

A Cage Went in Search of a Bird:¹
On Anna-Sophie Berger

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How high would you like the walls around your garden? How clean, how hygienic might your perfect city be? How long is your leash, and how tight do you like the collar around your neck? How wide apart do you like the bars of your cage? How, in essence, do you prefer the structures and systems that hold you, direct you, manage you, and keep you suspended? How tight are they, or how loose? These are questions of control and desire, security and freedom, that can be scaled from the micro-nuances of an intimate relationship all the way up to international geopolitics. In answering such questions, it's worth considering how they feel, what is their particular shape, and how they might be articulated when one is caught in the contradictory position between poles. And it's here, in this push and pull between states, that the recent work of Anna-Sophie Berger has emerged: a space in which to both yield to and resist questions of rules, sovereignty, subjecthood, ownership. It's indicative, for instance, that pets and animals appear in Berger's work, as do the materials and forms that fulfill vital needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. And though at first such materials suggest a mild humanism, Berger's installations are expressions of ambivalence that often convey an internal struggle between desire and resistance, like an animal pulling on a leash. And yet, more deeply at the heart of Berger's work is a concern with another more basic understanding of care: the attention which forms the tending, and attending, to the world.

Berger's early work was based in the production and circulation of both garments and images. After studying fashion and transmedia art at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, the artist began producing collections that were accompanied by photography and videos, conveying a searching, inquisitive approach to materiality. Yet the formal processes of fitting nuanced, living bodies into clothes has recently developed into a diffuse art practice that explores the way that life tests and pressures rules, codes, and structures as well

as materials. Her investigation of rules and standards begins quite small. Berger's exhibition at New York's JTT gallery in 2014, for example, featured imagery of a garment series, each handled somewhat differently. The artist produced simple circle skirts with accompanying tops in red, yellow, blue, and green, and pairs of leather slipper shoes with the shoe size printed prominently in black or white numerals on the front. In the space were photographs of said items on bodies—a nipple and breast pushing roundly through fabric, the crease at an arm or a waist, or the appearance of a neck at the top of a collar. These images were modified to fit the scales of various online spaces for image sharing—such as the set dimensions of profile pictures on a social network, printed first on Dibond, and then secondly as a silk scarf. At the opening of the exhibition, four female performers were present wearing the garments, and Berger directed them through a set of movement sequences, *Modeanweisung with Skirts* (2014). In this performance, which developed from Berger's experience of directing fashion models, the artist gave simple instructions to the performers—stand on one leg, look at the ceiling, place both hands on the wall—which each of the women performed within the individual nuances of her own body. Similar to the ways in which choreographers such as Michael Clark or theater directors like Richard Maxwell have used untrained or unskilled performers in their work to highlight the fragilities and frailties of the performing subject, Berger's short performance revealed differences of appearance within a tight formal structure. One performer's slipper fell off, for example, as she tried to raise a leg, while each performer interpreted the instructions differently, so that they might accidentally end up facing opposite directions or making particular shapes. It's highly uncontroversial, of course, to claim that each body is different, yet it is something else to see an abstract set of rules—a one size fits all—applied to a situation that demonstrates that in fact, no, one size never fits all, and that there might be something

important to discuss in this ill fit. The materiality of the garments, too, and the former positioning of Berger's work between fashion, design, and art is also significant. Art's self-critical and painfully self-aware relationship to objects and commerce finds relief in fashion, where there is more comfort with the rhythms of commerce and with objects in general. The sculpture *When I Am with You / When I Am Not There* (2014) features two white coats made from different fabrics—silk and cotton—tied together by the sleeves, suggesting two different bodies in different times, spaces, and seasons. The coats appear to be holding hands, comforting each other by their longing for the same owner, or enjoying each other's company. In a series of sculptures with the title *She Vanished* (2015–16), a coat has been soaked in material, thrown at a surface, and then dropped to the floor, crumpled. In *She Vanished (S.B.)* (2016), a mud-drenched coat was thrown at the wall of a gallery, and then discarded on the floor. The coat joins with the messy materiality of the earth, and the coat outlives the body.

