

Andrea Büttner *Triebe*

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Triebe

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In the spring of 2020, Andrea Büttner began to observe and draw the white asparagus harvest in the countryside around Berlin. In classic *plein-air* style, she observed and sketched the workers during the physically demanding labour of harvest, which is mostly done by hand to this day. Cultivated in row upon row of long mounds of soil, protected from cold and sunlight with heavy plastic sheets, white asparagus grows entirely under the earth. Working with speed and precision, experienced harvesters first use two fingers to uncover the sensitive asparagus tips that peek out of the compact soil. They dig to uncover the shoots and snap the shaft from the root with an asparagus knife, about 20 cm below the surface. They then use a trowel to backfill and smooth the soil to allow new shoots to grow from the root, recovering the mound with plastic sheeting. These steps of labour, which are all carried out in a stooped position – with a straight back and slightly bent knees – are repeated meter by meter, row by row, for a period of 10 weeks, which is how long the harvest usually takes.

The sketch books, woodcuts, etchings, carvings, and ceramic table-top sculpture in the exhibition *Triebe* (German for “shoots” or “spears”, but also “drives”) all reference the asparagus harvest. Starting with numerous drawings that roughly outline the various scenes and steps of work involved, over the course of the past year Andrea Büttner has created a dense and complex group of works dedicated to various impressions of the asparagus harvest: from the functional, geometric shape of the mounds and the contours of the seasonal workers’ bent over bodies, to details such as their hands penetrating the earth.

This last detail is the focus of the seven-part series of etchings *Spargelernte (Asparagus Harvest, 2021)*. A filmic sequence of close-ups of hands at work – interrupted by a single sheet that shows the tender growth of asparagus fern after the harvest – builds an unsettling sense of intimacy. We follow the hands as they breach the surface of the earth, uncover the phallus-like asparagus spear, grasp it with one hand and finally cut it with a long knife. The voyeurism involved in watching other people at work makes the etchings into uncomfortable images. The details of the asparagus tips and fingers draw the gaze in an almost pornographic manner, placing us in the position of unbidden spectators. At the same time they allow to take the perspective of the workers themselves - it is almost as if we are watching our *own* hands at work. This displacement, which clearly has a political dimension, is important for understanding Büttner’s exhibition.

Germany is not only the largest area of asparagus cultivation in Europe,¹ as-

¹ The volume of Asparagus cultivation in Germany is more than double that of Spain or Italy, see: <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QC>; accessed online 03.07.2021.

paragus also takes up the largest acreage of all vegetables cultivated in Germany. In the spring of 2020, following travel bans on seasonal workers due to the Coronavirus, the asparagus harvest became the linchpin of vehement discussions: news reports about asparagus farmers in danger of losing their harvests without seasonal workers from eastern Europe, contrasted with reports about the enhanced risk of infection for workers in cramped living conditions and the (already well-known) low wages and hard labour conditions.² The asparagus harvest came to stand as an emblem for a critique of labour migration within Europe, and became an ethical issue – for who would continue eating German asparagus following these insights?

Instead of reducing the asparagus harvest to these political issues and assessing it from the role of a mere observer, in her etchings Büttner adopts the position of the harvest workers themselves. The humiliation involved in the exposure and exploitation of these workers is transferred to the subject position of the artist³ – physical wage labour and artistic work are set in relation to one another. Even though very different in kind, seasonal labour as a typical example of externally imposed exploitation, and artistic work as a form of internalized self-exploitation,⁴ are both pervaded by mechanisms of capitalization. But how much connects them, beyond this parallel? For the hierarchies and potential exploitation mechanisms implied in the relationship between artist and worker⁵ persist – and they cannot simply be dissolved by a shift in perspectives, just as renouncing a vegetable harvested under deplorable conditions cannot solve the fundamental problem of globalised systems of labour. Instead, Andrea Büttner remains in this ambivalent position and expands her artistic engagement with the asparagus harvest to an examination of her own means of production.

It is certainly no coincidence that the artist returns to the woodcut in this context. The woodcuts exhibited in *Triebe – Erntende, Erntender, Spargelernte* and *Spargelfeld* (2020–21) – consist of two motif groups: on the one hand they show the asparagus, more precisely the asparagus tips breaking through the soil, on the other hand men and women at harvest. The process of making woodcuts is itself comparable to the cutting of white asparagus. The asparagus knife looks like an extended gouge, the tool used in woodcuts to carve the motif from the block of wood. In Büttner's woodcuts, as in the harvest, the white asparagus spear is the locus of "work". In the asparagus harvest, the soil is dug up in order to grasp and cut the asparagus; in the process of making a woodcut, the shape of the asparagus is dug out of the wood to appear as motif in the print. Both can be described as techniques of uncovering (of labour processes). At the same time, the use of artisanal techniques such as the woodcut also tends to address their position as supposedly "lower" art forms. The devaluation of artisanal work (craft) in contrast to the so-called "high art" creation in modernism, is imbued in these woodcuts as a deliberate tension and

as a challenge to their status as images. This tension also reflects a renewed fetishization of the (artistic) craft tradition, which becomes even more explicit

2 See https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/apr/16/western-europe-food-east-european-workers-coronavirus?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other&fbclid=IwAR38fPd-Q9BFOLi0zzAliPnAzbbuM_wS2xmRW-XkNxfXNLweV093BAQLrWdI; accessed 03.07.2021.

3 Büttner's recently published dissertation on art and shame fittingly begins with the words „Art is an arena of shame“. Andrea Büttner, *Shame*, Koenig Books, London, 2020, p. 5.

