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Angle of Repose

MARTIN HERBERT ON THE ART OF ANDREA BÜTTNER



Above: View of "Boom She Boom," 2014–15, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. From left: Andrea Büttner, *Fabric Painting* (neon orange); Andrea Büttner, *Fabric Painting* (blue); Andrea Büttner, *Fabric Painting* (orange); Andrea Büttner, *Fabric Painting* (grey); Andrea Büttner, *Fabric Painting* (green), all 2011. Photo: Axel Schneider. Below: Andrea Büttner, *Piano Destructions*, 2014. Rehearsal view, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre, Canada, April 11, 2014. Photo: Rita Taylor.

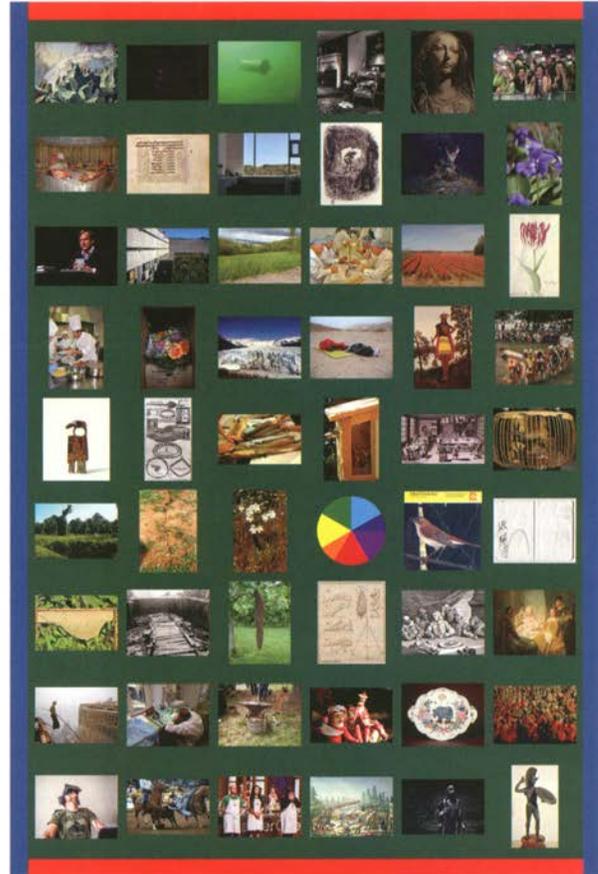


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Left: Page from Andrea Büttner's *Immanuel Kant, Kritik der Urteilkraft* (Immanuel Kant: Critique of Judgment) (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2014).

Right: Andrea Büttner, *Images in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment* (detail), 2014, eleven offset prints on paper, each 69 1/4 x 47 1/4".



"I WANT TO LET THE WORK FALL DOWN." These words sing out from (and provide the title for) a black-and-white woodcut that Andrea Büttner printed in 2005—and as it was written, so it would be done. Biblical overtones, we'll see, are pertinent to the Frankfurt- and London-based artist's oeuvre, which over the past decade has splintered into various media, including screen prints, wallpaper, photography, books, furniture, textiles, paintings on glass, instruction-based works, ephemeral installations involving live moss and wet clay, and videos she variously shot herself, collated from archives, or had nuns film for her. Her scope of inquiry ranges through Catholicism, philosophy, music, art history, shame, and botany, among other topics. Yet what remains constant is the fall: Büttner lets things go, allows them to drop, pushing the limits of form and refusing fixity, singularity, and authority. And this transgression is also a kind of conversion, a near-theological exploration of substance and accident in the world.

