

LISA BIEDLINGMAIER

- INTERVIEW -



Let us sum up your life briefly. So first of all, you were born in Russia, you grew up in Georgia and then you moved with your parents to Stuttgart, Germany. You studied at Art academy in Stuttgart and Zurich and made a lot of exhibitions in Stuttgart, Zurich, Freiburg, the National Museum of Georgia and Museums of Bat Yam in Israel etc., so you are a well-rounded artist. Now you take part in a residency program with the CEAAC in Strasbourg.

Can you explain how it happened? And maybe how you became the artist you are now?

Yeah, so first I started studying in Stuttgart to become an art teacher, but I quickly realized that I wanted to be an artist. By that time I was very interested in photography and I went to Zurich to study for two years at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK). Being away from Georgia for 16 years I decided to make a visit for a new photographic project. And in the following ten years I frequently went to Georgia to take pictures, to work on my photography projects, as well as on video and installation projects⁽¹⁾.

I had three different perspectives on this country. First of all it was the place of my childhood, everything was so familiar! Then it was the country where my ancestors migrated to from Germany, 1817, where they built up German villages. And last but not least I visited Georgia, a former Soviet Union Republic. After all those years, not being part of the Soviet Union anymore, Georgia changed a lot! It was really interesting for me to visit my Georgian friends' country and to realize, that I wasn't speaking the national language but the one of the oppressors at that time.... so it was a new perspective for me to look on this country and that was very interesting for many years.

⁽¹⁾ - *Ninka's Institute for Democracy* (2009)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDFiMF06gbM>

Do your parents live in Georgia too?

No, we migrated to Stuttgart when I was 13, it was in 1988, a year after the wall came down anyway and it became much easier to leave Soviet Union. So I was a child, hum I mean a teenager (*laughs*). For me this part of my life is still very important, it is part of my identity. That's also why later I started to make interviews with my grandparents, to find out more about the history of my family, who were German Colonists looking for better a life and religious freedom. What seemed to work out for over 100 years. But at the time of my grandparents generation life was really tough for the Germans in Georgia and Russia. First they were expropriated after the Russian Revolution and later during the Second World War they were deported from Georgia to Siberia to working camps. It was a very hard time for them. And after the war they couldn't return to their homes in Georgia and that is also the reason why I was born in Russia. I made a video work, "*Reve ta Stogne*"⁽²⁾, about

the experience, my grandaunt made in those working camps. I think I really needed to know about this part of their lives, I needed to know more about my story, the story of my ancestors, to better understand where I come from. But it is not finished yet, I mean I am now interested in another way.

Do you mean in a more mature way?

It is not about being mature; it is more like I closed one topic about myself and I opened another one.

All in all, how did you know about the CEAAC? Did you apply for the residency program?

In fact, you cannot apply for this. I think if you would have the possibility to apply then more people would know about it; there is a curator, Eva Froitzheim (*curator at the Kunstmuseum in Stuttgart*) who is selecting and recommending the artists. She called me and asked if I would be interested in having a residency; but I had never heard about the CEAAC before. Indeed I really like residency programs: I was in New York for six months, another six months in Paris, plus I am working between Zurich and Stuttgart, so I try to get around. This is useful in many ways. For the last five years I was very active in the Kunstverein Wagenhalle (*association for artists*) in Stuttgart, where I am

engaged in Curatorial praxis⁽³⁾.

And because I am always going back and forth between Stuttgart and Zürich, I have an insight into both art scenes. I like to invite Swiss artists to Stuttgart. Even if the two cities are geographically close, it is just three hours by train; the art scenes are not much connected.

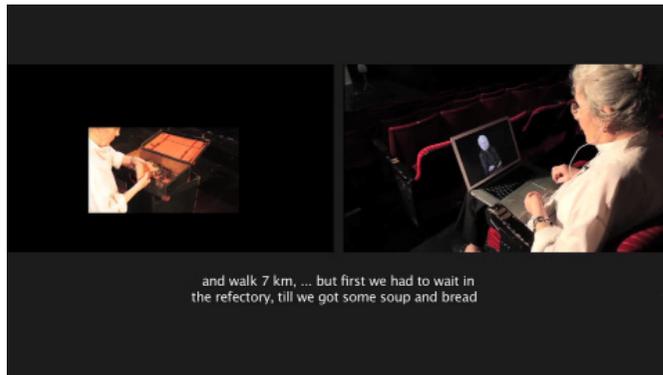
Are you enjoying Strasbourg then?

