

5 BERLIN ARTISTS WHO HAPPEN TO BE WOMEN

**ELVIA WILK PROFILES
BERLIN-BASED ARTISTS
CLÉMENCE DE LA TOUR
DU PIN, LINDSAY LAWSON,
KASIA FUDAKOWSKI,
MATHILDE TER HEIJNE
AND KARIN SANDER, AND
DISCOVERS THE RELA-
TIONSHIP BETWEEN
FEMINISM AND CONTEM-
PORARY ART IS ANYTHING
BUT STRAIGHTFORWARD**

TEXT — Elvia Wilk
PORTRAITS — Mario Lombardo

“They just happen to all be men.” How many times have you heard that? It’s the familiar claim that the choice of who to include was random and that the only people available were male. Whether artists or scientists or speakers at a tech conference, apparently there were no viable female candidates on the face of the planet to invite – at least none that the all-male selection committee could find.

And when someone raises a hand, posts on Facebook, or writes a letter to the editor pointing out the imbalance, the old affirmative-action argument plays out. Would you really want us to include women just because they’re women? Wouldn’t that be belittling? Wouldn’t that be unfair to everyone? Of course that sad argument ignores the structural inequality that causes women to be passed over for inclusion in the first place – but it also illustrates the paradox of trying to address gender blindness by promoting gender awareness.

The statistics across the globe generally show that (self-identified) women in the arts earn less than their male counterparts, are exhibited less frequently, and are less likely to receive gallery representation or have their work absorbed into major collections. Debate has raged and the pressure on magazines, galleries and public institutions has intensified, especially as the trendiness of ‘hashtag feminism’ continues to gain popularity. In Berlin, a very audible dialogue has been staged on Facebook feeds and in publications, as well as around groups like ff, a collective of feminist artists co-founded by Mathilde ter Heijne, one of the artists profiled in this article.

Those efforts explicitly bring women together, raise awareness and skew the ratio. The resulting visibility is vital towards progress. But, for a change, let’s just say that the five Berlin-based artists profiled here happen to be women. There’s no reason we picked them besides the exciting work that they produce, their active and influential engagement with the

community, and the complex questions they’re dealing with. Those questions may relate to issues of identity, social conventions, sexuality and gender – but we certainly wouldn’t say that’s the sum total of their ‘women’s work’.

An artist’s career requires constant oscillation between privacy and publicity, introspection and exposure, the physical and the cerebral, the personal and the political, the trendy and the timeless. A lot is expected of artists, and a lot of specific things are expected of artists who identify as women – namely, they are expected to address the fact that they are women, and to regularly contextualise their work in terms of feminism. When asked for their positions on the word feminism, the five artists here gave radically different responses, reinforcing the obvious but often-forgotten point that there is no singular or ‘correct’ way to be a (great) woman artist. As Roxane Gay, writer of the recent book “Bad Feminist” writes, “Feminism is not whatever philosophy is being spouted by the popular media feminist flavour of the week, at least not entirely.”

While there is a real need for discussion surrounding the f-word, there is also a need to find ways to talk about inequality beyond terminology and ‘isms’, which, as Karin Sander says, are inherently divisive. ‘Isms’ require drawing a line somewhere about who is allowed to participate in the discussion (why not ask male artists for their views on feminism?), and spotlighting one kind of diversity can lead us to neglect others. For example, these five artists could be considered a rather homogenous group in other ways. Ultimately, while working towards a semblance of quality, we have to remember not to let the gender of the artist obscure any discussion of the artwork itself, which Lindsay Lawson aptly points out. The goal is to reach a stage where we aren’t talking about great women artists at all – just great artists, many (or most) of whom happen to be women.

CLEMENCE DE LA TOUR DU PIN

CLEMENCE DE LA TOUR DU PIN
Delegation pattern (interject), 2013

Durst Rho 700 print on PVC
190 x 110 cm
Courtesy of the artist and L'Atelier-ksr



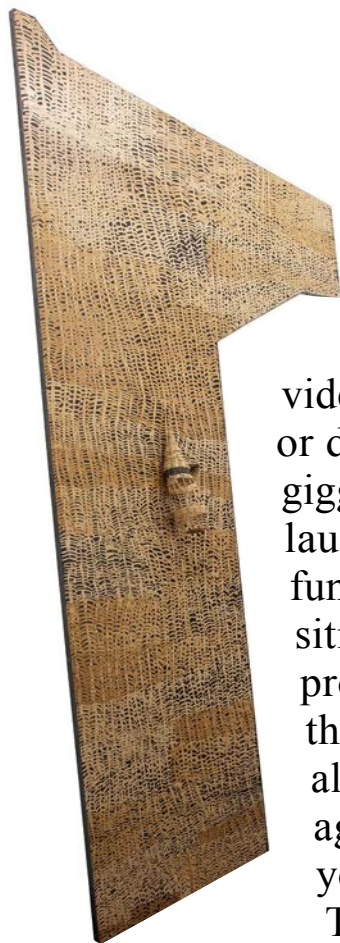
Clémence de La Tour du Pin is a French artist who explores the interface between technology and bodily experience through a variety of physical and digital media. In reference to the gendered aspects of that techno-social experience she says, “The body is a tool just as a laptop is; an organic extension of the mind, and gender roles are due only to political and socio-cultural needs. Gender is a cultural construct, and whatever or whoever the body is, it’s just a wrapper.”

