

'Mirrors that help us cheat'

Robin Waart in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Skype, Vienna / Berlin, September 2020

*KW: In your work for Haus Wien, how did you react to the location? I understand you used a mirrored closet – was that already there or did you bring that with you?*

*RW: The room my work is installed in used to be a bedroom. After I had asked for pictures of the spaces in preparation of my proposal and saw the used mirrored closet in this one – so yes, that was already there – it seemed like the perfect place for a project that had been on my mind for some time already but still lacked a specific form. The mirror is an important aspect of this work, obviously we'll get to that. In the room next to it, a little kitchen, there was a boiler that had all sorts of stuff – magnets, stickers, all kinds of kitschy memorabilia – stuck onto it. This image was the starting point for my intervention at Haus.*

*But you were asking if the work is site-specific... I recently read a good rephrasing of the term; when thinking of the work site, it seems we often refer to architecture alone, whereas I would like to think more about the context than the location as such. A lot of what I do has to do with context as well as my relationship to literature or film, which can sometimes perhaps come across a bit highbrow and limited in terms of audience and readability, but I certainly don't want to make art only for a few people that can read this specific language. Anyhow, the installation for Haus is made up of nothing but words; and is about the effect words can have on us, whether we know their exact background or not. I am trying to convince myself – and with me, others – that text and letters, whether they are part of a phrase or appear as isolated characters, are in fact always something we look at before we see what they say. Something, in short, that you have to read twice.*

*KW: Wouldn't you agree that a book or film – I mean it probably depends on the type of literature or film, but still – is a much more accessible medium than say for example painting, or other art forms?*

*RW: When you work with language the issue of translation is always intense. Maybe more so than in painting or sculpture. Language is per definition exclusive. Painting might also exclude, but if you want to differentiate between the two and push the differences, it has a sort of universal presence and its 'language' is even more metaphorical – this is a rephrasing of something Marlene Dumas wrote (to explain the switch to painting here); as a painter who works with language and I am quoting a poem from her collection of texts *Sweet Nothings*.<sup>1</sup>*

*KW: Your work for Haus could probably also be referred to as a 'sweet nothing', as it's really only the faintest trace of letters attached to the mirror surface, a very delicate thing.*

---

<sup>1</sup> "Art is only metaphorically a language, not literary" in Marlene Dumas (ed. Mariska van den Berg), *Sweet Nothings*. Amsterdam: A Coproduction of Marlene Dumas and Galerie Paul Andriessse, Uitgeverij De Balie 1998, p. 47.

RW: Yes (!), I had not thought of it that way, the four-mirrored-closet is something to stare at yourself in and while the room has been stripped of its carpet and curtains, I was lucky to find it still there, as one of the few elements that the original occupants of Haus had left behind. Not that it meant nothing to them, but because I immediately started thinking of Haus as this uninhabited, motel-like space for art, of Lolita and Humbert Humbert in the novel of the same title, moving cross country, from one motel room to the other, and this scene in the book where Nabokov portrays her immersed in her own image. I thought of looking at yourself in the mirror. The mirror is quite old, almost faded, rusty, you can see it has aged.

KW: *Are you interested in the mirror as material? Or is it just a surface that you use?*

RW: Yes, definitely, I am interested in it and noticing it more and more. The act of looking and reflecting on this, literally, plays an increasingly important role in my work, or the place where life and work intersect, like in this interview or on Zoom and Skype over the past few months, where you always see yourself talking when you are talking to someone else, and are forced into some kind of constant, often confronting, self-reflection. Simultaneously there is this fascination, almost, with how you look and how you want to see yourself and the desire to look away because the two don't match. I'm happy the technology isn't making us listen to our own voices as well. With a mirror, of course you always look at yourself, and every time you take a photo of the text here (but also a framed artwork anywhere else) you take a photo of yourself. Usually we try to avoid that or look for an angle where the self is washed out – contrary to what we, or Lolita, would use a mirror for. But most of the time we stare in the mirror privately; laughing mirrors at fairs and the magic mirror in *Snow White* are maybe the only exceptions to that rule.

