

Symphony, Encounter, Memory

An Interview with Gisela Weimann

Sarah Frost

The identity of the Berlin based artist Gisela Weimann (b. 1943) has been formed by her lifelong interest in other cultures, developed through travelling and her inspiring encounters with different forms of life, belief and behaviour. In her projects she captures these lived experiences, thinks them further, links and transforms the loose fragments until they take on a new shape.

Her extensive and varied work includes sound installations, experimental music theatre, performance, painting, photography and video. Her work frequently leaves the museum space and aims to change the viewer into a partner participating in and completing the work. A key part of her artistic process are her diary entries (quotes from these important reference points in her work are presented here in italics, translated from German). The diaries run through her work like a red thread and preserve her impressions, ideas and the development of her work. In collaboration with musicians, scientists and fellow artists, she starts an artistic symbiosis with them and through this process she realizes often large and interdisciplinary projects. Always, the radiance of her projects overcomes

the disciplinary and professional boundaries, both within the visual arts as well as between different specialisations and countries.

Sarah Frost: I enjoy listening to your stories about travelling and living in different parts of the world. Your subtle observations are based on all the senses. Sounds you describe evoke scenes and moods in me. Did the noises of the many different places where you have lived remain in your sound memory?

Gisela Weimann: This great symphony reverberates in my diaries and I only need to read a few sentences and at once the images and the atmospheres of the places overlie my presence and carry me back. In San Francisco I hear the foghorns on the Bay below my apartment at Larkin Street, above the rattle of the cable car and next door the soft classical music in the Petit Café. In the village of Tepoztlán in Mexico, the experience of silence and noise returns, as fireworks and rockets rise crashing into the sky on every festivity or occasion, roosters are crowing,

crickets chirping, the village band delights at the weekend with kettledrums and trumpets and at Christmas ‘Oh Tannebaum...’ blares out from down the valley to reach me:

tepoztlán, 9 september 1979 ... onslaught of thoughts – raindrops like footsteps around the house – is someone coming, is someone murmuring, is someone thinking – what happens inside the world of mysterious arrivals? i could live in these plains, framed by hills, under dramatic clouds, painting landscapes, dreaming and collecting memories towards new moments of the present... – drops on leaves, water, stone, sand, from roofs, trees, and the night-time symphony of the village dogs down the street start up like a quick fire...

When I think of Istanbul, I hear the shouting of travelling merchants under my window on Bakal Adem Sokak in Üsküdar, the clatter of horses' hooves and like a song the calls to get on a boat across the Bosphorus:

üsküdar, 28 november 1991 ... i think about my trips, about the experience of this city, about the calling, so plaintively, so melancholically-sounding voices, praising allah or vegetables and the boat trip to beşiktaş – it all transforms into a rhythmic song, in which the words are decorated with resounding endings, in order to flow better from the tongue to the ears of the others – everyone knows where the small boats to beşiktaş depart – nevertheless a short distance from the plank an old man shouts piercingly ‘beşiktaş, beşiktaş’ and waves with wild, almost desperate gestures in the direction of the boat – perhaps it is the last boat to beşiktaş and there will be no other path across the water in these gray, lost days – perhaps he is only expressing his poverty, complaining that he is standing in the wind and rain and hopes that he will get a few more lira if he shouts very loudly – in front of the boat, next to the sign on which ‘beşiktaş’ is written, a young man stands and repeats ‘beşiktaş’ melodically, when the old man takes a breath – and then these lead-coloured trips in boats, that now in the winter seem to sink deeper into the water, so that i have to hold up my nose, in order to let my eyes skim over the surface of the strait to see the many boats, big and small, that glide magically towards and past each other... – around midnight, as i came to the harbour, a small boat was already waiting for me and skimmed over the pitch black water as if it were ice ...

In my dreams the murmur of the Atlantic in Ifitry in Morocco is superimposed in my mind upon the roar of planes above my apartment:

berlin 20 september 2013 ... i sit next to life on a gray autumn day – what is real, the night or the day, here or there, berlin or ifitry, where in the soft haze the light gently detached from the darkness around seven, where i descended shivering the winding stairs to the beach, barefoot in shorts and walked towards the sun, which appeared above the high rocky coast at eight – there, half-asleep i sometimes took the thunder and roar of the sea for one of the aeroplanes flying into tegel airport and here i thought for a moment that i hear the sea ...

Your question has made me even more aware of the pictorial nature of sounds and how intensively memory combines images, poetry, sounds and music into a total event.

