradoxes inherent in the projection of selfhood as a condition of art production and reception. In its confessions of shamefulness, Roth’s diary-as-artwork articulates contingent codes of expression and judgement: those which are appropriate and inappropriate to show, and the social realm in which these valuations are made in life as in art. Through her selected readings Büttner expresses an affinity with the deviance behind the public expression of these emotions—a form of semi-passive reception and conveyance in which the insertion of her own voice imposes another layer of self-consciousness.

As an adjunct to her art practice, Büttner has written at length about the experience of shame as an active vector within the acts of making and exhibiting

art, and the associated machinations of the art world. She has speculated on shame ‘as an emotion that indicates what really matters to us, one that is productive and politically valuable as a heuristic feeling: as a feeling reflecting on cultural conventions regarding what we are supposed to show or hide.’<sup>1</sup> This consideration of shame as a productive force is widely evident within Büttner’s practice beyond the textual specificity of ‘Roth Reading’. Rather than existing directly as subject matter, the emotion and its attendant connotations of discomfort and abjection can be seen as active constituents of her work. More specifically, they are the drivers of Büttner’s aesthetic and contextual decisions.

Büttner produces work in a range of media, from relational pieces that involve collaboration with others, to prints, drawings, paintings, photographs and videos. Her diverse approach is unified by a sense of production on a personal scale: that which is resistant to overt complexity and is redolent

of the amateur or ‘homemade’, or is contained within a simple exchange or gesture. In keeping with this sensibility is her inclusivity towards techniques more commonly associated with the world of craft, such as woodcut prints, glass painting and pressed flowers. These anachronistic, artisanal skills are not employed by Büttner as ironic counterpoints to more ‘contemporary’ methodologies, but are used in affirmation of their aesthetic logics of workmanship, illustration and decoration.

While there is a clear investment in the production of discreet and crafted objects in Büttner’s practice, ‘Roth Reading’ underscores the significance of ‘framing’, an act that figures as a passive yet productive gesture. At times, this occurs most vividly in relation to the work of others, such as in the presentation of drawings by her father, or a recent exhibition of work by mid-20th century German printmaker HAP Grieshaber, conceived and curated by Büttner, and which took place at Hollybush Gardens,

All images courtesy Hollybush Gardens London



‘Roth Reading’, 2008, soundpiece

London, earlier this year. Yet her practice also demonstrates a wider emphasis on the moment of presentation and its staging in the social realm of the gallery. In considering a sequence of solo exhibitions by Büttner over the last three years (including those at Karlsruhe's Badischer Kunstverein, Hollybush Gardens, and the ICA, London), there exists a scenographic poise in her installation of particular selections of work, where forms of two-dimensional image making exist in relation to the purely abstract or decorative, or the narrative-based format of video or recorded readings.

In these exhibitions Büttner imposes several layers of self-contextualisation, moving beyond the mere insertion of the artist in the gallery space via the presence of her artworks. She often paints the walls of the exhibition space in a reddy-brown shade to act as a ground against which works are placed. This band of colour ends abruptly and messily as high as the artist can reach: the act stands as an intervention that is at once decorative and metaphorically linked to her own body. By defining these rules based on her physical limitations, and through the use of the particular colour and the 'unfinished' nature of its application, this act of framing also comes with the unavoidable connotation of dirty protest, of a space smeared in shit. It is a gesture that appears somewhere between incidental and contrived. While the deep shade is consistent with a classical convention of coloured walls on which to hang two-dimensional works, the intended symbolism of a room soiled by the artist in advance of the placement of her art, is suggestive of the desire to degrade and debase what is to come. The scenography of the space therefore seems caught in a double bind: on one level it has succumbed to the overt pressure within the rationale of the gallery space to make public (by acting out against Freudian anal repression in a form of abject exposure), yet on another level it merely implies such abjection through simulation, and retains an overriding concern that the installation should cohere and function aesthetically.