KW: *Tell me about the letters in your work, which read "To Véra". Do you address a specific person or does the work gain a more general meaning and in the end addresses everyone who looks in the mirror?*

RW: The thing about looking in the mirror is that you see everything, well, mirrored, meaning everything is the other way around. Two years ago, I did a three-month-residency in Vienna where I developed my collection of dedication pages from novels into a presentation. They were all three-letter-dedications, for example 'To C.L.S.' or 'In memory of J.V.C.'. I had been intending to make a book with those, but then instead first used them for a show at the Austrian Arts Council, on a set of windows that was covered with a type of foil that let you look out but not in. I took six of these dedications and had them laser-cut in black vinyl, but mirrored or in reverse. They were placed on the windows, so they would be readable inside but coded on the outside (like the building's opaque exterior or when you hold a page against the light, from behind). I realize now this was the starting point for my focus on dedications 'in space' and with mirrored surfaces as such. *To Véra* is not a dedication of my own but was taken from Vladimir Nabokov, who, if I'm right, dedicated seventeen out of the twenty books he wrote to Véra.<sup>2</sup>

KW: *Would you consider this a text work, a sculpture, an installation?*

---

<sup>2</sup> The seventeen books dedicated to Véra (in the English translation) are: *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), *Speak Memory* (1947), *Pnin* (1953), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959), *Lolita* (1959), *Pale Fire* (1962), *The Gift* (1963), *The Defense* (1964), *The Eye* (1965), *Despair* (1965), *King, Queen, Knave* (1968), *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), *Mary* (1970), *Transparent Things* (1971), *Glory* (1971), *Look at the Harlequins* (1974), *The Enchanter* (1986). The three without any dedication are the selected stories in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Nabokov's Dozen: Thirteen Stories* (1958), and the posthumous *The Original of Laura* (2009).

RW: Text on mirror. That is, the first work in Vienna – text on window – was a tryout for a larger work where I used all 27 dedications (the alphabet plus one) that made it into the book *Dedication(s)* for an installation in the hallway that leads to the library and archive at De Appel in Amsterdam. The idea behind it was to look at the sender-receiver-relationship between the writer and the reader. Mirrors are bottomless; with two mirrors opposite each other as happens in the bedroom in Vienna when you open the closet doors, you don't know where to start and nothing ever ends. I think I wanted to address the messy continuum between sending and receiving.

KW: *In working with dedications or inscriptions, you take a page from a book with just a few letters on it, a page that usually marks the beginning of a book, a page that follows a simple scheme of referring to a person that is probably dear to the author, a person that might not relate to the book at all but will forever be a part of it. The people that are mentioned here might stay anonymous or, if the book is very successful, might gain some fame themselves. In your work, you took a dedication from a Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1959). In which way did you alter or make use of this dedication?*

RW: Actually, I didn't do anything to it, there's no hand of my own involved in this piece really, even if it's a selection or a test run for a version with all 17 dedications. Their different typefaces stem from different copies and editions of books by Nabokov, although the dedication is most noticeable and ironic in *Lolita* because of the discrepancy that he would dedicate a book to an obsession for one girl to another woman, extraneous to the story. Each of them has a different font and placement on the page – and we basically took them, enlarged them to fit the mirror's dimensions as if the page were two meters tall, and pasted the vinyl cutouts on each surface. Flipping or mirroring them didn't seem at all necessary this time, even if I considered it, partly because I wanted to limit the amount of gestures applied to the found material, the silver foil already being one layer more than in the other, earlier installations. But in fact, the mirror element is in the vinyl this time.

KW: *So, who is Véra? She must have been a great inspiration for Nabokov.*

RW: Véra was a very important figure in his life, as the persistent dedication makes more than clear. She was his wife, his secretary, his translator, quite clearly his muse. But wasn't she also in a sense his slave? The repeated dedication to Véra (either from the Russian *вѣра* 'faith' or Latin *vera* 'truth') has something at once loving, dutiful, obsessive and aggressively absurd. It is also a movement from dedication to indebtedness, even to debt. Questions that come into play: Why isn't she mentioned as co-author? If she was so essential to the works, why hasn't she been more properly credited? She's definitely his significant other, the one-and-only, but the fact that she appears in the dedications alone says something quite paternalistic about their relationship, making it old-fashioned and unequal. It makes me a little sad.