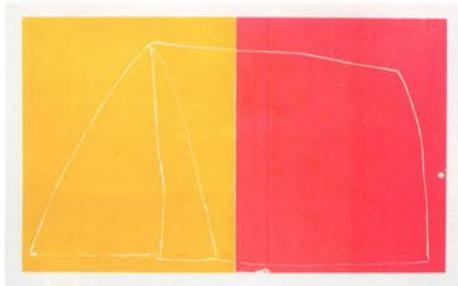
The gravitational pull in Büttner's art is everywhere to be found in the artist's current exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, curated by Julia Friedrich. Take, for example, the video installation *Piano Destructions*, 2014, commissioned by the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre in Canada, which features video projections of archival footage of artists—almost all male, from Nam June Paik to Ben Vautier—destroying pianos. These are countered by another projection: footage from the 2014 performance in Canada of a group of demure, mostly young women performing, in impeccable synchrony, piano pieces by Schumann and Chopin. The neo-avant-garde gesture aimed at destroying bourgeois culture, reprised over and over again, comes to look ridiculous and routine; but it is also positioned against the seemingly lesser (in high-cultural terms) act of obediently learning to play Romantic piano music, of being a "good" student. The piece is ambivalent, literally ambidextrous, its dual sets of hands and its comparison of

rectitude and collapse echoed in its nebulous refusal to take a discernible position concerning what's shown. In *Piano Destructions* we find the transposition or bringing low of heroic, radical demolition into the sphere of gendered, domestic, technical craft. But this alteration is not simply a critique of what came before. Rather, it continually undoes the relation between high and low, performance and skill, inviting viewers to pick through questions about the value of different kinds of production and repetition, as well as the relationship between artistry and the anonymity of rote exercise.

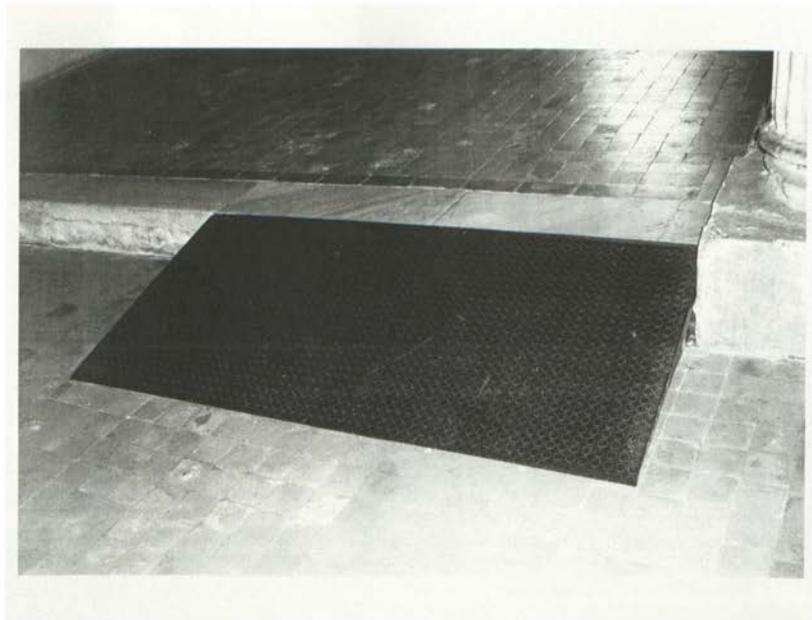
The work, then, embroils us in the process of judgment—a process we're constantly engaged in without necessarily being aware of it—while thwarting the apodictic: Rather than make definitive, individualistic artistic statements on the order of, say, dismembering a piano, Büttner constructs situations of inferential seepage that spread outward and often blend into another artist or thinker's practice. Declarations—and their ownership—liquefy.

Eleven large offset prints—not unlike subway posters—in the Ludwig exhibition each contain a multitude of small inset images, keyed to instances in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* where the philosopher alludes to something visual. (Felix

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Above: Andrea Büttner, *Tent (two colours)*, 2012, woodcut print on paper, 55 1/4 x 91 1/4". Right: Andrea Büttner, *Ramp*, 2010, silk screen on paper, 47 1/4 x 63". From the series "Ramp," 2010–14.