Sarah Frost: When I read your diary lines, it is for me like an immersion into your pictorial world that mingles with my own. I think back to my first visit to Istanbul and to the prayer of an Imam, which was heard over loudspeakers throughout Kadıköy and startled me in the morning. Today, ten years later, I associate the call to prayer with this first experience of it. These associations continue to unfold in relation to history and religion. Can sounds be understood as a symbol of a culture?

Gisela Weimann: After yesterday’s conversation with you, I thought further about this, read a little in my Istanbul diary and, at once, heard as well the call of the muezzin:

üsküdar 16 october 1991... today the singing minarets pulled me again from sleep, on both arms, and i became weightless and flew ...

Culture starts with language, its sound and rhythm, its different ways to think, its humour. Each language is accompanied by inherent gestures and a special, non-verbal body language. Rituals of greeting among people and in their relationship with their God are a formative expression of their culture. With a sound collage, a whole city can be conjured up and recognized by everyone who has once been there.



Above: *Bläserballett / Four Winds Ballet I, Aurora, Berlin premiere (2006)*. Performers from left: Theo Nabicht, saxophone; Daniel Plöger, trombone; Winfried Rager, clarinet; Michael Schlabas, trumpet. Idea and visual realisation Gisela Weimann. Composition Franz Martin Olbrisch. <<http://vimeo.com/19479820>>
Photo: Gisela Weimann



Sarah Frost: What sounds create/mark the voice of your adopted hometown Berlin?

Gisela Weimann: The continuous basic melody of Berlin's voice is the hum of cars on the intersection around the corner. When I leave the house, I experience on the streets in my neighbourhood, in the subway and in buses that not only the general appearance is changing, but also the noise. It is getting more colourful, more exotic, louder. The everyday sounds that have always been interspersed with many different languages mix increasingly with African and Arab dialects in conversations and mobile phone calls. These are partly voices that I know from Morocco and therefore they do not appear completely strange to me. For the many refugees from the most diverse countries, this is different and unsettling. On the other hand, to be a stranger, not to understand and to feel misunderstood intensifies the sensory perception and opens new areas of awareness and expression. Through artistic treatment this can be transformed into surprising pictures, music, theatre or performances and create a new perspective on their own environment for the local people.

This assimilation process leads to a continuous change and expansion. The wonderful gift of new images, sounds and languages continues to be an important reason for me to live here and to travel.

10. 11, 2011 ... i did not know that the time makes a noise in passing – while i sit quietly and think aimlessly about my life, a low knocking sound begins, that i cannot locate

– is it inside, is it outside ? – the knocking is picking up speed and combines with a swoosh similar to a stream of cars on a highway with transverse grooves – ddm, ddm ... – i pour myself a romanian home made booze, and the throbbing, pounding roar – ddm, ddm, ddm – gets louder, and suddenly i see the time racing past me ...

Sarah Frost: The border crossing is realized in your audio-visual projects through different levels of representation. In these works, different cultures co-exist, there is a fusion of public and private spaces and the different elements meet in/through movement.

Gisela Weimann: Yes, since the 1980s a focal point of my work are sound installations, performances and experimental music-theatre-productions which involve artists and theorists from different fields and nationalities. Often my inventions have their origin in the sound of a poetic play on words or emerge from the collaboration with poets, composers, musicians and from current events. The list is long: *Four Winds Ballet*,¹ *Kitchen Symphony in Five Courses with Service, Pea(ce Soup)*,² *Opera for 4 Buses*, *Opera en Route*, *La Notte Blu*,³ *A Thousand Moons for a Garden*, *Mobile Illusions*, *Chamberstorms*, *Zellophonie*, *Beginning End Here Now*, *Staircase Theatre*, *Garden of Memories*, *Embellishment of the Bauhaus Archive*, *Still Life Sounds*, *Windows See the Sea*, *Rural Pleasure Trip* and so on.⁴

What most of these works have in common is my attempt to find an artistic form that unites art and the



Right image p.14: *Opera for 4 Buses*, Berlin premiere (2001). Inside the German bus. Left, p.15: English and the German buses, Altes Museum, Museum Island Berlin at the premiere, 31 August 2001. Both photos: J. Fieguth / drama-berlin.de Above: *Opera en route I: From Finland via Grimma to Greece*. Audience inside the Finnish bus, in a 2003 performance at ECHO Festival, Grimma-Kaditzsch. Photo: Susanne Ahner

everyday experience. A familiar everyday situation – like the trip on a town bus or a meal – are transformed into a complex art event with the audience as an equal partner.

Sarah Frost: You have implemented this concept primarily in *Oper für 4 Busse / Opera for 4 Buses* (2001)?

