

*“Ma personnalité se diffond, s'évapore [...]. Je me perds par la sympathie, l'assimilation aux choses, par la faculté d'objectiver qui va jusqu'à me dépersonalliser”
Frédéric Amiel (1)*

The Table Grattée of Maya Schweizer

(Illustration 1)

by Peter Cross

In November 2010, Maya Schweizer began an artist's residency at the 3 bis f Centre, at the Montperrin Psychiatric Hospital, Aix en Provence. '3 bis f' is the number of the former women's pavilion ('f' for femmes), where women classified as insane were accommodated at the beginning of the 20th century. It forms part of a huge grid of hospital buildings: part refuge, part prison, like a parallel society for the insane, one of hundreds of nearly-identical asylums built all over Western Europe at the end of the 19th Century. Now, through artists residencies, it offers a zone of interchange between the institution of modern psychiatry and the general public: a 'space for meeting, exchange'(2).

Before travelling to Aix Maya Schweizer researched the history of women in psychiatry, particularly the curatorial project 'Madness is Female' by Bettina Brand Claussen (3), based on work in the Sammlung Prinzhorn, Heidelberg (*Illustration 2*). Thus the artist found herself starting a journey that would also end in the Prinzhorn Collection (4).

It was at this stage that she decided to create a simulacrum of a 'found' collection, a fiction of the site at 3 bis f. What is the role of fiction, where is reality in the work of Maya Schweizer?

It seems as if every time I start a project, I start at the very beginning, as if there were no continuity between what I have done until now and what I am about to examine.(5)

Schweizer's practice always begins with the specific, the personal, even if this 'subjectivity' is sometimes one she only encounters by accident and in passing. While sitting in a taxi, in heavy traffic in Dakar. While unraveling the role of accident and mistake in her grandmother's early life, a Jewish Frenchwoman hidden in a house in Vichy France during the Nazi Holocaust. Tracking the disappearance and reappearance of Senegalese street vendors in Florence. Filming the rehearsals of an out-of-work Black comedy group in Los Angeles. It is always the quality of this encounter – this mixture of accident and intensity - that gives Schweizer the basis for her research and later production.

The process is like an aphasia victim learning to speak once more: Schweizer rebuilds and reconnects what has been forgotten or hidden, brings together text and image, the narrative and the visual, to create a fiction that that itself is an appropriation, a balancing act between what has been found and what has been lost.

I was familiar with my role. Remain sitting, observe until the scene is over.... (6)

....and then, make a fiction. This losing and finding herself again in the making of her work is what draws Schweizer to the idea of 'de-personalisation' that lies behind the opening quote by Frédéric Amiel (1). She recognizes, in her own history as well as in contemporary ideas of the self, a porous quality, a history of movement, flight, deportation. She travels a lot. There is an element of her

practice that is wandering, diasporic, nomadic. Her materials are light and portable: her tools can be packed into a small backpack: video and photographic camera, digital recorder, laptop.

Artist as visitor, witness, outsider, reporter, ethnographer, guest: collecting fragments, impressions, reportage. Something melancholy and restless, detached, echoing the gaze of the flâneur, the dispossessed, the immigrant. Artist as researcher: mining libraries, archives; mapping out possibilities, correspondences. In a recent piece(7), she projects two identical sequences of the Tour Eiffel simultaneously: one filmed in 1889, when it was first built, the other over a century later by the artist. The space between the two images is the real subject of her work.

At 3 bis f, because of institutional rules regarding the representation/documentation of psychiatric patients, Schweizer was denied her usual materials of recording and documentation, and she was obliged to find new ways of working. Schweizer packed her sewing machine. She planned memory workshops with the (female) patients: drawing exercises that revealed the extent and failure, the borders of memory: a central theme in all her work.

The situation is secured, I am taking part.

Actually no, it is not.

...Listen, seeing, not understanding, only seeing and searching.

Not belonging.(8)

In creating a parallel practice to the hospitalized women, she became a sort of fellow traveler. *Not belonging*. She created a dual role for herself which accommodated the contradiction of her position: on one hand she was part of the institution, invited to participate; on the other she was also its subject, a part of the process that she was setting into motion.

The artist joined the women in their art workshops, working alongside them, *'all in the Irrenboot together'*(9). But she was also...*'a researcher/psychiatrist and tried to develop artworks/objects that the collector/psychiatrist would collect.'*(10)

The *Table Grattée* is an old tabletop she found lying around in the hospital and appropriated, using it as the ground for her inscriptions. Later she added legs and made it, for largely symbolic reasons, a table once more. She had inscribed her own experience of the institution on a rejected element of the body of the institution, but at the same time, she had created a simulacrum, a fiction and had made a political gesture.

The *Table Grattée* is an object that incorporates both dimensions of her time at the hospital, unlike anything she had made before. Schweizer used her workshop time to doodle: sometimes with a pencil, sometimes with a sewing machine(*Illustration 3*). Her doodles were something totally new. She never draws; she is a film maker, a video artist. With her doodles, she was coming to her drawing in a parallel way to the patients, also unskilled, as if for the first time. Doodles are 'meaningless', or at least their meanings are concealed, only recognizable later, if at all, once the outpouring of images and visual connections are finished. They come from the opposite end of the search for meaning. The detached observer and describer must now engage, invent and inscribe.

We ask again: What is the role of fiction, where is reality in this work by Maya Schweizer? Is the *Table Grattée* authentic, or not? It *looks like* a piece of outsider art, a found object inscribed as if to 'appropriate the alien place of the institution'(11) like the textile works that had affected her so deeply at the start of her research (*Illustration 4*). But it is not one of these works, nor is it, on the

other hand, an imitation of them. It asks us, the audience, what we expect of works of art made in madness.

The voluntary assumption of a position, as well as the simultaneous questioning of it, are both fundamental to the production of contemporary art, and must also engage the audience, their expectations and assumptions. This dialectic -the dynamic force behind Schweizer's project and the basis for her research – is one that characterises the whole idea of madness – as woman or outsider – from the beginning. Where is the 'truth' of madness if not in a dialogue with the 'sane'?

What is the difference between the Table Grattée, visible and framed by the contemporary gallery, museum and discourse, and the other work, invisible and unreachable, made by the inmates of the Montperrin Pyschitaric Hospital? And is one mode of expression any more free or authentic than the other?

NOTES

1. Henri Frederic Amiel, in: *Le Journal Intime*, 26 January 1854.
2. 3 bis f Presentation material PDF
3. Catalogue *'Irre Ist Weiblich: Künstlerische Interventionen von Frauen in der Psychiatrie um 1900'* Sammlung Prinzhorn/Wunderhorn 2004
4. *Table Grattée* was exhibited at the Haus Kayed, Heidelberg, as part of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the opening of the Museum Sammlung Prinzhorn, *From Kirchner to Now, Artists Respond to the Prinzhorn Collection* May-July 2011.
5. Statement by Maya Schweizer, *Texte Zu Kunst*, June 2011.
6. Statement by Maya Schweizer, *Texte Zu Kunst*, June 2011.
7. Maya Schweizer, *Au dos de la carte postale*, 2010. Film installation: two synchronized video channels 15 min and one Super 8 film, monochrome (12 min) 2010
8. Statement by Maya Schweizer, *Texte Zu Kunst*, June 2011
9. In conversation with the writer, August 2011.
10. Statement by Maya Schweizer, *Texte Zu Kunst*, June 2011
11. Statement by Maya Schweizer, *Texte Zu Kunst*, June 2011