

galerie burster | Berlin

Finja Sander

Mögliche Übereinstimmung: Barlach X Sander

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in cooperation with the Ernst Barlach Stiftung

If you want to understand something bigger, it's worth looking at the small things. To pick out a detail and examine it closely. For this reason, Finja Sander's intensive study of the artist Ernst Barlach should not be seen as an expression of out-of-control admiration, but rather as a starting point for thinking about larger relationships between past and present, remembering and forgetting.

Barlach and Sander encountered each other for the first time in Güstrow in 2019, when Sander went into the Güstrow Cathedral and found herself in front of the bronze sculpture "Der Schwebende" (The Floating One). Under complete tension, arms crossed over his chest, and streamlined, "Der Schwebende" hangs in the room. Almost as if he could shoot forward at any moment - and yet, he is completely motionless. A memorial to the fallen of the First World War, itself looking like a projectile. The work has a turbulent history: created in 1927, proscribed as degenerate and removed from the cathedral in 1937, and finally melted down for war production in 1941. A replica has been hanging in Güstrow Cathedral since 1953, now also placed as a pacifist memorial in the context of the Second World War. Barlach as well found himself caught between social upheavals, changes in political power and the two world wars. He died in 1938 and did not live to see the Second World War, but the artist experienced the rejection of his art by the National Socialist regime intensely. Even his support of Adolf Hitler in 1934 as a signatory to the "Aufruf der Kulturschaffenden" (Call of the Cultural Workers) did not save him from being ostracized as degenerate. The matter is complex. As always.

Remembering as such is also multi-layered, contradictory, and sometimes quite unbearably inexplicable. Sander works in this entangled web, this space of tension between facts, feelings and implications that can be derived from the past. It is there that she carefully approaches Barlach's work, formulates her own thoughts and theses and yet manages to never cross the fine line into unambiguity, which can all too easily lead to simplistic activism. Commemoration and a culture of remembrance are important - especially now that contemporary witnesses are dying. Appropriate forms for these processes are constantly being sought. And yet Sander is concerned with something other than establishing an authoritative form of remembrance culture that provides something appropriately affected or remorseful for all occasions. Rather, it is about entering a space that opens up possibilities. It is an investigation that does not end in a statement and can hardly end at all, but rather depicts an ongoing and perpetual confrontation.

Sander's performance "Für Morgen." emerged from her preoccupation with "Der Schwebende". Her own body becomes the floating figure itself. For an hour, she allows herself to be hung into a metal scaffold, held by orange straps; she crosses her arms in front of her body, stretches her neck forward and closes her eyes. Once, when the scaffolding was placed in direct sunlight, she had to be doused with water every 30 minutes to protect her from overheating. The performance has been shown at 13 different locations so far, mostly with a strong connection to historical memorial sites. What Sander does is a formal examination of the gestures of remembrance. As part of this, she reconstructs memorial wreaths from broken glass ("passiv aggressiv", ongoing). These wreaths are heavy and can weigh up to 25 kilograms. Sometimes she shoulders the object on a specific construction and carries the glass wreath around. The metaphysical weight of the memory is juxtaposed with the actual weight of the object.

Neither the performance nor the objects are on display in the current exhibition "Mögliche Übereinstimmung" at galerie burster. Nevertheless, their presence, and therefore Barlach's, resonates throughout. There is an inescapable overlap between the present and the past, not only through the works on display, but also through the fact that Barlach exhibited his ceramics in 1904 in this very street, Ludwigkirchstraße, in this very house, number 11, with Richard Mütz - a respected ceramist of the Art Nouveau period. Today, risograph prints forming a line through the room can be seen in the space. The series, like the exhibition, is called "Possible Correspondence" (2024) and shows exactly that: the possible correspondence between Sander's body and Barlach's bronze figure. They take up the bright orange color of the tension belts from the performance "Für Morgen". Sander's body is cut against the figure of the floating angel who is wrapped in a coat; you have to look closely to be able to separate body and figure. The series is accompanied by three of Barlach's prints, which remind Sander of the formal language of "Der Schwebende" and were translated into large-scale wallpapers for the exhibition. The visual axes intermingle and overlap one another. They interweave with each other, perhaps in the same way that the past extends into the present, making it impossible sometimes to clearly distinguish between the two. Perhaps one doesn't even have to.

Sander's examination of Barlach's contradictory, extensive, and complex artistic figure also focuses on his personal notes. Her own wafting research process is revealed with the help of notes and markings that she adds to Barlach's letters and to his autobiography - on display in vitrine-like tables. This creates an active meta-correlation between a past that is only supposedly statically frozen and a constantly changing present that has yet to be remembered. It is probably this correspondence in motion that makes Sander's work so fascinating and at the same time so close to and different from what is known as "Erinnerungskultur" (culture of remembrance). In contrast to rigid, fixed memorial ceremonies, Sander does not try to hold on to anything. Her own thoughts and investigations are just as fleeting, carefully tentative, and revising themselves over and over, starting again from the beginning just like the past and present themselves. And so, her preoccupation with the figure of Ernst Barlach has only just begun. Because it is only through a single fate, through a singular figure in history, that one can really come close to the bigger picture.

Text written by Laura Helena Wurth