Yes, very much. Actually, I am also surprised. I don't know why, but I thought that Strasbourg is quite small, and this is why you are not expecting so much from it. But then you realise that despite visiting the historical city, there is a lot of other stuff to explore. There are so many possibilities here.

Actually because it is small, the people are really motivated and connected. Whereas in bigger cities with their different scenes, like for example in Zurich, the art scenes almost don't communicate with each other. (...)

And so forth your residency started in late January and you are about to leave in a few weeks (three months). Next year you will have an exhibition here. Let us move to your approach to art.

The only thing that is consistent part of my work is that one project is totally different from the other. I think that life is going on and there are so many topics to discover or to get



Screenshot from the video *Reve ta Stogne*, 2013

(2) - *Reve ta Stogne*, 2013
<https://vimeo.com/73560440>

(3) - *Curatorial praxis*
<https://www.lisabiedlingmaier.net/kv-wagenhalle/>
and <https://www.lisabiedlingmaier.net/peekaboo/>

into, and doing art is a way for me to reflect on those things; it is important for me to focus on what is my point of view on certain positions or situations. That is what makes art interesting for me: dealing with issues in different ways. Particularly nowadays, you have all this information and you can sit down and just consume; so doing art means for me embracing the possibility of going deeper into one topic but also making a decision what really matters to me, personally.

Do you think as critics may say that your work has a real echo to social and political issues?

First of all it is really important for me to be critical about myself and then about my environment, politics and so on. I mean being politically engaged is always an issue. That is why somehow a critical dimension is always within my work, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. As I mentioned before, I do not have just one general focus. I use my artistic practice to get deeper into a topic and within it I would address a specific view on that. In this way I can talk more precisely about the social or political aspects. I guess it feels like being a good citizen – no matter how strange it sounds. Taking a step back is a good way to analyse things that happen around you. And as an artist you can do that. Many people are involved with situations and circumstances through their work, their children or whatever and therefore are not really free to act independently or to address prob-

lems. Even if they are able to analyse situations they are not properly able to make a decision, to step out. You know what I mean?

Totally! At this point do you think to a certain extent that your work frees you from these situations? Does it allow you to both express and critic yourself?

Not really. Within the work, yes! I think I can talk freely about things because I have this distance as an artist. But unfortunately, we are also participants. And all those structures we are enclosed into are actually the society we live in. Things are imposed on us and on the one hand it creates a feeling of safety and on the other hand, just like in all these discussions about what is natural and what is imposed on people, we do not have a real choice on what we want and what we really need, ... only within a certain frame.

This topic became really interesting for me, especially during these last years when I discovered Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004). On the one hand it is about the history of the development of capitalism and it is connected at the same time to the suppression of women, through witch-hunt. For example she analyses the moment the church started to persecute witches and later in the Late Middle Age the state kept this practice to be able to divide, to control and exploit the people. Her point of view is really interesting because she lays emphasis on the fact that the capitalist system was not naturally developed from



(body building)
ropes, tension belts, fabric, coatrack, neon tube
/ 2018
Installation view at AKKU, Stuttgart



the feudal society but imposed through many centuries with a lot of violence. The effects are still present in today's women's lives. And lots of things still seem natural to us whereas they are not. It should be the basic book to everyone.

Federici includes philosophers and historians, and that makes her work interesting. It is also about how capitalism really needs to manipulate people. In fact to accumulate wealth you cannot pay everyone fairly; the capital can only grow because some people are not paid ; like an unbalanced balance. In my recent work I am thinking about the body in relation to all these ideas. Despite everything people do still have their physical bodies and they have to carry it through; this is why the body is a real issue talking about capitalism.

As a matter of fact the body seems to have an important place in your work, so our question is what is your approach to that? I mean, talking about one's social body, according to you, where is the place of human body in front of all the screens and new technologies?