In an effort to better understand the capturing and commodification of subjective and sensual experiences, de La Tour du Pin has created a body of work revolving around smell. For her 2013 solo show “Brand, Nature and Teamwork” at L’Atelier-ksr in Berlin, she infused the gallery space with synthetic scents emanating from gels within tall, free-standing Plexiglas columns. She produced a digital publication called “Stock-Seamless-Toxic-Liquid-Texture-115919758” in conjunction with the show, in which writers and artists reacted to the unrepresentable experience of smell.

She is also highly engaged in collaborative projects, from the gallery space she co-runs in Berlin, Center, to the expansive group exhibitions she has co-curated, including “EDENunlimited/tbc.tbc” at Alt Stralau 4 (2014) and “We outsourced everything and now we’re bored” at L’Atelier-ksr (2013). The title of the latter exemplifies a running theme in her practice: the increasingly fraught relationship between interpersonal relationships and economic exchange. In one exhibition series at Center called “Fight”, she and her collaborators invited two artists to go head-to-head in a dual exhibition of works without knowledge of what the other artist would show. Such rapid-fire experimentation and playful subversion of solemn exhibition formats and embedded art-world structures frees the process of co-creation to exist as a means to its own end.



KASIA FUDAKOWSKI



KASIA FUDAKOWSKI
2 quarters Kimono, half wicker,
from my mother's side, 2014

MDF, steel, wax, wicker
300 x 150 x 10cm
From the performance "Local Artist"
Courtesy the artist

Kasia Fudakowski's sculptures, performances and videos are off-kilter jokes, punchlines without a lead-up or deadpan monologues rife with puns. If they elicit a giggle, they also prompt a look around the room after the laugh, to see whether anyone else also thought it was funny. That sly humour is born from Fudakowski's sensitivity to the slippages of meaning that result from appropriation and translation, whether linguistic or aesthetic. Take the titles of projects like "Where is your alibi Mr Motorway? (2013), "It's like déjà vu all over again" (2011), or "You're my wife now" (2013) and you get the picture.

The Polish-British artist often shines a light on those mistranslations through a focus on handicraft and vernacular techniques, such as in her recent solo show "Local Artist" (2013) at Chert in Berlin. There, Japanese craft techniques including inlay and basket weaving were roughly appropriated, revealing national, cultural and artistic 'heritage' as a certain kind of construct.

Many of her sculptures possess anthropomorphic qualities – not necessarily in the sense that they have ears, hands, or feet (though they often do), but more that they are characters with personalities, often set up to resemble stage props, but with the gusto and humanity of stage actors. Some of those works have individual names, such as the deftly woven figures of "Valerie, Fay, and Katrina" (2012); others are an ensemble cast. One show at Künstlerhaus Bethanien was entitled "Enthusiastinnen" ("(Female) enthusiasts", 2012), with its rusty, irregular, leaning shapes forged with amateur techniques that nonetheless revealed her sculptural skill. Those flawed yet sympathetic casts of women are tragic, comic, and familiar. In response to the question, "What does feminism mean to you?" Kasia replies, "Some of my best friends are literally women."



KARIN SANDER

KARIN SANDER
Berliner Zimmer, 2012

Esther Schipper Berlin
 Tufted carpet, tricolor, 100% wool
 545 x 980 cm
 Installation view at Esther Schipper Berlin
 Courtesy Esther Schipper
 Copyright Karin Sander & VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2014
 Photo copyright Andrea Rosetti, 2012

An established artist within the conceptual art canon, the German artist Karin Sander deals with the spatial components of inherited societal roles. This has led her to explore how the boundaries of private versus public space relate to self-representation, censorship and aspects of celebrity culture. Gender is implicit in any investigation of identity as social construction, and her work prompts one to ask how the quest for equality can be inclusive while preserving individuality. She points out that “Isms are rather ambivalent things – they polarise and are unproductively divisive,” but she is for equal rights for women, “which even today we are a long way from having.” She adds, “For this socially significant debate we need more commitment from both women and men.”

In a series of ongoing projects that began in 1997, Sander approaches the notion of self-representation via mass replication: hundreds of tiny replicas of real people are produced via laser scanning and mechanical extrusion and exhibited en masse.

