

The Loneliness of Being German

Thomas Brezing
Vera Klute

GAILLEARÁI CHATHAIR LUMNIGH



LIMERICK CITY GALLERY OF ART

Foreword

Limerick City Gallery of Art (LCGA) is delighted to present this two person exhibition, *The Loneliness of Being German*, of work by Thomas Brezing and Vera Klute.

This exhibition of new work by Brezing and Klute will interrogate the issue of “identity” and ask what creates a sense of belonging and how influential is the past? These questions resonate throughout the work of Klute and Brezing. Through their personal experiences of living in Ireland, they examine German sensitivities and question how they deal with identity, heritage and memory. The artists share many similarities in their personal lives and practices and share a “love for the handmade in art” and a curiosity about different materials. However, they also have different approaches to their respective practices with Klute demonstrating a detailed and refined approach to the human body while Brezing describes his work as raw, rough and often about the environment. Both artists have won many accolades for their work and are included in both public and private collections.

I would like to thank Cherry Smyth for her essay, Enda Wyley for her reading with Thomas Brezing and Gisela Holfter for her conversation with Vera Klute. As always I want to thank the team at LCGA, our public who have been so supportive over the past number of months, demonstrating the power of art, and the importance of public spaces such as LCGA.

The importance of public support through Limerick City and County Council and The Arts Council/An Chomhairle is critical to enable us to push artistic boundaries and engage with wider publics.

Finally, I want to thank Thomas and Vera for their commitment, despite the challenges of Lockdown, to this exhibition. Their generosity and patience since they made the initial proposal has been much appreciated. I hope that you will acquaint yourself with this original and thought-provoking work.

Úna McCarthy
Director/Curator
May 2021

The Painting is Lonely

Cherry Smyth

Artists Thomas Brezing and Vera Klute respond quite differently to the awkwardness Hugo Hamilton identified in his essay 'The Loneliness of being German', 2004, with regard to patriotism, Heimat and the lack of a dream world. 'Awkward', from the Norse 'turned the wrong way', can speak to both geographical displacement and the psychic displacement many artists need to provoke their work. In Brezing's large painting 'Perhaps the Future Doesn't Need Us', 2020, a crowd of people stands before a devastated landscape of crumbling turreted castles. It's as if the fairy-tale version of life or nationhood has disintegrated, taking with it the ideals and moral framework we were brought up to embrace. The epic impulse moves not towards glory but towards chaos, questioning any utopian patriotic impulse.

In an essay on painting practice, Amy Sillman writes of 'a kind of metabolism'¹ that drives her to keep changing her forms, to find out what she doesn't know. 'Form is the shape of my discontent, and that what interests me is how form can match that feeling or condition – of funny, homely, lonely, ill-fitting, strange, clumsy things that feels right....Awkwardness is the name I would give this quality, this thing that is both familiar and unfamiliar.'²

While Brezing employs fractured abstraction to convey alienation, Klute turns to lush figuration. In 'Breakage', 2020, and 'Frizz', 2021, a wreckage of vegetation is pushed towards what resembles an aftermath. For Klute, growing up in rural Germany there was still a pressure to behave properly (*kleinbürgerlich*): 'The rules of behaviour,' she explains, 'seemed as regimented as the layers in the mandatory black forest gateaux. The latest large paintings are a way of breaking out of this forced order into chaos.'

Klute is also drawn to exploring the tension between childhood memories of an idyllic rural German landscape and the imagined, very different life she would have led had she remained there. Many Irish people living abroad share this swing of emotions between dreamy nostalgia and discomfiting disdain. For Klute, being caught between

sentimentality and alienation 'maybe describes for me the loneliness of being German.' Although Klute adds that she doesn't think she's ever been lonely. 'For me maybe the title of the show shouldn't have been loneliness but rather the solitude of being German.' This echoes poet Marianne Moore's superb line: 'The cure for loneliness is solitude.'³

I've often wondered if it's easier to attribute existential loneliness to 'exile' in a place where you are determined as 'other', rather than to experience it 'at home.' Brezing agrees but adds, 'At the same time, as an artist you are a kind of "other" wherever you are. And no matter where you are there is a certain feeling of loneliness. I think it stems from the knowledge that we are mortal beings. It's a loneliness felt as a void and we try to fill it with all sorts of things, but there is no filling, no balm.'

While moving away from our native land, our work is always tempted to look back over our shoulder. I'm thinking of Klute's 'The deep dark woods', 2019, and the black rugby ball sculptures by Brezing, which echo the European tradition of artists like Magdalena Abakanowicz. There is of course a precious bane in being outside looking in. Beckett achieved this not only by living in Paris, but by writing in French. 'I was quite happy being considered "other" in Ireland,' Brezing says. 'I felt I was waking up from a deep slumber inside a straitjacket. I felt the freedom to slowly move towards what I felt drawn to: art and artistic expression.' For Klute, the 'self-inflicted distance' seems a predominant part of German culture that she brought with her. 'There is no room for pride and there is no room for feeling sorry for oneself – we have internalised this and it has become part of how we interact with each other.'

Klute's short animation, 'Falling Down', 2020, embodies the notion of the 'new global conscience' that Hugo Hamilton suggests lessens the loneliness of being German. Here, the multi-layered landscape hints back to Ireland's megalithic past as well as to the detritus of war, and to the huge devastation of climate catastrophe in which we are all united

as endangered. How pointless it seems to cling to nationhood. 'I share your sentiment about whether countries or boundaries matter,' says Klute, 'when in the end everything we are and we have ends up as another layer in the skin of this earth.'

