

Larissa Fassler in Conversation with Diana Sherlock

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Sherlock: This interview is an opportunity for us to discuss how you position yourself relative to your subjects and how you understand your role as an artist in making this work. I'd like to start by discussing the significance of language to your practice. The surfaces of your works are often patterned by a cacophony of voices, an intertextual choir of conversations, colloquialisms, slogans, and jargon in different languages rendered in context. How do you use language in your work to tell us about a place and one's position within it?

Larissa Fassler: I have lived in three languages for twenty years. My first language is English; I speak French with my partner at home; I live in Berlin immersed in a German-speaking public. I have mastered each language to a different degree and now deeply understand how language expresses cultural values and how language proficiency grants access or creates barriers in society that result in different modes of being. I use language in my work as a tool to describe and decipher a place, a culture, but sometimes the words remain pure image, abstract, inaccessible, replicating my experience of moving through the world. Language is so nuanced. It is full of contradictions and slippages of meaning. There are so many things that cannot be described by or translated into language. The body has its own language that reveals things unspoken. With observation and experience, one can learn to read the signs and decode a society's messages over time. My work as an artist is to translate and

interpret the complexities and contradictions of daily life, history, and culture as it is revealed to me through language and place.

DS: Many of the writers in this publication have written about how mapping is key to your practice. Yet the seemingly objective process of mapping a space always returns us to the subjective in your work. Maps are never neutral; all maps reveal the point of view of their maker, visually and politically. How do you use mapping, like language, to reveal the site and situate yourself relative to it and its inhabitants? How has this changed in the work over the years?

LF: In the early works, *Kotti* and *Alexanderplatz* for example, I used my body as a measure to map the space but used neutral descriptive language that did not express my personal opinions or subjectivity. I slowly realized that there is no neutral voice, and I allowed my own voice to come through more strongly, in style, in my use of humor, and in my speculative commentary. The work became more expressive too, shifting from data-driven drawings and models to more expressive, even more political, drawings, paintings, and mixed-media sculptures. I still situate myself as an outsider, an observer, but over the years I have allowed myself to become more visible in the work. Eventually, I began to question the authority of the map and other information systems and to highlight their subjective nature.

In the first *Kotti* work (2008), I also attempted to capture everything about the site. Of course, this is an impossible task rooted in an encyclopedic impulse of the Enlightenment that necessitates subjective selection and categorization. Feelings, tastes, and opinions that are learned or socially constructed inform, even if unconsciously, the choice of site, the choice to represent one thing over another, the choice of how to represent something and how to relate it to something else. None of these choices is neutral and all of them shape what the work tells us about the site.

Related to this is the difficult question of who has the right, the knowledge, the authority, the legitimacy—basically the power—to speak about a place and in what way. It was only once I had been living in Berlin for several years, when this place also felt like my place, that I felt I could start to express my position. For example, *Palace/Palace* (*Palast der Republik / Berliner Stadtschloss*, 2012)



Image: Destruction of the Berlin Palace by the Council of Ministers of the GDR, September 7, 1950. Photo credit: akg-images.

demonstrates how angry and devastated I was by the decision to tear down the former *Palast der Republik* (the most iconic structure of the GDR regime) and rebuild the *Berliner Stadtschloss* (the former seat of the Prussian kingdom). This decision by the city effectively purged Berlin's city center of its troubled past with the GDR. In its place a historical counterfeit, an anti-modern Disneyfied castle, was erected deliberately skipping over the twentieth century to suggest historical continuity with a past that never existed on this site. *Palace/Palace* combines elements of these two iconic structures with Disney's castle to heighten the absurdity of this fraud. There was also the *Schlossplatz* series of drawings that document the daily uses of this complicated site by analyzing its dominant colors, the practices and movements of its users, and how tourists—the main users of the site—define it through their photographs.

DS: Maps produce the space and contain its possibilities in a visualization that is subject to power, but you use a process of counter-mapping to reveal how power is inscribed in the foundations of the city. How do your counter-maps visualize and help to complicate and reimagine existing social realities?

LF: I superimpose several complex organizational systems, official and individual, to highlight social hierarchies and biases. I am interested in how these systems reveal how city planning shapes the built environment and how gentrification and the pressures of globalization including investment

capital and tourism impact the people who use it. I contrast this with the individual daily experience of moving through and living in the city. Often there are contradictory intentions, inequities, and social and political tensions, even conflicts, revealed through this process. In these differences, the unseen can be seen and the unvalued can be valued.

For example, seven hundred thousand people a day travel through the Gare du Nord in Paris, which connects central Paris to its northern (mostly Black) suburbs as well as other French and European cities. Recent architectural renderings by France's national state-owned railway company (the SNCF) whitewash these passengers to depict a homogenous wealthy business class. To counter this in the *Gare du Nord* series, I attempted to name and make visible all the people of color who were active in the station when I was there, and then I re-re-appropriated West African Dutch wax textile patterns as the dominant motif in *Gare du Nord IV* and *V*. These print patterns

were originally appropriated from Indonesian batiks by the Dutch when they were a colonial power (Indonesia was part of the Dutch East Indies during the nineteenth century), then later sold to West Africans who made them their own. On any given day at the Gare du Nord, you will see scores of men and women wearing contemporary Dutch wax garments. By introducing elements of these prints into my paintings and routing these patterns into the surfaces of the Gare du Nord and Noisy-le-Sec sculptures, I attempted to render a truer image of the culturally complex multitude of people using the station.

