

UNSEEN AND UNHEARD // UNGESEHEN UND UNERHÖRT
Artists respond to the Prinzhorn Collection // Künstler Reagieren auf die
Sammlung Prinzhorn

ed: Ingrid von Beyme, Thomas Roske

Published by Sammlung Prinzhorn/Wunderhorn 2013

Emma Hauck and her Legacy

Just over one hundred years ago a young woman from Southern Germany called Emma Hauck (1878-1920) was placed in the Psychiatric University Clinic in Heidelberg. She was suffering from a severe mental disturbance and at the time of her restraint she believed that she had been contaminated and poisoned by her husband's kiss. Within a few months she was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox and sent to an asylum for the incurable in Wiesloch where she died eleven years later at the age of forty-two.

Throughout her incarceration she wrote extraordinary and intense letters to her husband Michael, a schoolteacher in Mannheim, begging him to collect her. Of the existing letters of which there are twelve some of them are written in a fairly legible, flowing script. From these we can glean that she longed to see her family and to visit the countryside. She expresses the wish to go to the theatre, to have a good piece of cake and a glass of red wine. However according to the medical notes Hauck's behaviour did not reflect this wish. ⁽¹⁾ She wished to live the traditional life of a housewife with a social identity but was undermined by her deep and pathological aversion to the family. We are told that she would have liked to live in the forest on her own. Her response to this conflict is reflected dramatically in the less legible of the letters where she overwrites the text with several layers of repetition. Written on thin, regulation paper with graphite they usually cover the entire page from edge to edge. Initially these letters resemble small woven cloths with their densely crafted script. Although she does not use imagery the words mounted on each other as they describe a landscape. The pared down power of the script was an extraordinary precursor of the text-based work of many twentieth century artists.

In one of the letters Hauck displays two styles of script. On the left hand side she has carefully written her husband's name and address in beautiful handwriting, together with the date. On the right she has covered the entire area with repetitions of the word *Komm* (Come) 1909 making a forest out of the lettering. The words are multi-layered with varying degrees of depth and opacity. In the third letter written at the

beginning of her incarceration she writes *Herzenschatzi Komm* (Heart's treasure or Sweetheart come) 1909. This time the text is written in columns or large fingers that run down the page, probably repeating the nicknames Bartli and Schatzi. They vary in density and are sometimes only readable at the edges as the overlapping decreases. Within the columns the lettering follows the peaks and troughs of a landscape.

The Quay Brothers

In 1996 these three letters were shown with other works from the Prinzhorn Collection in an exhibition called *Beyond Reason, Art and Psychosis*, at the Hayward Gallery in London. The pieces made a deep impact on the Quay Brothers (1947-) identical twin filmmakers with a passion for early twentieth century calligraphy. Although mainly known for their dark animated tales they had also made a feature film, *Institute Benjamenta or This Dream People Call Human Life* (1995) ⁽²⁾ that drew on the writings of Robert Walser (1878-1956)). Walser was a German essayist whose death by hypothermia outside the asylum where he spent the last twenty three years of his life had been the subject of one of their early animated films, *Stille Nacht 1* (1998). Walser's method of writing became increasingly eccentric to the point of illegibility as the script got smaller and smaller: it was said that he wrote on any tiny scrap of paper at hand until the script eventually resembled smudges of various shades of grey. Later the Quay Brothers were to refer to Emma Hauck's letters as 'a graphite blur of images'. This, they declared, is what their new film would be about.

In Absentia (2000) ⁽³⁾ subtitled, *Emma Hauck, who lived and worked in an asylum*, is one of their darkest works. It is a transitional piece that links the early short animated films with their first feature film *Institute Benjamenta* (1995). Live action footage is interspersed with animated sequences throughout. Originally intended as collaboration, the BBC commissioned Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007) to write the music, which was called *Zwei Paare* (Two Pairs). When it arrived the sounds were so disturbing that the brothers were only able to work in five second sequences. The power of the music left little room for manoeuvre but the Quays used this to the film's advantage to reflect Hauck's borderless psychosis. The sounds are almost inexorably entwined with the Quay's trademark use of light to describe Hauck's disturbed mind. They clash like fragments of speech that have taken on distorted, exaggerated proportions that are inescapable. The opening sequences shudder and anticipate. Light no longer gently oscillates as it had in their earlier animated films but it flashes and pulsates throughout like an arrhythmic heartbeat. It seems to be "refracting through the prism of Hauck's brain" ⁽⁴⁾

Central to the film are Hauck's graphite stained hands that jerk spasmodically as they control the pencil movement. The fingers are surprisingly strong and are patterned with loose graphite that has etched

itself into the crevasses of the skin almost mirroring the marks they make. It is a measure of the brothers' involvement that they used one of their own pairs of hands for the close-ups of the writing scenes.

At the beginning of the project and before the actress who was to play Hauck arrived, one of the brothers wore the dress, previously worn in Institute Benjamenta by the proprietress and stood in for her. An extra pair of hands mysteriously appears later caressing Hauck's neck and again guiding her through the writing process. Hauck's face is only shown once so that the hands and the writing accoutrements are allowed to tell her story.

Like Walser before them the Quay's are fascinated by minutiae and found objects. There are echoes of their more optimistic formative work '*The Calligrapher*' (1991) in the treatment of the writing materials. The Quays breathe life into them and give them vitality. Here pencils roll or spring through the air and used pencil leads dance their final steps. During one sequence the camera enters the tunnel of the pencil sharpener as if it inhabited Hauck's brain. The disembodied legs of a mannequin that stride purposefully nowhere in mid air makes several appearances. Sometimes a sprite enters like a character from another story but this is no Rumpelstiltskin that can be outwitted.