Hamilton did not foresee the rise of the far right in Germany. Can art be a way to disrupt the inscription of a single story told in linear time that fascism depends on?⁴ 'When I hear of the rise of the far right in Germany and elsewhere,' says Brezing, 'I am (again) reminded of what Paul Celan wrote the day after the Reichs-Program-Nacht: 'es floss deinen Blicken ein Rauch zu, der war schon von morgen.' (Smoke flowed to your eyes from tomorrow.) The smoke is always there, we are never very far from total obliteration. Life is very fragile. We have to remember there is only one race, the human race.'

1 Sillman, A. *Faux Pas*, Paris: After 8 Books, 2020, p.146-147

2 Ibid.

3 Moore, M. *Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, London: Faber, 1987

4 Mayer, S. *A Nazi Word for a Nazi Thing*, London: Peninsula Press, 2020

Quotes from Brezing and Klute were taken from email correspondence with the author, February 2021.

Thanks to Marcus Kern for a conversation towards this essay.



Vera Klute, *Falling Down*, video still



Thomas Brezing, *The Numbers don't add up*,
Mixed media installation, Variable dimensions









Ordnance

There are craters in the forest
and the ghost of a white man,
people died because of him,
where the three crosses stood.

Every crater a downfall -
failed, sleeping shells
lie in ambush
in stained land.

We pick up a dud,
play with it, beat it with sticks,
sing onto its breastplate
a sorrowful song.

Press it back
into the trough of the crater,
into its dark brown shelter,
lie beside, dream together.

Silently without friction
sleep the duds beside us children,
sleep the stains
inside us children.

Thomas Brezing

The Riverbed

When the digger began work
the trout moved upstream,
silently howling with puffed up lips,
hiding in a soothing daze under the bridge.

The machine charged the river with noisy force
and the water turned brown, tumultuous.
We hurried when the driver waved us over,
climbed onto the iron plates,
swung high into his world.

Every day for weeks I waited
longing for a look, a nod,
the pointing of his finger,
let it be me.

Inside the cabin he smiled,
pressed a hard hat on my head.

Into the middle of the stream we moved.
Engine in deep guttural thrum,
the clatter of the tracks,
our head shook, our hands and jaw vibrated,
the tracks squashed the slush-bed underneath.

The water gurgled, teeth of the huge bucket
screeched, tore into the riverbed,
it filled up with mud, rocks, logs
and rubble – everything rising
high in front of us,
the large maw oozing.

We rumbled to the waiting dump truck,
shed the load into its bed,
reversing only after patting it,
gently, once, twice, three times,
like a father on his son's head,
lovingly and in farewell.

The day the digger in the river halted
they cordoned off the area and left.
A police man stood at a distance.
In the jaw of the bucket
slept an unexploded bomb.

Thomas Brezing

Thomas Brezing is a multi-disciplinary artist. He was born in Germany in 1969, moved to Ireland in the early 1990's and is based in Co. Dublin. Previous solo exhibitions include *Perhaps our Awakening is our Deeper Dream* at the Golden Thread Gallery Belfast (2020), *Anvil Dust* at the Molesworth Gallery Dublin, 2018, *Father*, Lapua Art Museum, Finland, Linenhall Arts Centre, Mayo (2015) Highlanes Municipal Gallery Drogheda (2011), The Lab, Dublin (2007) and the Ashford Gallery, RHA, Dublin (2005). Group shows include *7.42* at Lapua Art Museum, Finland and Cable Factory, Helsinki (2012/13) & *Altered Images* at the Crawford Art Gallery Cork and Irish Museum Of Modern Art, Dublin 2010/11.

Brezing has been on residencies at the Heinrich Boll Cottage, Co. Mayo (2018), Creative Spark, Dundalk (2017), Boathouse Studios Loughshinny (2015 & 2017), Lapua Arts Museum Finland and the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Monaghan.

He has been the recipient of an Arts Council Professional Development Award, Arts Council Visual Bursary Award and Fingal Artists Support Scheme Awards. His work is included in the collections of the National Portrait Collection Ireland, Fingal County Council Collection, Lapua Art Museum Collection Finland, Highlanes Municipal Collection, Mayo County Council, Contemporary Irish Art Society, Boyle Civic Collection and the Office of Public Works.

Acknowledgments: Jozef Voda, Sharon Murphy, Martin Drury, Enda Wyely and Caroline McFadden of Balbriggan Rugby Club.

Vera Klute

Vera Klute is a multi-disciplinary artist. She was born in Germany but is based in Dublin since 2001. She has exhibited widely in Ireland and abroad. Previous solo exhibitions include the RHA Gallagher Gallery, the Molesworth Gallery, the LAB, the RHA Ashford and the Butler Gallery. Her work is part of public and private collections including the National Gallery, the National Self-Portrait Collection, the Arts Council, the Office of Public Works, Trinity College and The Butler Gallery. Most recently she received the Solomon Fine Art Award for sculpture (2020). Other awards include the Hennessy Portrait Prize at the National Gallery and the Hennessy Craig Scholarship at the RHA (both 2015), the K+M Evans Award (2013) and the EVA Award at Wexford Arts Centre (2009). She has been awarded several Arts Council Bursary Awards and was elected Associate Member of the RHA in 2018. Recently, Klute completed her first public art commission, a large stone sculpture of Luke Kelly situated in Dublin 1.

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FREE ADMISSION

Curator: Úna McCarthy,
Editor: Siobhan O'Reilly
Design: Pure Designs
Print: PrintRun

ISBN: 978-0-9927969-9-0

First published by Limerick City Gallery of Art to accompany the exhibition

The Loneliness of Being German, 8th July - 12th September 2021.

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