

Pianos, asparagus and shame: Andrea Büttner mines philosophy and art history in Kunstmuseum Basel show

The Heart of Relations is the German artist's largest solo exhibition so far, with almost 90 works from the past 15 years



Andrea Büttner
Photo: Xandra M. Linsin

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The Heart of Relations at Kunstmuseum Basel is the German artist Andrea Büttner's largest solo exhibition so far, with almost 90 works from the past 15 years. As well as slide projections, a room-filling mural, tables and benches, her *Bread Paintings* (2011-16) appear alongside works by Hans Holbein the Younger and Willem Van Aelst in the Old Masters section of the Kunstmuseum.

Rooted in philosophy and art history, Büttner's art explores themes such as shame—the subject of her doctorate at the Royal College of Art in London—labour, poverty and monastic existences, and the ideologies that historically underpin crafts and organic gardening. While best known for her woodcuts and etchings, she has diversified into a variety of other media such as video installations, books, wood carvings and textiles.

Nominated for the Turner Prize in 2017, Büttner has lived and worked in Berlin since 2016.



Büttner's installation *Vasen* (vases, 2021). The artist says she is interested in the "fetishisation of craft" within the field of art

Photo by Julian Salinas, © Andrea Büttner/ProLitteris, Zürich

The Art Newspaper: You have long been interested in the subject of shame. A mural created for the Basel exhibition, *Shame Punishments*, shows images of public shaming from the Middle Ages to the current day. What are the connections between shame and art?

Andrea Büttner: Shame punishments are a part of Western art history—the image of Christ on the cross is the most important example—but they are also on the rise in our modern time. Exposure and visibility is part of the punishment, part of the pain.

We live in a culture where institutions and artists all look for visibility as if it's a positive thing. But if you look at the history of shame punishments, it's

not a positive thing. Shame is related to the image, because it's all about being seen. Shame punishments, in a way, are exhibition strategies.

You also have a performance work showing at the Kunstmuseum during Art Basel, called *Piano Destructions* (2014/23). Can you describe this?

I collected all the video footage I could find of piano destructions in the history of art—Fluxus, for instance, but also later. This footage is shown and at the same time a group of nine female pianists play a concert on nine grand pianos.

This gesture of destroying a piano was repeated so often in art history, mostly by male artists. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the piano was associated with a female bourgeois upbringing. The repetition of the destruction of the piano makes this final gesture of destroying bourgeois culture quite ridiculous—again and again, another radical male artist destroying another piano. There's also another type of repetition involved when you learn how to play an instrument and it's so unheroic in comparison.

During the pandemic, you went to Beelitz near Berlin, famous for its asparagus. At that time, news items were raising the spectre of a shortage of foreign pickers and questioning whether it was safe for the harvesters to work together. What drew you to the asparagus harvest as a subject?

If you think of Manet, asparagus is very much an art historical subject that also has to do with the history of realism. I went to work *en plein air*. It was interesting because it's a bit ridiculous—a middle-aged lady with a sketchbook. I am not free of anxieties about my drawing skills. I thought that if the harvesters came over to see how I draw them, I might be ashamed—the drawings are quite sketchy and quick. Maybe the people who harvest can even draw better, who knows? But they need to do the labour to fund their families or their lives and I can afford to do this in my work time. So I felt the drawing was very helpful as a lens on to the economic situation of me being an artist, and them being migrant seasonal labourers.

It was only when I was there [that] I realised that again, I'm showing people bending. I see their hands, they have a hood because they often wear hooded sweatshirts when it's cold. So again, it's the shape of the person begging or of the person praying.



Andrea Büttner's installation of wooden carved asparagus at Kunstmuseum Basel
Photo: Julian Salinas © Andrea Büttner/ProLitteris, Zürich

You also had wooden carvings of asparagus sticks made.

I was thinking the shape of asparagus is a bit like a drumstick, and this gave me the idea to get them carved. This work, which is different asparaguses from different carving schools, speaks about the fetishisation of craft within the field of art. That is connected to my main concern at the moment, the roots of craft and organic gardening—all these things that seem left wing but can have quite reactionary roots too.

What are you currently working on?

I am preparing an exhibition at K21 [in Dusseldorf] which is in the autumn. I'm also editing a video that I shot at Liberty department store in London in 2017, and I haven't shown yet. I wanted to think about William Morris and Arts and Crafts, so I contacted Pauline Paucker, an artist and art historian, and we went to Liberty to speak about socialism and good taste.

What has been your experience of Art Basel?

I went to Art Basel for the first time right after going to the opening of the Documenta I took part in, in 2012, and I was deeply shocked, it was such a crass contrast for me. I thought these people are going to Art Basel because, to their minds, they can see all the art at once. And to my mind, you could see art at Documenta, it was such a difference. I see it with distance now, but I don't look for art there. I go to meet colleagues and I enjoy that part of it.

- [The Heart of Relations](#), [Kunstmuseum Basel](#), until 1 October