Other subsequent bodies of work explored different instruction or rule-based systems to highlight the consistently irregular anomalies that give life its particular liveness. Using her mother's recipe for bread, Berger produced a number of oat-bread sculptures that convey her varying degrees of success or failure (chiefly burnt-ness), such as the series *Let Rise, Let Go* (2014–15), which convey the difficulty in performing a personalized and location-specific score elsewhere. Berger's mother, one imagines, has developed and refined her recipe based on the ingredients available to her at home, as well as her own oven and utensils, and perhaps the climate in the region in which she lives. As with the coat sculptures, there is a certain level of vital materialism embedded in this work, which relates to a pleasure of materials taking form. As Berger has said in an interview: "When I bake bread—and I do not mean this in any spiritual way—I am amazed by the process of making and the chemical reality of this

beautifully complex procedure."² In certain respects here Berger's focus on structure and rule instead reveals constant nuance, and I'm reminded of Lisa Robertson's book-length poem *The Weather*, which registers the continual movement and shift in climate and weather and the wildly various range of human reactions that take place in response. "It will never rain; we feel bad about certainty. It's a fine flowing haze; we don't know light. It's a tearjerker; we practice in attics. It's almost horizontal; we seem to go into words. It's an outcropping of cumulus; we are a sum of inescapable conditions."³ In a related fashion, each section of Robertson's poem is titled after a day of the week, offering a strict organizing structure in which to place continual expressions of flux. In a similarly searching mode, Berger has also recreated another family recipe, a kind of "magic ointment" used to heal and calm skin. When she found herself sunburned and far from home, unable to find the cure that she had always used for such problems, she was also unable to repeat certain rituals of healing and hence a sense of home. Recognizing that the cream represented a palliative combination of materials and memory, she began to use it as a kind of conceptual glue, smearing it over photographs and making the cream for exhibitions, as a way of adding a fugitive form of emotional or curative value to them.

Such ever-changing moods are also drawn out by a series of works that Berger made using daily therapeutic coloring-in exercises in June 2016, each named after the date on which they were performed. Over the completed exercise, each in the shape of a mandala, the artist wrote notes about her experiences and emotions during the day, as well as details of the weather and what she ate or drank. On June 22, over a somewhat erratic combination of selected tones: "Horrible morning / From 11am-2pm in bed half awake / unable to get up / try to masturbate to relax / feeling dried out / work painful & slow / glad for the rain / two eggs, raspberries / I hate everything." Over a set of simpler tones on June 30, however, is the

expression of an altogether different state of mind: "In a very philosophic mood / a glass of wine, some nuts / reading all about romanticism and stuff and this article about self-confessional aspects in recent artistic practice lol." As that last entry demonstrates, there is a degree of self-reflexivity to these drawings, which is both wryly comedic yet sincere. The focused, meditative practice of coloring for adults, though a somewhat infantilizing fashion aimed at a stressed-out, contemporary subject, has clearly delivered a reflective moment for the artist, and even within the platitudes of the mass-produced design there might be help (similar ambivalences exist about organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, in which each special person or problem is put through the wringer of banal "steps"). As Berger writes on June 16: "It's imperative to find portable peace."

Self-care practices and mindfulness techniques such as adult coloring books have become ever more prevalent and marketable. 2017's fidget spinner toy loved by adults and children alike is only the latest and most prominent manifestation of a tool for unquiet minds. Though these may certainly be calming or helpful to certain individuals, as a cultural manifestation they point to the damage wrought on human attention through the harnessing of desire by technology, marketing, and globalization. The destruction of attention, according to the work of theorists such as Bernard Stiegler, is the destruction of the skills that allow us to concentrate and relate to objects, but also subsequently to understand how to care for objects, and thus each other. A lack of attention implies, along this line of thought, a resultant harm on both psychic and social apparatus—thus damaging social and structural systems of care.

Berger is a highly attentive artist, who notes and documents her observation in personal and public writing, in photography, and in her treatment of objects and materials through sculpture. Keenly aware of such

questions regarding attention, Berger's work, like Stiegler's, attempts to dismantle the automatic suspicion of objects and materials in themselves. Where they differ is that Berger has turned the techniques of marketing, image sharing, advertising, and fashion onto objects not usually the focus of such attention. In the works comprising *Pea Campaign* (2015), garden peas are held in silver claw clasps like precious stones and worn as earrings. The earrings are photographed on models, used to pin up silk prints, and displayed as precious objects. The pea, though certainly tradable and marketable, is of course not a de facto corrupted object because it is for consuming. As Berger has described: "I always felt strongly that to have a proactive approach to material culture and to be critical of consumption, one would have to first accept the relevance of objects as integral parts of human life."⁴