The paradox within the acts of making and exhibiting art as forms of self-exposure is again paramount here. In psychoanalytic narrative, our childhood obsession with faeces develops into an

awareness of the need to hide that which is culturally unacceptable, and to experience shame and embarrassment in instances where we perceive ourselves as having failed to do this. In the words of Guy Hocquenghem: "The constitution of the private person, individual and chaste, is "of the anus"<sup>2</sup>. At the point of presentation that the gallery symbolises for the artist, there is both a movement towards the experience of exposure (the desire to put on show and enter into an exchange with others), and a sense of a pulling back (where the social and critical conventions of contemporary art as an institution provide parameters for what is acceptable and what is not).

Büttner's browned gallery space articulates the point at which art shifts from private production to public reception as a realm in which shame is embedded, and the presence of this emotion delineates a viscerally human and contingent experience of criticality. The artist's 2007 video 'Little Works' (often exhibited on a monitor as part of the installation of individual works within the 'shit-space') constitutes a further reflection on this condition, addressing a counter value system for creative production to that of the contemporary art world.

Over a period of several months Büttner spent time at a Carmelite nunnery in Notting Hill, London, sketching the nuns at prayer. While the order of Carmel is closed and the nuns' communal life focuses on contemplative prayer, the gradual decline in their number has led to a move towards increased transparency. Through contact with a member of the order, Büttner invited the community to video their production of 'little works'—items of handicraft produced for an annual thanksgiving festival. There is a necessary passivity here in the artist's handing over of documentary responsibility, with the final edit of the footage providing the sole inference of the artist's perspective on what has been recorded. The video gently progresses from individual interviews with the nuns about their chosen handicraft, to the final display of these items in a form of internal exhibition, or collective offering.

Despite its simplicity, the work is highly compelling due to the viewer's awareness of privileged access, and also to the otherness of the lives depicted. Without reflecting on such a conflict, the presence of the video camera as the gaze of the

outside world directly contradicts the parameters of seclusion through which the cloistered order preserves a sense of contemplative isolation, creating a tension in the nuns' revelations of their crafted objects. For viewers of the footage, there is a contagion of awkwardness that comes with the experience of witnessing something that one feels is essentially a private activity. The experience forms a strange parallel with the responses of the nuns as they are interviewed about their work; their bashful hesitancy to show off their skills, coupled with the faith-led desire to give thanks to God through pride in (and open display of) their talents.

The lives and practices of the nuns represent both a materially hermetic existence, and a complex ideological symbolism of repression and hiding that is ingrained in religious, and particularly Catholic, belief. The approach of 'Little Works' however is not to observe this condition as an oddity, it rather subtly frames the vulnerability of the act of showing; the nuns' anxiety of communication, driven by the desire for the survival of the order, leads to a revelation of that which conventionally has remained hidden; and their ceremony of the 'little works' in itself constitutes a highly ritualised yet amateur process of exhibition. Büttner's act of framing through the editing of the nun's footage carefully highlights the familiarity of this process, from the 'studio visits' to witness the individual nun's production, to the installation and 'private view' of the handicraft group show. The comparison with the secular space of contemporary art is clear, but what is equally obvious is the disparity in the two value systems; for the nuns, the transposition of their labour from the 'studio' to the less private arena of exhibition does not entail a sudden acquisition of judgement and value (critical or monetary), instead their work continues to function amongst a closed circle within a logic of gifting and thanksgiving, through the display of talents. Their handicraft objects exist as ciphers for an 'a-critical' notion of talent, as distinct from the precise criteria of judgement and quality at work in the art world.

Büttner's position within 'Little Works' is a distanced one, yet her gesture of showing the world of the Carmelite nuns within the context of her exhibitions draws clear parallels with the level of

investment within her own 'craft-based' production. The a-critical context of the nuns' festival of handicraft is based on a Catholic notion of the worthiness of labour, and the clear manner in which their objects demonstrate this work. Büttner states, in relation to her own practice, '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'<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the scenography of her exhibitions situates her visually rich and expressive large-scale woodcuts as key protagonists, their very physicality associated with the process implying a focus of time and effort.

