

METRO PICTURES

Weber, Klaus and Judith Hopf. "Messages in Bottles," *Mousse* (April-May 2012): 178-182.

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Judith Hopf, *Zählen*, 2008. Courtesy: Galerie Croy Nielsen, Berlin, and Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna

Opposite – Judith Hopf, *Hey Produktion*, 2001. Courtesy: Galerie Croy Nielsen, Berlin, and Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna

Messages in Bottles

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
KLAUS WEBER AND JUDITH HOPF

The long-time colleagues Klaus Weber and Judith Hopf have not collaborated for about ten years, but they have kept an eye on each other. And in effect there are evident affinities shared by the two, as emerges in this half-serious dialogue where nature becomes a metaphor for escape, animal emotion a method of salvation, stupidity a light version of folly, and rain a cage with crossable bars.

klaus weber *Silencio!*

judith hopf Attention.

ku Esteemed ladies and gentlemen of the academy...

jh ...you show us the honor of calling upon us to submit a report to the academy...

ku ...concerning our previous life as an ape.

jh In this sense, unfortunately we cannot comply with your request.

ku Unfortunately not.

jh Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* is a good introduction for us, as we know each other from academy. We haven't worked in close proximity for the last ten years or so...

ku ...but we've observed each other...

jh ...with great respect.

ku And delight.

jh It is of interest that in Kafka's text, the ape is trying to escape, but not by fighting directly against his captors.

ku It's one of the fascinating elements of the story, that the ape is so skeptical about the concept of freedom. Especially because he comes from so-called nature. He was caught in the wilderness and brought to civilization, and as he reconstitutes himself into a thinking being, he gains an instinctive doubt about freedom.

jh So-called nature occurs in both our artworks. For example, you showed models of animals—or remains, skeletons of animals—in your last exhibition. The show had two parts, right? One part with your work, and the other part with wonderful bits of nature, texts, and objects collected from all over the world. What did that showing of history and nature mean?

ku It was less about nature and more about a sort of escapism. You want to get away from civilization or human culture, and the getaway vehicle is nature, but actually it's not about nature. Like the ape would say: it's not about freedom.

jh A friend of mine always says that nature should not deserve to be loved. I guess he means that nature is not a nice place, but a brutal one. I love it because it's such an anti-Romantic view. Nature is so essential to the Romantic conception of aesthetics, to that construction of subjectivity.

ku The idea that nature is a brutal concept is odd in its own way, because the concept of brutality doesn't exist in nature. The whole moral conception of nature is an anthropocentric phantasm. What did you say earlier about teaching a horse to count? It's a projection from one side to the other, which creates the other.

jh The concept was established in the early 20th century, when a pedagogue from Berlin claimed to own a horse who could do arithmetic. The human audience would pose some problem, like four minus three, and the horse would score very high in giving the right answer. It was even in the *New York Times*.

ku How did it answer? By stamping its leg?

jh Yes. Eventually, a psychologist determined that the horse did not understand mathematics, but rather that the correct answers were just the horse's emotional reaction to the emotions of its audience. The audience would have a certain tension, anticipating the horse's right or wrong answer, and the horse was so hypersensitive to this tension that whenever it sensed their collective relief, it would stop, and immediately be rewarded with love and affirmation. That was the trick. This effect is called "Clever Hans." It means that you are not truly understanding the problem at hand, but reacting to whatever power controls you. I think it's connected

to the ape's strategy of adapting to what humans wanted him to be, and feeling quite all right with that.

ku Recently, I thought of a title for a new show: "If you are an instrument, you get played by every hand." It's the horse thing!

jh Maybe! It is also a part of the whole conception of intelligence and stupidity. Stupidity can be a good power as well as a bad power. From the academy to the ape to the horse, intelligence can help you out of difficult situations or different power systems, but you also need to understand stupidity to survive.

ku Why is stupidity interesting?

jh Because you can't avoid it.



ku Sometimes if things, or structures, are really noxious from an intellectual or an emotional point of view, the wrong attitude is to approach them with intellect or aggressive, smart words. Some things cannot be confronted with solutions. Maybe there is no solution. Maybe you have to confront it with something that does not affirm the confronted. If something is not part of an intelligible system or method, sometimes stupidity is the most appropriate response.



jh If you observe, for example, teenagers on the street inventing funny walks, or strange new languages and rhythms that their elders cannot follow, or fashions only they can wear... I always wonder about such processes and respect them quite a lot. I like the idea that these may be super-stupid body talks, rhythms, and languages, bringing fun, freedom, and emancipation. But, at the same time, there is also a really unproductive aspect of thinking and acting stupid. This part is called ignorance. Take war, for example. Everybody knows that it is stupid to solve a conflict with war.

ku War can't be stupid. It's beyond that.

jh Intellectually, there may be hundreds of reasons to avoid the catastrophe of a war. It's just that people get forced physically to that endpoint. So, isn't war stupid?

ku I've always thought of stupidity as a lighter version of... well, perhaps of insanity. Stupidity is not fatal. It's in limbo; it could tilt toward witness or soberness. It's productively ambiguous.