For me it is about different approaches to the body. The starting point could be the idea how a body exists within a society. In Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic era* (2008) the author says for example, that we are living in a "pharmapornographic age". First of all he/she thinks that pornography on internet has such a big financial impact on the market that it has to have an influence on our daily lives. The principle of pornography is to get instant satisfaction and without constantly manufacturing new products. You can sell the same service again and again.

The second thing is the *pharma*. Getting medicine and pills for all kind of mental states is incredibly easy. All these anti-depressive and pain killers are a huge problem because people get addicted very easily. In USA, President Trump considers proclaiming a state of emergency on that because of the impressive number of people taking these medicines. Those theoretical backgrounds are some of my starting points for my last work and I created a few of those body aspects with the macramé technique. (...)

When you talk about bodies do you also think about a spiritual body?

Of course, and there are also plenty of philosophers behind that, for example Richard Shusterman was talking about soma aesthetics (*Body consciousness*, 2008). In his understanding soma is not just a physical body but it includes all your needs, your feelings, your expectations and so on. In the western philosophy the body was always considered as weak and the focus was on the mind and the soul as the place where things are created. But the body is of course the primal tool for everything and therefore has an influence on the mind ; this is something that we can learn from eastern philosophy. So your state of mind, the way we think and the way we react, depends on how you feel in your body. I think this is very interesting. In my recent work *Giant Humming Pebble Stones* (2018) I explore the influence of sound on our body.

These stones are made of felt and a humming human voice sounds from the inside. I discovered this guy Dr. Levi on youtube who is healing US soldiers returning from Afghanistan with heavy PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder). He encourages them to relax through humming and this seems to help them. My interest in soma has been also increasing these last years because I did a teacher training in Kundalini Yoga and the White Sound Gong Meditation.

I recently started playing sound performances with my gong. The White Sound can be produced by playing the gong at maximum level,



The Owl Stream
macramé, feathers, fairphone, loudspeakers, 2017
Installation view at Corner College, Zurich



and contains all the frequencies. This White Sound is said to have a direct effect on body and mental state. The sound vibration dissolves physical tensions and thought patterns.

It seems like in the last years the musical dimension in your art practices has increased, especially with your husband's band Feinstaub. How did it happen and why?

I think the sound dimension has always been there somehow, but maybe in different ways. My interest originates from examining the human body more deeply, and then of course there is always the influence of my surrounding. In fact, my husband is a musician and he organises concerts, so I get to meet a lot of



*Giant Humming Pebble Stones
audio installation; felt, loudspeakers
/ 2018*

musicians. Indeed, even in my first photography series, which was about Georgia, I asked my husband to make a soundtrack. He recorded twenty-one very short different music pieces and thanks to the installation one could sit inside a closet and listen to the music. My idea was to deconstruct: you have the pictures on the wall, the music in the closet and the stories to those projected in the room. But all this not in one piece, but more of a puzzle; you have to put them together yourself. So even in photography I was using music.

Later on, I had video projects, using sound as well. It's an additional dimension and supports the intention of my work. Sound can create a connection between the recipient and the work ; it reaches the spectator's body and heart. Yeah... it is interesting that music has an increasing importance in my work!

Indeed, you play with a lot of medias just like photography, videos, etc; so, you touch on everything and...

Yes, but sometimes I feel like I complicate things for myself because the way I work includes the fact that when I have a new idea, I also often discover a new media and have to learn the way it works. For example, I decided once to animate a cartoon character, and then I was sitting there trying to handle After-Effects for the first time in my life. I mean I am used to photography and video medias but there are always new technics in my work. But I shouldn't complain; it is also always exciting to try something new, it is a challenge. I do



*Feinstaub
performance at Kunstraum Niederösterreich,
Vienna, 2016*

not want to be restricted by the media I use; I start with an idea and I like to think about what media would be perfect to express it.

Talking about the place of the body in your work, did you ever do performances with you own body?

Not so concretely. Once I made a presentation and I had this metal object with spotlights mounted on it ; it was a literal interpretation of the expression "standing in the spotlight", with all the attention focused on you; so when I was walking around I always had these spotlights pointing at me. But it was just a presentation not a real performance. I do not know yet if I would do performances, however it is interesting because I was thinking again and again about it, but maybe I would prefer



to write something for someone else and invite him or her to perform it.