Meiner Verlag recently published an edition of the eighteenth-century text featuring Büttner's images.) Some of the chosen pictures mirror Kant's thought—a starry night sky, for example, annotates the writer's famous soliloquy on the ineffable heavens—while others tug against it via anachronism: images of fans waiting for pop group One Direction, of street-food vendors in China, or of a Sigmar Polke stained-glass window in a Zurich cathedral. Büttner even interpolates earlier works of her own into the assembly. As the selected images here assume something like critical agency, acting as oblique commentary on the text, the pure form of judgment that Kant sought—detailed in the book that contains his foundational thoughts on aesthetics—is deftly muddled. (At the same time, this work—for which Büttner seems to have borrowed liberally from Wikimedia Commons, among other sources—echoes recent projects such as Camille Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, in its consideration of the fungible excess of available images, situating informational superfluity as at once a daunting glut and a route to limitless new compound meanings.)

Countenancing night skies nevertheless represents an atypical move for Büttner. Her eyes are usually directed downward: a "falling down" of the gaze, if you like. The Ludwig show also includes a series of screen prints featuring photographs of wheelchair ramps: If these constitute a metaphor for elevation, it's a pointedly *modest* elevation, at a gradient that helps one safely lower oneself, too. Büttner, in conversation, says that she was attracted to the first of these—a corrugated-dark-metal example that also graces the cover of her self-titled 2013 monograph—because, framed by her lens, it reminded her of

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* of 1915. Malevich's landmark canvas was first shown in the artist's "Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10" exhibition in St. Petersburg (then Petrograd) in 1915–16, wedged high up in a corner, as icons famously are. Büttner's ramp photograph obliquely echoes the painting in order to establish difference and distance. The ramp presses into a corner between street and sidewalk, a dark rectangle that embeds mobility and a direct reference to the real world into the monochrome. Büttner, read this way, wants to reposition progress as a subtle, everyday action, bringing it down to earth. The movement she implies is humble but effective: more *lateral* and connective than ascendant and grand.

Several screen prints of ramps also materialized in Büttner's recent solo show at Hollybush Gardens in London, accompanied by several works revolving around that highly horizontal living form, moss. Three-dimensional slides drawn from a collection assembled by Harold and Patrice Whitehouse, an English couple who collected moss and created

stereoscopic photographs of their specimens, were shown on a flat-screen monitor, making the plants look gorgeously rich and almost painterly. Nearby lay a display of live mosses in the form of a moist rectangle of green in a steel tray, resting on tufts, with ceramic limb-like objects and a sex toy hidden on the ground beneath. Büttner first noticed moss when, once again, she lowered her gaze: Some years ago, in Rome, she became interested in the green growths clustered over the amorphous piles of stones that form many of the city's famous fountains. She appreciates the plant, she says, because there is no *singular* moss, and because of its relation to passivity. Moss doesn't require dedicated cultivation; at most it asks for a little water. Like the dust gathering on Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* in Man Ray's 1920 *Dust Breeding* photograph—a precedent for Büttner's thinking—bryophytes are modest, communal, self-propagating, and stay at ground level, clinging to the surface. If we frame this within the social sphere (as Büttner's art asks us to do), her decision to focus on menial moss rather than showy fountains might suggest itself as symbolic of an expansion, or a recalibration, of what one gives care and attention to; the plant might also be considered the antithesis of thrusting, onward-and-upward mobility. What, to quote the old saw, does a rolling stone not gather?

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INDIVIDUALISM AND GRANDNESS have been nemeses of Büttner's art for some time. This is evident as much in the materials she chooses to work with as in the subject matter they depict. She began making woodcuts in the 1990s, when the medium was discredited within recent German art history for its association with the marketable heroism of neo-expressionism, and verboten in the then-presiding context of institutional critique. Examples of her prints from 2004 onward skew, pointedly, to iconography from the supplicatory side of faith—Saint Francis, animals, nuns, cribs—and sheltering constructs such as tents and igloos. In 2007, Büttner handed a camcorder to an order of Carmelite nuns so that they might film inside their convent in West London. The resulting video, *Little Works*, found the sisters engaged in craft activities that—as one saw when the crocheted bowls, woodworked crucifixes, lavender satchels, and visionary drawings of the Virgin Mary were brought together in a modest display—were emphatically embedded in community.