Berger's close attention has also fallen on the materials that signify public space, now also altered in the face of communication systems. Her 2016 exhibition "Places to Fight and to Make Up" at mumok in Vienna included a pair of concrete parabolic reflectors (acoustic mirrors) taken from a playground from the third communal district of Vienna close to where she was living at the time. These are also called "whisper mirrors" because they concentrate sound waves so that one can whisper into them and be clearly heard by a person standing very far away at the opposite concrete mirror. It's a form of intimacy that suggests a secretive way of public communication. In the context of the playground they are meant as a pedagogical toy or game for children, so that they can learn about sound, yet on these particular parabolic reflectors there are also graffiti tags and images—notably a green smiley face. These both animate the objects and communicate the language of other users of the playground, but also signify a societal emphasis on communication in public spaces that is waning due to the flight of dialogue to private online networks. They are designed for one sort of use but instead become portraits of

the city by improvised means. “It seems absurd,” Berger has written, “to attempt to regulate and rigidly shape life within a city. Ultimately, to me, the parabolas—whilst superficially stained—are as active and vivid a sign of a public reflecting itself through communication as one could hope for.”⁵

Such questions regarding societal and political systems of care and control have recently made themselves even more present in Berger’s work. For a recent exhibition, “New Words” at Emanuel Layr, the artist constructed an elegant wooden cage, entitled *The Nest Is Served* (2017). The bars of the cage, which resembles a kind of adult playpen, has bars wide enough to pass through, and is lined with blue fabric covered in stars. A found document, a guide to English for non-native speakers which begins with “I am late,” “I love,” “I like (lit. I am pleasing),” “I buy.” It’s almost impossible not to think of the refugee crisis and swing to the right in Europe when looking at these works, for what would the ideal nest or cage be for a structure that is structurally violent yet retains links to peace; that includes infrastructures of care yet is systemically hooked to inequality; that is open yet closed. What kind of cage would we prefer a nation to be? Accompanying works included *Things Are Tight* (2017), two raver chokers in national colors, produced at Berger’s parents’ former business, a costume jewelry manufacturer, made on the occasion of an international football tournament, and *Grace* (2017), a steel box of coal appropriated from similar ones at the Isar River in Munich, designed so that the coal never touches the ground. The box is held on a chain and can move in and out of the gallery like a dog on a leash. Cleanliness being a strict, taut form of grace, this is another work by the artist that reveals the city’s desire for citizens to behave in very particular ways—to be trained.

In order to speak to such ambivalences, Berger has recently employed the figure of the court jester in a number

of works. In *Drunk or Dead?* (2016) a paper cutout of the figure is laid out on the floor, recalling the chalk outline drawn around a fallen dead body. Weighing the light paper down are various bottles and cans—wine, whisky, olive oil, and beans—the sustenance for a basic form of precarious artistic life. The title, together with the flimsiness of the figure and its prone position, suggests a body pushed to its limits. In striving to entertain on only basic resources, the jester has exhausted himself. The jester is a character that speaks to the “zaniness” of the precarious worker, according to Sianne Ngai’s book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, suited to an age in which surplus value has been extracted from affect and subjectivity. The jester is also here, however, because the jester is an implicated figure. The jester has access to the sovereign, to wealth, and to power. And as Andrea Fraser’s essay “L’1% C’est Moi” laid out with great clarity, the fortunes of contemporary artists currently rest on a stratified society, in which the artist is always implicated. The jester has a curiously long leash, and certain forms of freedom to perform parrhesia—the rhetorically candid speech that can speak truth to power. However, the jester is never fully out of danger. He can always be killed, he can always push too far. He is a figure that is both precarious and powerful, walking a line as thin as a knife-edge. The jester is a truth teller on a leash, a provocateur in a cage—but what other position is there from which to speak? There’s a kind of recklessness to this figure which is both pathetic and endlessly resourceful—he or she can magically transform nothing into something, but is also caught between opposing forces. As is the artist, much of the time. Because our questions remain impossible to answer given the conditions of much of the world that we have arrived at in 2017. We want to be cared for but not like that, we want to be free but not like that. No rules but some rules. In the meantime, we are figures who have to speak the truth but be aware of our positions, and to pay close attention. For there is no care without attention, and it must be paid.

1 Franz Kafka, “Zürich Aphorism Number Sixteen” from *The Zürich Aphorisms of Franz Kafka* (New York: Schocken, 2004), 16.

2 Anna-Sophie Berger, “Interview with Tomas Absolon,” *Blue Paper* (June 2015): 13.

3 Lisa Robertson, “Wednesday,” *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001), 33.

4 “Take Care—Anna-Sophie Berger in conversation with Laura McLean-Ferris,” *Flash Art International*, no. 312 (January/February 2017).

5 Ibid.