Moreover I consider the body as a conceptual idea more than me performing on scene. In fact I see a lot of performances and I think they are really quite controversial. The challenge in the performance art is the immediate symbolic dimension. For me performances are the most difficult things in art practice. But who knows? One day it could happen. Indeed I just realized, that I was recently doing a cupping performance during a group exhibition called *Ektoplastik* (group exhibition with Nathalie Koger, Michl Schmidt, Wolfgang Obermair), which played with appearance and disappearance. So, if you put the cup on your skin, you have a kind of a sculpture. It materialises on your skin.

Do you know the *One Minute Sculptures* (1997-98) by Erwin Wurm? The principle is that you get an instruction saying something like "Take a pen and point it at the wall, for one minute." and then you are a sculpture for one minute. The idea is to include the spectator in the performance. It is about opening the notion of sculpture. When is it a sculpture? When do you call it a sculpture? Does it have to stay there for hundred years or can it stay just for one minute? Is it a sculpture if your own body is part of it? The very important point is to always try get beyond the definitions and rules!

Is that your thing, breaking the rules?

I think I have something of a rebellion in my

work and when I started studying art I thought it was about having new, unique ideas; but that was just in the beginning. For me art is about life; it is not just about having new ideas, but having new perspectives and new approaches. It always depends, of course,

because if I would do this cupping performance in another context then it would be nothing special; whereas if I do it within a new topic as for example re-discussing the term of plastic and sculpture then it becomes interesting. Also, the space where I show my

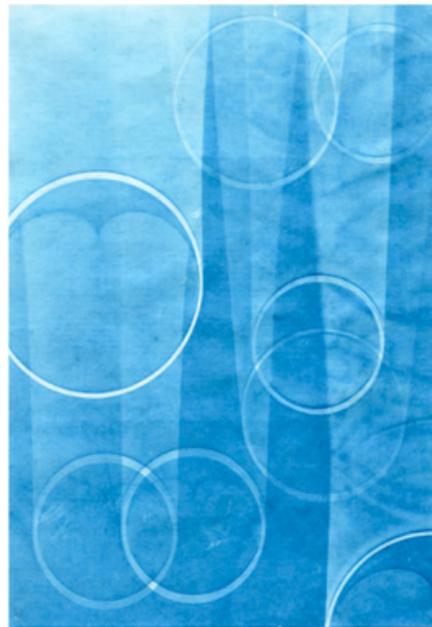


Cyanotopie
panels, bleached fabrics, cyanotype / 2016
installation view in the group exhibition „Older than Jesus“ Palermo Gallery, Stuttgart, 2016

work is important for me. For instance, I made an exhibition in a former music instrument shop and it somehow moved me, that the cut between one reality and the next was so harsh. I mean today it is a music instrument shop; next day it is an art off space. So, the connection between the past, the present and the future of a space or a situation can be very inspiring. When you start reflecting those things you try to find a way to express it. In this case I found these panels covered with fabric; they were used in the store windows exposing the products. During more than ten years the sun made a kind of a drawing on them, bleaching out the fabric; they looked really nice and I was thinking about how I could integrate them in my work. The interesting point was that I did not make them, the time made them, a readymade! So I decided to invite an interior designer and asked her to place them in the space. She proposed to use the window frames as view axes, so we had a direct reference to the architecture. Then cyanotype came into my mind: it is a photographic printing process that produces a cyan-blue print, through sun exposure. So equal to the panels. I went to a shop to purchase this paper, but when I arrived the vendor showed me some examples made by their apprentice and I asked her if I could show them in my exhibitio. So again, kind of a readymade; I took them and placed them on the panels. This is actually the exciting part of doing art: really being surprised by things that are developing themselves. As an artist I initiate the first idea and then I see what happens.

Any last word to conclude?

Thinking back about Strasbourg, I really hope that it will not be my last visit here. I am saying that, because I am also involved in the curatorial practice at the Kunstverein Wagenhalle in Stuttgart. I would love to initiate more meetings or exchanges with people from Strasbourg. Indeed, many bands from Strasbourg have already played in Stuttgart and I wish that the same would have happen within the contemporary art, that we would have more exchange. Yeah, we will see!



detail view, cyanotype

*Interview by Alexia Husser and
Frédérique Ratsimiseta
With the participation of Caroline Deloire*