4 See Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2007.

5 Although the drawings of seasonal workers were made with the consent of the persons depicted, the hierarchy between observer and observed remains as a structural principle; Büttner defuses it somewhat through abstracted representations and by avoiding recognisable identification, however the artist cannot escape the fact that this power dynamic inevitably comes into play.

in the wood carvings.

For the work *Spargel* (2020–21), Büttner asked students at five different wood carving schools in Germany to carve asparagus spears, based first on illustrations and later from life. These evidently hand-made pieces, with their distinctive irregularities and slight variations of form, make apparent the relations that Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre explicated in their recent book *Enrichment. A Critique of Commodities*.⁶ According to the authors, the central strategy of the so called “enrichment economy” consists in increasing the value of handmade things, distinguished by their variety (as opposed to the uniformity of industrial products), by charging them with narratives of authenticity, local tradition, and cultural identity. This narrative enrichment of objects – not unlike the value creation in the visual arts – serves to ultimately transform them in effect into collector’s items. The carved asparagus spears in Büttner’s exhibition are also not only products of traditional artisanship, but are additionally enriched with meaning by the motif of the asparagus, the German vegetable per se. But instead of assimilating to the form of valuation described by Esquerre and Boltanski, the wood carvings in *Triebe* are situated in the context of “low” labour, which is not easily ennobled: the kind of work that bends backs and hurts hands, which has irrevocably inscribed itself in the (real as well as carved) asparagus spears.

The stooping positions of the asparagus harvesters that appear in the woodcuts and sketchbooks are reminiscent of Büttner’s earlier images of humility. With no discernible facial features, often with a hood pulled over the head or a hat to protect from the sun, the drawings of asparagus harvesters centre on their extended hands, just like Büttner’s depictions of beggars asking for alms. In her *Beggars*, this can be read as a gesture of submission to the generosity of others, while in the case of the asparagus harvesters it has more of a demonstrative quality: one does what one is paid for. And thus the works *Erntende*, *Erntender*, *Spargelernte* cross the line from humility to humiliation. For in this case, bending over is a position enforced by physical labour, and no longer the pose of a more or less voluntary self-abasement. These transitions are also the focus of Büttner’s slide-series *Kunstgeschichte des Bückens* (An Art History of Bending, 2020 – 21).

The motif of “low” work is a classic theme of realist art, which in the 19th century turned to the observation of unadorned social realities. Paintings such as Gustave Courbet’s *Les Casseurs de pierres* (The Stonebreakers, 1849), with their depiction of hard physical labour, evidently demonstrate a close affinity to Büttner’s asparagus harvesters – in the iconography of stooping as well as in the thematic focus on socio-economic realities. But there is another motif that immediately comes to mind in connection with this exhibition: Edouard Manet’s *Une botte d’asperges* (Bunch of Asparagus, 1880) and *L’asperge* (The Asparagus, 1880). Painted in the tradition of Dutch kitchen still lifes with corresponding bourgeois undertones, Manet’s asparagus pictures are interesting to Büttner precisely because they eschew the conventional tropes of realism.⁷ His pictures are devoid of the social and economic realities that underpin what they show, and therefore deeply ambivalent within an oeuvre that is principally received in the context of discourses on realism. This ambivalence is perhaps

best understood as an expression of a tension that is fundamental to artistic production: between its material and social realities on the one hand, and its

⁶ Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichment. A Critique of Commodities*, trans. Catherine Porter, Polity Books, Cambridge, 2020.

⁷ Conversation with the artist, 03.07.2021.

deeply bourgeois means on the other.

Let us end with a look at the work with which Büttner chooses to begin her exhibition: the two-channel video installation *What is so terrible about craft? / Die Produkte der menschlichen Hand* from 2019. The point of departure for this video installation is an interview with a sister of the religious order Communauté de Jerusalem, who works for the e Manufactum department store in Cologne. Parallel to interview sequences in which we hear the sister talk about the history of the order, but also her relationship to the store, we are shown views of both her domains – the Romanesque church Groß St. Martin in Cologne and the product displays at Manufactum. As so often it is the subtle juxtapositions – for example the church organ bench with a high quality couch at Manufactum, or the close-up of cleaning products that are shown in parallel to a liturgy that promises (spiritual) cleansing – that make Büttner’s video installation as compelling as it is uncomfortable. For Manufactum’s entire business model depends on the capitalization of artisanal labour, including that undertaken in monasteries and convents to finance their operation. With slogans such as “the good stuff” which “possesses a soul and is largely immune to the ravages of time”, Manufactum suggests an alternative to the “ubiquitous, fast-paced mass market”⁸ and thereby backs precisely the dynamics of the luxury goods market as described by Boltanski and Esquerre. With (right-wing) conservative⁹ and moralising undertones, Manufactum claims a better life is in reach by purchasing traditionally manufactured products. But better for whom?

⁸ See <https://www.manufactum.de/ueber-manufactum-c199340/>, accessed 03.07.2021. German: “die guten Dinge”, die “eine Seele besitzen und weitgehend immun sind gegen den Zahn der Zeit”.

⁹ The founder of Manufactum, Thomas Hoof, still runs the publishing house Manuskriptum (originally founded as a pendant to the Manufactum store) which publishes blunt right-wing conservative to new right content, see especially their own publicity blurbs for the series *Tumult and Politische Bühne*. Originalton, at <https://www.manuskriptum.de>, accessed online 03.07.2021.