jh There is another, radical side to stupidity. As an artist, for example, you may have an idea for a work but knowing you are unable to realize it. You have a blockade, a radical moment where you say, "OK, I can't work this out for myself because it's not possible to learn how to do this thing". At least not in my lifetime. Robert Musil, by the way, had a good description of stupidity as a phenomenon. He said something like, trying to describe stupidity is a bit like following a group of butterflies. You always think, now I have one! But then your glance is caught by another butterfly, which looks just like the first one, but is flying in the opposite direction.

ku Was this in a novel?

jh He did a lecture called "On Stupidity." If I remember correctly, he was intellectually interested in the topic because he was wondering about the Nazis gaining power. He was thinking that it couldn't be that everyone is so stupid to run in this direction of destroying everything.

ku He also wrote a great short story that is quite relevant here. It is about a fly trapped on flypaper. The fly flies onto the sticky paper and suddenly realizes, "shit, I stick." As it focuses on pulling its one leg out, the rest of its body gets even more stuck.

jh What a nightmare!

ku In his detailed description of this process of getting stuck, an identity shift happens between the reader and the fly. It is about solving a problem by a radical transformation. By describing the fly, he gets rid of the fly. What is so fascinating about *A Report to an Academy*, is that the ape is trapped in the cage and realizes there is no escape, but to get rid of itself by becoming human. It reminds me of a situation we all know so well, where you are trapped in a set of circumstances that you completely reject, yet you also realize that you are constitutionally so massively part of the situation that the only way to get out of it is to get rid of yourself.

jh Hmm. Get rid of yourself. Interesting. To be honest, I don't think I can get rid of myself, even if I also don't think it is wise to believe that one can do art—or anything else—in any kind of authentic way.

ku What about rain?

jh Rain?

ku Yes, rain! Let me recite this poem: "Rain is a cage you can drive through." No! "Rain is a cage you can walk through."

jh That poem was mentioned in a text talking about the rain I did at Gunter Reski's Laden Gallery back in 1998. My rain was very improvised, more or less, a very poor fountain, you could say. I wanted to show something immaterial, like a wonder. I think also that I liked the "it" thing with rain, and weather in general. If "it" is raining, one cannot change the situation, you know?

ku You once did a film where someone was being chased by a cloud.



This page – Klaus Weber, Veggieanatomy, 2011. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Herald St, London. Photo: Andy Keate

Opposite – Judith Hopf, Untitled (Frogs), 2008. Courtesy: Galerie Croy Nielsen, Berlin, and Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna



jh Ah, that's true. Perhaps a personal paranoia. It's also a bit destructive to make rain in a gallery. But nicely enough, the drops made this particular sound, like water on a cheap shake roof, or on plastic, or an umbrella. The instinct is to get "under," to avoid getting wet. It made the gallery into an interesting social situation because conversation started very easily, as if around a nice fire, everyone warming their hands together.

ku When I started to get intrigued by fountains, I bought book on the history of fountains and it included a beautiful old German drawing from the 17th century depicting a person carrying an umbrella, and it is raining under the umbrella.

jh Wow. That sounds a bit paranoid too.

ku Yes! But also very smart, because it's systemic. The person is carrying his own bad weather around with him. Like a donkey following a carrot stuck to its own forehead. I mention this because I once made a fountain titled *Rain is a cage you can drive through*, which refers to that same poem. I like this idea because it's so optimistic. But in the case of the umbrella guy, it is more realistic to say you cannot drive through the cage because you are carrying it with you. So, freedom is not a choice.

jh But isn't it sad, trying to integrate such a crisis into one's worldview? I mean, if you no longer have a shield to keep you from getting wet or whatever, you have no way to confront conflicts without protecting yourself.

ku It's like the fly on the flypaper. We don't have a "conflict," we have a "problem." The more we are aware of it, the more we stick to the trap. The more we try to escape, the worse the problem, and the only solution is the impossible. Which brings us back to stupidity, if the only solution is an impossible one. The sculpture *Rain is a cage you can drive through* vaguely refers to Theodor Adorno's comment, "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," right?

jh I never fully understood that. I don't know anybody who can live radically in that way.

ku But that is what he meant.

jh I get a bit skeptical about such wisdom. I experience art, literature, music, intellectual work, et cetera, also as escape vehicles of sorts. It is really necessary to move away from normative life conceptions. I am a fan of the arts because they afford the possibility of thinking in other ways. They are really about making other worlds happen, even if only in our fantasy.

ku That is not escape, but escapism. Or more like a sleeping pill. Or like a good book.

jh Yes, be it a drug or a good book, which hopefully also may have some out-of-control effects on our minds and our understandings.

ku The utopian thing about art making is that it's like writing messages in bottles, and they are floating to future ears, or future minds. The fact that they are in the future doesn't mean they are better or more progressive, it's just that they do not exist yet.

jh But we should also hope to receive messages in bottles already floating to us.

ku Hopefully.



Klaus Weber, *Fountain Loma Dr/W6th St*, 2002. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Herald St, London. Photo: Katja Eydel



Klaus Weber, *shape of the ape*, 2007-2011. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Herald St, London. Photo: Andy Keate