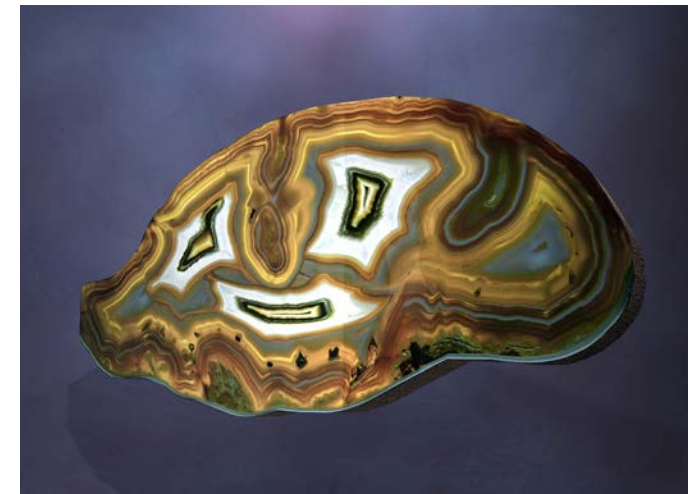
The subjects – who include art fair visitors, colleagues and friends, and Sander herself – choose the way in which they want to be represented, from their stances to their outfits. Those minute cultural signifiers take on inflated meaning when juxtaposed with so many others, bringing the credo of consumer society to mind: “You’re unique, just like everyone else.”

The element of standardisation present in that series is manifested in other works such as “Berliner Zimmer” (2012), where the standard dimensions of a classic Berlin room were sketched in, basketball-court-like, onto a carpet. Sander has also performed minute interventions in the institutional space of the gallery, such as cutting circular holes in the floor where the wastebaskets of the second-floor gallery staff had been, so that their discarded papers were instead tossed through the hole to the gallery space below (“Core Drillings”, 2011) – or a circle of astroturf installed in the lobby and garden of MoMa that invited visitors to lounge in the sun (“Astroturf Floor Piece”, 1994). Based between Berlin and Zurich, Sander teaches in the art and architecture department at ETH Zurich.



LINDSAY LAWSON

LINDSAY LAWSON
The Smiling Rock, 2005
 Courtesy the artist and
 Gillmeier Rech



In her recent show “Sad Hetero World” at Gillmeier Rech in Berlin, Lindsay Lawson explored the libidinal element of online interactions, from the seemingly-benign eBay auction to the act of OkCupid dating. A semi-fictional narrative underpinned the exhibition, which

follows a mysteriously phrased eBay listing for an anthropomorphic rock that turns out to be the profile picture of an OkCupid user. The rock itself may or may not be the central object of desire in the story – it could also be the rock’s personal profile or the rock’s monetary value (\$10,000!). Is it ever possible to locate a single source of desire, or is it always multifarious and abstract?

That show and other works by Lawson may react to the sad and the hetero aspects of our world, but certainly don’t succumb to them. By foregrounding the lives of objects, she allows lesser-told narratives of humans to come to light, often focusing on non-‘normative’ forms of sexuality, as well as the more quotidian aspects of human affinity for the non-human. Today this might mean our intimacy with handheld technology, such as the selfie-culture through which our relationships are mediated via their (self-)representation on electronic devices. In four untitled MDF-mounted photographs exhibited at Berlin’s Import Projects in 2013, Lawson displayed fragmented images of her friends and acquaintances partially obscured by electronic objects.

Born in the USA, Lawson has been influential in organising shows and project spaces in Berlin; in 2011 she co-founded the well-known Times bar, and she currently co-runs the production collective Baby Darwin. She is clearly attuned to social issues surrounding the production and contextualisation of art. Yes, those include gender, but, as she puts it: “I believe in many feminist ideas, but I can’t say that my work is particularly feminist, as I would not ascribe a concrete ideology to what I do.” She also points out that she could be asked about her art rather than her position on feminism.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE
From the series *Courtesy the artist*,
2004 – ongoing
Courtesy the artist

Mathilde ter Heijne explores the violence of recollection, seeking out the stories of those who have been left out of traditional narratives and finding ways to subtly reincorporate them into collective memory. Born in Strasbourg, France, and raised in the Netherlands, ter Heijne builds these rich narratives through sculpture, video, installation, and print materials.

One of her best-known works, the ongoing “Woman to Go” project, which began in 2005, is a series of postcards printed with the faces of unknown women who lived between 1839 and the 1920s. On the flipsides of the postcards are biographies of women from the same period whose lives, conversely, have been well-documented. This juxtaposition between nameless representation and recorded knowledge demonstrates how history is a construction based on information filtered through a patriarchal system, which often arbitrarily determines who is remembered and who is forgotten.

Her research on lesser-known societies and their non-linguistic symbolism has manifested in projects such as “Export Matriarchy” (2007), a replica of a traditional house of the Mosuo people, a matriarchal group from the Yunnan province of China. Collaboration is central to this research-driven practice – her catalogues often include interviews with other women practitioners, from theorist Elizabeth Bronfen to filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta. Ter Heijne is a professor at Kunsthochschule Kassel and is also a founding member of ff, an evolving and collaborative network of feminists that started in 2012. According to ter Heijne, “Feminism is about trying to understand and eventually change structures in society that cause the marginalisation of certain groups of people.”

