

**HELLA BERENT »Time Capsules« Landesbibliothek Oldenburg,
20.02.2014**

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to welcome you and I am delighted to introduce Hella Berent's exhibition at the Landesbibliothek. I have followed Hella Berent's work for quite some time and appreciate both the artist and her work. Since I have known the artist longer than her work, I would like to begin with a few words about her and share a few of her characteristics that are reflected in her works.

Hella Berent loves to travel and to immerse herself in loud, quiet, emotional, dangerous, strange, odor-and color-intensive worlds. She collects impressions and experiences, which she then integrates and shares with us in her works. The countries of Egypt, India, Iran, Italy are principal sources of inspiration; and most recently she visited Cambodia and Myanmar.

On her numerous journeys around the world, the artist has traversed space and time and linked both in her work which being both ageless and timeless, knows no boundaries. In her travels, she has had many experiences of which she has much to tell, at the same time she maintains a kind of innocence, almost a form of naivety. Regrettably, these days naivety is perceived as having a somewhat negative connotation – the term often being equated with childish inexperience or even with foolishness. For me, however, the term conveys an unprejudiced, nondiscriminatory quality that suggests curiosity, courage and openness, all essential requirements for the fulfillment of the urge to discover new terrain and the traversing of boundaries. In this sense only, would I attribute naivety to Hella Berent.

The boundlessness and the experiences, which the artist has gathered throughout her life and travels through space and time manifest in her works and find their expression in various media ranging from drawing, painting, ceramics, and sculpture, to artists' books. A cross section of this central media - the artists' books created between 1977 and the present - are on exhibit at Landesbibliothek Oldenburg.

What do we associate with books? What do books tell us? We immediately think of language and knowledge. In these books Hella Berent shares her knowledge with us, yet in only a few instances does she use language. However, in the few language books she has produced, she makes use of language so poetically that large associative spaces emerge. In her books she does not immortalize data and facts but rather emotions, intuitive and

subjective insights, moods, feelings. She observes and absorbs impressions of her surroundings, processes and communicates them in her books. Outer images become inner images and vice versa. Where language reaches its limits, the artist crosses these boundaries with her specific visual language. For it is images with which her books are filled – she shows us figurative and abstract images, shows us the color blue, black, white.

Why does the artist choose the medium of the book, which is more related to the word and so difficult to exhibit? It is the intimacy that fascinates her – a book is tangible, you take it into your hands, hold it close to your body and in front of your face in order to read it. A direct dialog develops between the book and the reader, or, as in our case, the viewer. Through this closeness, through the intimacy the viewer no longer remains a consumer but becomes a partner in a dialog who recalls their own experiences making them part of the work.

Hella Berent uses different types of books, large, small, thick, thin, and in a variety of wonderful materials. Primarily she has these books made according to her own ideas and specification, they include her rubber books which are made of black, industrially manufactured rubber sheets that do not allow light to go through but reflect it. The black has an incredible depth drawing us in – a deep, silent, black space is created that throws us back on ourselves thus drawing us into ourselves.

The deep black, the unfathomable deep black, I would say, is the opposite of the white, empty side of the sheet that has yet to be written or painted on – the pure surface that needs to be filled, whereas the black has a profundity in and of itself. That is why the artist processes the rubber pages in only a few cases.

While the rubber books are black and dense, the silk paper books consist of almost transparent pages that allow a degree of visibility of the contiguous pages. In these books, Hella Berent presents us with figurative and abstract structures – she shows the human gestalt, landscapes, the sea, houses, but also the free interplay of color and form, controlled only by her concentration. Colorful watercolors, interspersed with lines. The line is at the heart of her works.

On some pages the artist has arranged the lines in a kind of order – line by line, layer by layer, next to or on top of each other – quite similar to the way that pages are structures in a book. She repeats on the surface, in the picture that which builds up spatially in the books. Each sheet of paper is

superimposed upon the next sheet, and the next, from surface to surface and from one layer of color to the next, thus creating a spatial object. Surface becomes space and as one leafs through the pages then space in turn undergoes the transformation into time.

A particularly interesting characteristic of these artist books is the translucency of the thin, near transparent pages. Each sheet reveals layers beneath in varying degrees of diffusion, an integration of depth creating a constantly changing environment as the pages are turned.

These layers, which simultaneously reveal and conceal what lies beneath are reminiscent of that which is known as a palimpsest.