Nabokov is an extremely complicated writer and it's not that I like his work that much or that I like it any more after this 'discovery', looking into these repeated dedications. Reading his books, I often lose track of the story he is trying to tell, but then I'm drawn back by the devil's details, how he works with words, as if they are strangers he invites into his world.

KW: *I see where you're going in looking at this quite unsettling and hierarchical relationship between a "master" and a "muse". Knowing about its background, your work seems almost like a memorial for Véra, a shrine that is solely and once again dedicated to her, this time leaving Nabokov out completely. Instead, the viewers inevitably become a part of the relationship by looking at it in the mirror. For them, Véra becomes something like an anonymous heroine.*

RW: Yes indeed, it's interesting what dedications do and how we perceive them. That all these books (printed in the thousands, maybe millions) are dedicated to Véra, but also, at the same time for us: for you, the reader. And while there's something mysterious about some dedications, others are absolutely profane. Some don't even really make any sense at all. The most common dedication in literature is probably 'For my mother and father' or 'To my parents', one that basically says nothing more than that the author was born and is maybe thankful for that. Because, how many parents actually read their son's or daughter's books? Aside from the ones that make me chuckle, I have been looking at dedications for some time now and haven't stopped being struck by them, why and to whom artists – not just writers – dedicate their works, films, songs, entire careers to someone else. But also the different ways in which they do so, from the modest blueprint that the anonymous three-letter-ones like 'To C.L.S.' suggest, on the one hand, to the ultimate exaggeration 'For My Goddess Wife' (in Benjamin Stein's 1985 novel *Her Only Sin*) on the other.<sup>3</sup> The idea to focus on this archive of dedications materialized when I started to think about an exhibition in which I wouldn't actually show any work of my own. And, of course, I'm drawn to the fact that the word 'dedication' can be used in two ways, it can be the time and effort that someone puts into their work, something or someone, but it can also be the literal inscription of a work to another person, a 'Widmung' or specifically 'Zueignung', as we say in German, while its translation 'opdracht' in Dutch, implies a task or duty, almost something moral.

KW: *Is your work dedicated to someone or did you ever make a dedication?*

RW: No, not really. Although I do make books and someone once told me, 'You can't make a book without a dedication, if you're so invested in them yourself.' But I could also imagine a refusal to dedicate to one particular person. I've made it almost too hard for myself there.

KW: *As a last question, what's next on your agenda?*

RW: I am working on a new book right now. *Evol/Love* will feature a collection of subtitled movie stills, all about love. These will be inverted and flipped, like negatives, and unavoidably here the element of the mirror returns again. When you slur and cheat a little the word 'love' read backwards sounds like its antonym: evil. But that's what mirrors can do for us too. They help us cheat.

---

<sup>3</sup> Equally totalizing (but now on the prepositions), John Steinbeck dedicated his *Burning Bright* (1950) "To, for, and because of Elaine".

Robin Waart's work begins with the words of others. He uses repetition and collecting as a framework for projects with books, movie stills, photography and book pages to scratch at questions of (dis)continuity, what it means to do, and to look at, the same thing over and over. Waart studied Greek and Latin in Amsterdam and received his BA from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, and MA from the Royal Academy of Arts, The Hague. Recent exhibitions include *Indistinct Chatter*, Layr, Vienna, 2021; *Untitled (Molly House)*, Exile, Vienna, 2020; *Group B*, lxhxb, Eindhoven, 2020; *Evol/Love*, Bloc Projects, Sheffield & Fluc, Vienna, 2020; forgo, Berlin, 2020 (online); *A sense of things to come*, Bradwolff Projects, Amsterdam, 2018; *Dedication(s)*, De Appel, Amsterdam, 2018; *Skorpion*, White Dwarf Projects, Vienna, 2018. His forthcoming publication *Evol/Love* is in print now.

<http://www.robinwaart.nl/>

*Katharina Wendler* (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

<https://www.katharinawendler.com/>

In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *in conversation with* \_\_, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

*in conversation with* \_\_ is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

## *Exhibition*

Das Haus

September 21–27, 2020

Haus Wien, Kobelgasse 3, 1110 Vienna

<https://haus.wien/>