There is one romantic moment in the film that the Quays shot outside an apartment block in a Viennese street. Wind blows through the open windows and the curtains float suggesting something curious within. It passes through the camera like a sigh possibly depicting a moment of connection with the past. Perhaps it is Hauck's memory of her husband but she cannot dwell on it for long and anxiously awaits the next pencil allowance so that the writing can continue.

In Absentia is possibly the first of the Quay's investigations into the pointlessness of female endeavour. Hauck's writing is seemingly pointless because the letters are not sent and because the words are obscured. It is unlikely that she understood how difficult they would be to respond to. As a testimonial to Hauck the Quays film shows an understanding of her visceral need to write. Her repetitive actions are treated with a gravitas that reveals the indefinable purpose of her compulsion.

In the commentary accompanying the film one of the Quay Brothers calls the asylum a museum. It is a strange but understandable Freudian slip when one considers that Dr Hans Prinzhorn's collection was and still is housed in a Psychiatric Hospital. Perhaps at some level an asylum where no treatment is given can be seen as a terrible museum of people.

Laura Bruce

Another artist who was impressed by Hauck's work is Laura Bruce an American now living in Berlin who works in a variety of different media.

Bruce is interested in the way Hauck's repetitions '*build up to become another form altogether and how the outpourings are never complete despite the fullness of the paper*'.⁽⁵⁾ Her early coloured drawings are covered in small obsessively drawn stacks of pencil marks that almost resemble stitching or Seurat's (1859-91) pointillist paintings of Gravelines (1890). The images stretch from edge to edge of the paper like an isolated film still.

In *Landscape (Bright Lights, Dark Sky)* 2004 the sky is heavy and barely supported by the clouds that streak along a horizon where dots of orange light provide somewhere for the eye to focus. At first glance this is a peaceful scene but this is the calm before the storm as the landscape pulsates with elemental activity. The eruption took place later when Bruce abandoned colour for the more direct medium of graphite on paper. In these large and dramatic drawings, Bruce combines interiority with the external drama of natural forces. Inner turmoil is dramatically explained in a series of extraordinary events in which she harnesses something of Hauck's torrential outpouring. In *Double Cone Bang Bang* (2007) two tree forms or columns blast through the earth's crust like geysers from the pale earth. Behind them are their shadows or are they the after images of a nuclear explosion? Obsessive detailing tempers the grand gestures and describes some of the surfaces as if Bruce were treading water or accommodating herself to the underlying disturbance. Strange and ambiguous forms appear in many of these drawings. Nothing is as it seems in Bruce's work, whether it is in these drawings or in the suburban scenes of America that are peopled with ordinary people silently experiencing personal crises. Black holes sear through the earth's crust in *Burn* (2010) that lead the eye out of the picture into an unfamiliar realm. They are like rips in the fabric of the familiar world through which another reality either surges or engulfs. People it seems are at the mercy of the unrelenting elements. Bruce is clear that this is also the manifestation of an inner turmoil and that the one informs the other. Violent psychic events are reflected in nature and the sheer force of ongoing organic life pours onto the paper. Somewhere else a cloud falls to earth.

Recently Bruce has appropriated old found paintings or photographs of German rural scenes. In *Valley* (2010) she has transformed a peaceful river landscape with a few cottages dotted along its banks into a scene of disturbing psychological activity. A large white cloud emerges like a speech bubble from one of the houses as if the walls were unable to contain the distress of the inhabitants. In *Blue Cloud* (2011) drab cottages and trees have been over-painted with colourful clouds that seem to be communicating with each other through the ether. Hauck herself might

have walked through these villages. Unlike Bruce who can be reflective, Hauck's direct response to her incarceration was to fill the void with pencil marks. She became catatonic and refused to engage with anyone but was able to communicate beyond the bounds of the asylum. The letters were a like a continual SOS signal or a magical incantation.

Disruptive forces, a fascination with obsessive detail and psychic disorientation underpin all three of these artists' work in varying degrees. Hauck's letters are no longer dismissed as scribbling but can now be seen as part of the wider genre of text based work. In retrospect it is unclear whether she knew the letters were not being posted or if the need to reconcile outside circumstances with inner reality over rode everything else and gave structure to her existence. For the untrained and culturally deprived patient or artist this act of reconciliation is the essential rudder of creativity. Trapped as she was in the asylum it seems likely that the writing was a means of restitution that gave some sense in its practice to the chaos in her head. Sadly only one visit from her husband is documented. Her unique way of channelling inner reality, untrammelled as it was by artistic influence, gave a new space and form to the activity of yearning.

Miranda Argyle 2012

Notes

- (1) Medical Notes. Prinzhorn Collection, Archive Heidelberg.
Milena Wiedemer *Emma Hauck-ein Autorin der Prinzhorn Sammlung. Kunstlerische Positionen und Vermittlungsmoglichkeiten der Grundschule.* Pedagogische Hochschule Heidelberg 2009
- (2) The Quay Brothers. *Institute Benjamenta Or This Dream People Call Human Life.* (BFI) 1995, DVD, New York (Zeitgeist Films) 2000
- (3) The Quay Brothers. *In Absentia, Stille Nacht 1&2, The Calligrapher, The Street of Crocodiles.* The Short Films 1979-2003 (BFI) DVD, London (BFI) 2006

(4) The Quay Brothers, Interviews and Commentaries. The Short Films 1979-2003 (BFI)

(5) Laura Bruce, e-mail to author, September 9, 2011

(6) Georges Seurat *Beach at Gravelines*, 1890, oil on canvas, Courtauld Gallery London