Gisela Weimann: *Opera for 4 Buses* – my biggest project so far – creates a micro-cosmos in the public space of a city. The operatic plot, in four acts, takes place inside four city buses that have been transformed – inside and outside – into intriguing art objects through ornamental strips of mirror glass and lighting. These vehicles enter into a visual and acoustic dialogue with the audience, the surroundings and passers-by while travelling on a defined route which includes them all into the performance.

Sarah Frost: *Opera for 4 Buses* seems to open two perspectives from which the audience can see the work: from the outside, the buses are perceived as sculptural objects and from the inside, a spectacle is featured within the buses. The viewers are free to change their point of view between inside and outside. I am interested in the dramaturgy of the performance inside.

Gisela Weimann: As a prologue, I would like to cite two excerpts from my diary which describe my thoughts during the time of planning and after the public premiere of the bus opera on Museum Island in Berlin in 2001 in the frame of the festival ‘Götterleuchten’:

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berlin, 22 january 2000 ... somewhere inside i am convinced that i will succeed in the realisation of the opera – a big conviction, when i consider the extent of the project's details – but the general form comes first and only then the details – in my internal dialogue, i answer a question about the aesthetic purpose of the opera – “it is about the disintegration of the context of reality, the irritations that everyone experiences when reflecting on the real world – i find this reality threatened and unreal, the well-functioning interplay of social reason and the onslaught of madness, which could cause this structure to break apart from one moment to the next” ...

berlin, 7 august 2001 ... with the last of the fading summer, the opera for 4 buses drove across museum island as if in a dream ... – the last few weeks were extremely exhausting, to the point of my tearing apart, and yet full of amazing concentration – i was supported by friends, particularly my fellow artist karin fleischer who came to berlin for ten days and was our good spirit ... from the premiere on, it went wonderfully ... i saw all six performances and have many ideas for the continuation of the project – all in all, a lot of press and a lively discussion, which raised questions about how an opera should be, what art can do, and what art wants and can achieve in everyday life ...

Each of the buses represented one European country with an experimental opera act written by a contemporary

composer. The opera did not follow an obvious story line, instead the composed music, voices, singing, poems, scraps of words, improvisation and electronic sounds created changing atmospheres, reminiscent of the different cultural backgrounds of the participants. It was my idea that the audience should experience an imaginary journey through Europe by moving from one bus to the other after each presentation.

‘Motorenlid / Motor song’ by the German composer Georg Katzer was an electronically manipulated base sound of the buses motor noises used in all four vehicles as a dark, subconscious undertone that I described as ‘hell under the seats’. Melvyn Poore from England reflected in ‘Geradeaus / Straight on’ about the mental oppression caused by the loss of one’s language, like Gaelic in Ireland that was forbidden for a long time. The Finnish composer Patrick Kosk created with ‘Schnee, Wald und Meer / Snow, Wood and the Sea’ an electronic image of his home landscape with tunes from folk songs and experimental life drumming. German composer Friedrich Schenker’s ‘goethefaustzweischmittchen’, a Dadaistic word and sound collage with scraps of Goethe’s *Faust II* and Schiller’s *Die Räuber*, was a special present to me to be used in future performances. Natalia Pschenitschnikova from Russia mixed in her work ‘Kante an Kante / Edge on Edge’ poetic singing with ambient noises of the Russian metro and an old orthodox ritual. The soloists came from Holland, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, the costume designers from Lithuania and Germany and the lighting designer from Romania.⁵

The visual dramaturgy was based on the interplay of the inner and outer worlds through a design of different patterns of mirror strips attached to the inside and outside of the windows, and on the body of the buses. The ornaments in the windows alternated with equal size strips of glass and created a confusion of perception between reflection and reality. This game of doubled reflections was intensified by mirror elements on the costumes of the musicians. It fragmented the views and the viewers, as well as the surrounding reality, and stimulated the experience of floating in different dimensions of space.

Sarah Frost: In *Opera for 4 Buses* you adopt a number of roles. You are author, producer, stage designer and director.

Gisela Weimann: If it would have been only these four roles and one or two more! As a freelance artist, I run a one woman company without operating budget. To be able to start with my artistic work I need an operation office, a production space and a place of private retreat – the keyword here is rental costs! As secretary, manager, accountant, concept developer, proposer, artistic director, workshop director, press officer etc, I employ myself without a salary. Now I could start! Not yet, first I have to raise money because all the others have to be paid. Next obstacle, a hope for money is only possible after a detailed 11-sided application with 11 copies has been submitted, in detail, conceptually and artistically convincing, with the names of all participating artists, their concepts and CVs, with an exact cost plan, including production, travel and residence expenses, all professional fees and with the presentation of commitment by additional sponsors, because it is always only a matter of matching funds. Many unpaid weeks with research, exchange of letters, phone calls, soliciting of bids – and, and, and – are necessary in order to proceed. Every colleague who changes from the easel to the field of multimedia and multinational projects knows this process.