Büttner's woodcuts, as works that answer the need 'to give something to the audience', move towards the supposedly amateurist notion of mutual satisfaction for artist and viewer in the actualisation of skill. When interviewed, the artist is at once open about her own dissatisfaction with the aesthetic of 'coolness' prevalent within post-minimal, post-conceptual art production, and equally conscious and anxious about the problems inherent in labour and effort as criteria for a work's value. In certain areas of her practice she chooses to work directly towards this problematic dialectic. Placing simply presented pressed flowers in a contemporary art exhibition, she adopts the position of the hobbyist, the 'little work' standing as a beacon of out-of-place awkwardness, and yet equally exposing the social boundaries of the value system it finds itself within. Similarly, Büttner's woodcuts speak of the medium's historical associations with both the mass reproduction of devotional religious art and modernist expressionism, articulating an arena of moral and emotional affect.

A recurring source of subject matter for Büttner has been Saint Francis of Assisi, specifically the stories relayed in *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, a 14th century text that poetically depicts the key events in the saint's life. Her large woodcut 'Vogel-predigt', 2010, shows Saint Francis preaching to a tree full of the birds; the image is presented on a single plane, its decorative arrangement of space and repetition of shapes echoing the style of a pre-renaissance frieze. Büttner's approach to figuration is highly stylised, and favours a simplicity and abstraction of form that has distinctive faux-naïve



'Breadpebble', 2010, woodcut on paper



'Vogelpredigt (sermon to the birds)', 2010, woodcut on paper



'Little Works', 2007, video

qualities. As such, the piece retains a sense of the devotional icon. Its graphic and visually striking aesthetic suggests a state of pious celebration and reflection on the life of the saint.

As a subject, Saint Francis represents the disavowal of wealth and worldly belongings as a necessary step to pursue a life committed to the Christian faith. Born in the 12th century to a wealthy family, the saint's early life is widely depicted as decadent and privileged, yet a series of visions are said to have led him to revoke his father's patronage, and turn to a life of wilful poverty. His example led to the foundation of the Franciscan religious order, whose members similarly value an existence of monastic poverty as a positive, cleansing state.

Büttner's evocation of St Francis in her work can be seen within this discourse of volitional impoverishment. As with the repeated depiction of nuns in her practice (beyond the documentary approach of 'Little Works' the artist has also exhibited sketchbooks of drawings produced at the Carmelite nunnery and woodcut prints of dancing nuns), there is an underlying sense of deliberate abjection and repression, coupled with a simplistic state of wonder-

ment and praise. Within the wider discourse of her practice there is an equivalent desire to, in her words, 'let the work fall down'; in this implied state of lowness there is an embrace of failure and of the inappropriate, on both an aesthetic and social level. As Franciscan theology articulates the choice of poverty—the conscious movement from wealth to penury—so she expresses both the wilful movement towards discomfort that is encapsulated within the space of the gallery, and the hermetic conditions of the art world that contain and rationalise this exposure.

Büttner's description of shame as an emotion that is 'productive and politically valuable as a heuristic feeling', frames the structural conditions of her practice. It is present in the push and pull of passivity and labour visible in her approach to production, where the emphasis on frameworks of reception articulates the desire for proximity to others and to other's work. Here, shame is a signifier of dependency and of shared cultural space. It is similarly present in the highlighted opposition between faith and critical thought, wherein the codification of these value systems defines a mutually vulnerable state of expression and reception. The art world, as in the wider cultural realm, functions through a complexity of relations, responsibilities and judgements that exist implicitly between the states of production and reception, the figures of artist and viewer. Büttner's highly complex yet subtle practice advocates a critical consciousness of these parameters, an aesthetic embrace of vulnerability and limitation that opens up a far wider understanding of the relationship between selfhood and social efficacy.

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Andrea Büttner, 29th São Paulo Biennale,  
25 September – 12 December

- 1) Andrea Büttner, *The Aesthetics of Shame in Contemporary Art and Theory*, PhD thesis, 2008
- 2) Guy Hocquenghem, 'Family, Capital, Anus', *Semiotext(e)* 6, *Anti-Oedipus: From Psychoanalysis to Schizoanalysis*, Vol 2, No 3, 1977
- 3) *Artists at Work: Andrea Büttner*, interview with Gil Leung, Afterall Online, May 2010