Büttner's own equivalent of such "little works" might be her glowing paintings on the recto or verso of glass, which she typically makes on an unassuming, domestic scale (whereas her screen prints and photographs tend to be quite large). These paintings, which intentionally recall church windows, feel as though they could constitute a daily practice.

They're also intended to echo Jutta Koether's work in the same medium, and indeed Büttner's art is often overtly referential, reminding us that artists

almost never work solo—even art made alone arises from influences. She has divested authority and assumptions of artistic grandeur repeatedly: See, for instance, her instructional work *Fallen lassen* (Letting Fall), 2010, for which she asked friends and other artists to give her instructions on how one might allow things to fall down "to express an affirmative attitude." She then performed these instructions, involving small tasks and quotidian objects such as carrots and leaves, and left the traces on view during

Above, from left: Andrea Büttner, *Fallen lassen* (Letting Fall) (detail), 2010, leaf, string, jacket, potted cactus, helium balloon, charcoal, carrot, paper, glass, clear tape, book, boxing bag, sand, apple and orange peels, plastic cup, water, aluminum cans, dimensions variable. Andrea Büttner, *Moss Garden*, 2014, eighteen species of moss, powder-coated steel, tufts, ceramics, sex toys, 6 x 70 1/4 x 47 1/4".

Two stills from Andrea Büttner's *Little Works*, 2007, HD video, color, sound, 10 minutes 42 seconds.



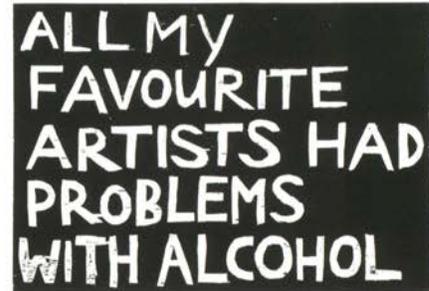
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Left: Andrea Büttner, *Untitled (corner)*, 2012, stretched fabric. Installation view, Neue Galerie, Kassel. Documenta 13. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

Right: Andrea Büttner, *All my favourite artists had problems with alcohol*, 2005, woodcut print on paper, 16 1/2 x 25 1/2".

Below: View of "Andrea Büttner: Nought to Sixty," 2008, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. From left: *Dancing Nuns*, 2007; *Grid*, 2007; *A stone Schwitters painted in the lake district*, 2005; *Little Works*, 2007; *Untitled*, 2010; *Little Works*, 2008. Photo: Marcus J. Leith.



Büttner's art can be read as a form of empathy—an exemplary outstretched hand, not from above but from across.



the exhibition. Extending her consideration of authority to matters of artistic signature—an issue that Büttner appears to care about only insofar as she can resist it—she embraces a number of incredibly diverse historic practices (from command-driven Fluxus and Conceptualism to abstraction), making unambiguous nods to artists who have shaped her. We see Blinky Palermo, in wall-scaled textile monochromes such as *Untitled (corner)*, 2012, that refer to the painter's "Fabric Pictures" series from 1966–72; Sister Corita Kent, in her graphic word pieces; and Dieter Roth and Martin Kippenberger—two figures who allowed human weakness into their art—in the woodcut *D. Roth and M. Kippenberger are meeting at the bridge of sighs*, 2006. Büttner has spoken of her fascination with Roth's diaries (for her forty-one-minute sound piece *Roth Reading*, 2006, she recited all the passages within them that relate to shame and embarrassment) and particularly with his assertion that what we look for in the journals of others are disclosures of vulnerability—revelations that they, too, failed.