DS: What is the relationship of the monument to the model in your work?

LF: Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico, in their article "The meanings of monuments and memorials: toward a semiotic approach," write how monuments function aesthetically and politically to reinforce dominant historical narratives. Monuments, they argue, create specific understandings of the past to present and promote certain visions of the future. Monuments affirm national memory and identity by obliterating what is discomforting.¹ In my practice I focus on how space is used, and I work directly with what is discomforting to question and challenge dominant narratives.

I invert any traditional idea of the monument by working in banal urban spaces designed for utilitarian function but which have also come to define the city. *Alexanderplatz* (2006), *Kotti* (2008),



¹ Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico, "The meanings of monuments and memorials: toward a semiotic approach," *Punctum* 2, no. 1 (2016): 28–46.

Image: Three of twenty-three allegorical Beaux Arts statues of women on the facade of the Gare du Nord, each personifying a rail line destination. Photo credit: Larissa Fassler.

CIVIC. CENTRE. (2016), *Gare du Nord, Machine tournez vite* (2019–2020), and *Tissus urbains* (2020) are all sculptures that capture the form and shape of the spaces that envelop and impact people's daily lives. These sites are monuments to the everyday, testaments to a lived reality that often contradict official narratives that are more likely to be recognized and remembered. *Les Halles* and *Les Halles (tricolour)*, both from 2011, were based on a site two kilometers east of Paris's Place de la Concorde and are made from found filthy cardboard that mimicked the squalor at the site to question why this major subterranean shopping mall and transportation hub connecting the center of Paris to the northern *banlieues* (or suburbs) was so dilapidated.² These sculptures capture present-day lived realities of the place and subvert the idealism of most models, which imagine a promising future without the complications of gender, class, and race.



DS: As noted, your way of working requires an intense observational and documentation process that positions you as an outsider. In some cases you have a personal relationship with the place, sites in Paris and Berlin where you have lived for the last twenty-two years, but in other cases, Turkey, Havana, Manchester, you have no prior relationship to the place or the people living there. How do you navigate your privilege and the ethical issues that arise when you choose a location and a site in which to work, particularly in those cases where you are looking at Othered bodies marginalized by class, color, et cetera?

LF: That is a very difficult question. Sometimes I fail. In 2017 Cuba was opening up; Obama was "normalizing" US-Cuban relations and the country was on the verge of change. I thought this would be fascinating to document. After months of preliminary research, I spent one month working in Havana and then the next six months producing paintings back in Berlin. I learned a lot during the process, but the resultant pieces remained superficial representations of the place. I could not satisfactorily answer why I would produce work about this place and its people when I had no legitimate ties to it. This is the reason they are not included in this book.

My work in Istanbul felt quite different somehow. Istanbul has strong ties to both Berlin and Paris, and Turkey and Europe are geopolitically interconnected. Perhaps even more importantly, the Taksim drawings focus on the events that

² A major renovation of *Les Halles* was completed in 2018 after fourteen years of political and economic interruptions.

Image: Forum des Halles, Paris, designed by Claude Vasconi and Georges Pencreac'h (1979), in disrepair prior to its 2016 renovation. Photo credit: Larissa Fassler.

happened on Taksim Square over nine very important days from May 31 to June 9, 2015. Presented in reverse chronological order they chronicle reactions to the announcement of the first Turkish general election results on June 9 back to the evening of the second anniversary of the Gezi Park protests, which originated in response to the government's urban redevelopment plans but then sparked nation-wide protests concerning Turkey's secularism and the erosion of freedom under the rise of political Islamists. The protests at Taksim Square in 2013 were very particular to Istanbul but also resonated in Berlin and elsewhere at the time. The drawings raise questions about the privatization of public space by the Turkish government and its supporters while considering more generally how the right to public space and the right to demonstrate can be diminished or withdrawn when public spaces are privatized and the owner's control who has access to the space and for what purpose.

DS: Your art has become increasingly political. What is driving this change in your work and what contributions do you think art can make to these issues?

LF: The Manchester, New Hampshire, USA works focus on society's failure to assist people who are at the margins, the poor, the homeless and, in this particular case, those also impacted by the opioid crisis. These works make the routes to poverty visible. They mirror hard images of a community back to itself. The facts are known—statistics for poverty, opioid use, dropouts, healthcare costs—but it is a call to action to highlight them all in one

place. As seen in Istanbul, public space can be threatened and destroyed by many means. In the case of Manchester, public space is completely dysfunctional due to the dominance of car culture, the scourge of parking lots, poverty, and an opioid crisis that leaves people who are struggling with homelessness, mental illness, and addiction to languish in parks and transit hubs. Societies suffer without well-designed and maintained public spaces. Well-functioning public space can form a sense of togetherness and foster ongoing relations, it can combat inequality and polarization, and it can encourage each and every one of us to find ways to know and help one another. My work is an attempt to make this visible and through it I advocate for this necessity. ■■■