In antiquity and in the Middle Ages, when paper was still expensive and one could not always afford to use new paper, therefore, paper that had been written upon was cleaned in order to be reused. The earlier writing was erased, scratched, washed off, or otherwise removed, leaving a surface that could receive new writing. However, the earlier writings could never be completely eliminated, and traces however minute or vestigial, remained. Such a reclaimed surface is called a palimpsest.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century the palimpsest has been used as a metaphor for memory, especially in philosophy. Sigmund Freud, too, compared memory to a palimpsest: The traces of things that we experienced years ago and are seemingly forgotten are still there, they slumber in a deep layer of our memory and can always be reactivated. Freud spoke of the fact that memory unites an "unlimited receptivity and (the) preservation of permanent traces." (Sigmund Freud)

Hella Berent's books are comprised of delicate silk sheets laid layer upon layer, the first pages are the foundation of the later pages; however, by flipping through, both later and earlier pages can be seen in turn each in a different context changing as subsequent pages are turned. This can also be regarded as a metaphor for life and its experiences which dependent on place and time can be seen in terms of changing contexts. It is also a metaphor for the history that has shaped us, forming as it were, the foundation behind our outer appearances. Even if not immediately perceivable, it has shaped our sense of self.

By shining through, what is depicted is placed into ever new contexts. Such new contexts are created by painting over. Here I would like to refer to the artist's overpainted and collaged books:

In her collages, Hella Berent takes found pictorial material out of its original context, links it with other pictorial material and partially paints over it, thus creating completely new stories.

Furthermore, she also works on already existing books, for example the works entitled *Paradox*. These are books about classical sculpture and Tuscan architecture interspersed with color fields. Thus, placed into a new context and updated, they are transported into a new time.

Accordingly, the artist calls her exhibition "Time Capsules". Time capsules preserve and transport things from a certain time into another, new time – thus connecting the old and the new.

Hella Berent's books are also "Time Times Capsules". They appear timeless and link the most diverse times and spaces to each other. Sometimes simply by the fact that she ceases working on a particular book, leaving it untended for an indefinite period: weeks, months, or even years, only to take it up once more, to continue work on it causing quite different times and phases to be reflected.

With her books Hella Berent refers to centuries past. We are referred to the parchments of antiquity, incunabula, and of beautifully illustrated manuscripts, and then there are her rubber books made of a contemporary, industrially produced material. Her inspiration goes far back in time, yet she is rooted in the present and pointing to the future, integrates the new media into this exhibition. On view are eleven films in each of which the pages of one of her books is flipped through. The artist presents the books in a medium of our time, which is correspondingly, the medium of time.

The books comprise both space and time, and this is experienced quite directly in these films, reprocessing the book's contents back to the point where the flow of time is marked by the turning of the pages, one by one ... in the flow of time. The leafing through of the books is accompanied by a range of field recordings, including waves breaking, birdsong, rain forest ambience, and composed music.

Each film ends with the final page and continues segues into the next with the first page of a new book continuing to reflect the artist's work process in which the completion of a book does not signify an ending, but rather a continuation beginning with the first page of the next, new book – a

representation of an infinite, boundless way of working – as page follows page, so does book follow book.

This boundlessness and infinity is reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges' novel "The Library of Babel", in which all kinds of books might be found, everything that could be expounded upon, all possible combinations of languages, necessarily including much nonsense, but nevertheless, incorporating all masterworks yet to be written. The quantity of books to be found is infinite as are the rooms of the "library". The duration of its existence is imagined to last ad infinitum, as Borges, too, addresses the infinitude of time itself.

And since Hella Berent's own universe of books should not be missing in this library, I would like to conclude by once again referring to the Argentinian writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges, who in his short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, a complex tale of intrigue set ostensibly in World War I, and tells of a book, an allegory of time, a symbolic labyrinth, and paths chosen, or not, all being allusions to the diverging nature of space and time. For me this example of Borges' writing has an affinity with Hella Berent's linking of inner and outer images and the diverging and converging nature of time and space by which she presents to us her very own cosmos.

Speech by the Cologne gallerist Scharmann on the occasion of the opening
Hella Berent at the Landesbibliothek Oldenburg

Dies ist Marions Absatz, den Colin und ich verändert haben (rot). Hier ist die wörtliche Übersetzung von Marions Absatz. Siehe unseren Kommentar. Du kannst entscheiden, was du verwenden willst.

And since Hella Berent's own universe of books should not be missing in this library, I would like to conclude with a quote by the Argentine writer and librarian from the novel *The Garden of Forking Paths*: Someone sets himself the task of drawing the world. Over the years he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, dwellings, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before he dies, he discovers that this patient labyrinth of lines reflects the image of his own face.

For me Borges' quote describes how Hella Berent links inner and outer images just like she links space and time and how she presents to us her very own cosmos.