This questioning of the artist's eminent cultural position is decisive. It's increasingly clear that the successful contemporary artist is the model for the individual under the cognitive regime of neoliberalism: mobile, self-directed, self-evolving, practicing

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immaterial labor, practicing "freedom," successful, a celebrity. Of course, this is a fantasy for most. Büttner offers a very different portrait of the artist, one who is openly influenced, who needs others, who has limits. (ALL MY FAVOURITE ARTISTS HAD PROBLEMS WITH ALCOHOL, reads a woodcut from 2005, doubling down on inspiration and imperfection, not to mention nodding toward another well-worn cliché of the bohemian creative figure.) For her 2008 show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London—on view while she was also writing a Ph.D. thesis at the Royal College of Art, examining the relationship between art and shame—Büttner painted the gallery walls an ugly brown as high as she could reach, which was certainly not the ceiling, and called this intervention "shit space" (shit and shame having obvious links). She also often reprises works, bucking the idealist notion that the artist-as-individualist has a new idea, a salable innovation, for each new exhibition. She presents this model not only to critique the role of the artist as neoliberal avatar but also to critique the entire coercive context it precedes—the area where biopolitics and the marketization of everything merges with the new, you-can-do-anything religion of self-optimization, as monetized by the Tim Ferrisses of this world. Here, in the aftermath of what filmmaker Adam Curtis has famously termed "the century of the self," bodies and minds are set in competition

with each other and, in a culture of achievement, are mostly doomed to fail. But what does failure even mean if you will your work to fall?

It's fitting, then, that Büttner looks at the culture of self-help and self-promotion with a cocked eye, privileging the self-effacing gesture, the "minor work." Countering the sacred with the profane, Büttner is drawn to the tension between the two—to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and the precariousness of the secular state, to questions of devotion and questions of betrayal, to the exegetical tradition within Catholicism and the technological vision of the present. The modernist dialectic of high and low itself, the artist has noted, is a Christological concept, stemming from Pauline theology; Christ lowered himself, and that's why he was elevated again. Büttner has suggested that aspects of faith, such as Franciscan selflessness, might be worth reconsidering, as both a way of seeing more, through a kind of embodied vision of the world, and a way of distinguishing generosity and tolerance from dogma. Again, this complicates judgment, *reminds* us of judgment and the ways in which we are always, even if unconsciously, adjudicating good and bad, self and other. It reminds us what it might mean to judge someone else's life choices according to attitudes we've adopted unconsciously, been taught to hold: how, in short, to be in the world.

All this might be read as a form of empathy—an exemplary outstretched hand, not from above but from across. For a 2012 show at International Project Space, in Birmingham, UK, Büttner produced *Benches*, a set of emphatically beautiful padded, fabric-covered backrests in rainbow hues and austere grays, accompanied by simple lengths of wood resting on plastic crates, like secular pews. If her practice can be telescoped into a single move, this might be it. In an unlikely echo of Matisse's famous idea of art as something "like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue," the visitor was offered, alongside sheer visual pleasure, a work plainly opposed to self-elevation. It was allowed that he or she might be tired. Here was both a slow attenuation of experience—one that countered the hyperactivity of the endlessly producing creative laborer while avoiding any lofty meditative concepts—and a nurturing gesture on the metaphoric order of watering moss. The plant won't grow bigger or more beautiful as a result, but ideally you do it anyway. Stitched into one of the pews' backrests, meanwhile, was a simple two-letter German word, perhaps the most disproportionately accepting sentiment that could be communicated in such a small space, which you could read before letting yourself sink down: JA. □

"Andrea Büttner: 2" is on view through March 15 at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. MARTIN HERBERT IS A WRITER AND CRITIC BASED IN BERLIN.

Andrea Büttner, *Benches* (detail), 2012, handwoven fabric, wood, plastic crates. Installation view, International Project Space, Birmingham, UK, 2012. Photo: John Fallon.