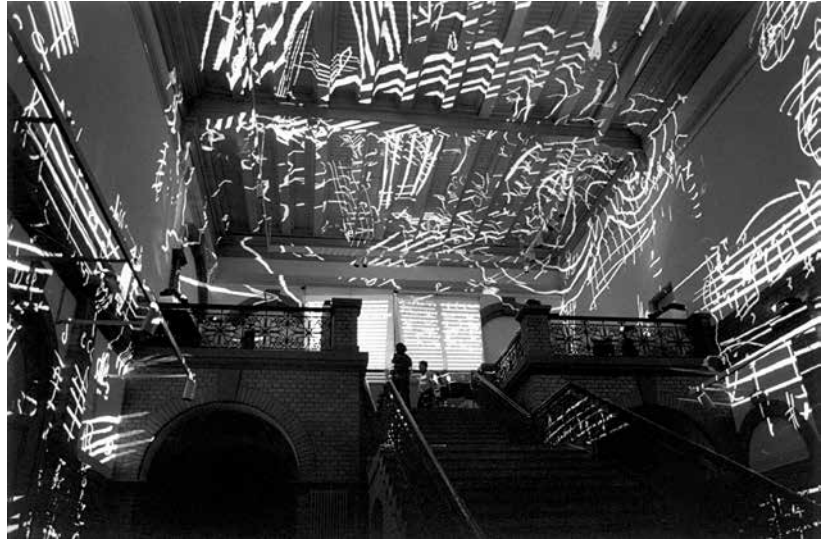
Of course, the pleasure of having succeeded let me soon forget all the trouble, because another effect of a project like this is my own social and technical learning, as I have to consider and fulfil many aspects and obligations for an action in public space and thereby meet people with different skills and attitudes. I have to deal with security, mirror technique, police regulations, insurance, power for the sound and lighting on a moving stage, costume design and directing a group of individuals, etcetera. This great learning process is a lasting gain for me and fills me with gratitude towards all the generous individuals in embassies, companies and offices who supported me. My beloved buses that I had bought for a much reduced price from the Berlin transport company, I no longer have – the rent for their accommodation would have ruined me at once.

Sarah Frost: Yes, this time and bureaucratic work that precedes a project is rarely visible. It is an eternal up and down to get such projects started.

Gisela Weimann: Up and down, good cue! My *Treppentheater rauf und runter / Up and down the Staircase Theatre* conveyed this familiar life experience.



Two views of *Up and down the Staircase Theatre. Symphonic variations in 28 steps: Introduzione ed allegro - Largo mesto - Scherzo vivace - Finale furioso.* Künstlerbahnhof Westend, exhibition *Berlin/London, Abschied/Arrival* (1994). Light director: Günter Ries. Photos: Friedhelm Hoffmann, Berlin.



This work was premiered on 24 September 1994 at the Künstlerwerkstatt Bahnhof Westend as part of the exhibition *Berlin-London, Farewell/Arrival*, which accompanied celebrations of the final removal of British occupying forces from the city after the reunification of Germany. The commissioned compositions by Friedrich Schenker and Keith Gifford rose and fell with the upward and downward movement of the musicians on the majestic station steps in a sometimes positive-light, sometimes negative-dark world of projected notes. In the invitation visitors had been asked to wear light clothing to include them as a projection surface into the visual action.

Sarah Frost: You frequently invite the viewer to participate actively in your artworks. However this happens in your mirror works which play an important role in your production, in a completely different, quieter way. The look in the mirror asks the viewer to question their own self-image and provides a space for reflection about one's own integration into the world. Both a distortion and a revaluation of reality are possible in this invitation.

Gisela Weimann: Like the key and the shadow, mirrors are archetypal symbols that appear again and again in the visual arts, literature, music and philosophy. All three symbols also play a significant role in my work and they are linked together in different ways. On the subject of mirroring, my extensive German-English catalogue raisonné *Reflexionen-Reflections* (2002) is my largest

publication, summarizing my work to date. It is dedicated to my sister Christa Weimann-Bicić and presents more than thirty works from 30 years that deal with reflections and mirrors. These reflections form an important part of my life story and in this book I involved thirty female art and music scholars, with whom I had cooperated on the various projects in different countries inviting them to comment on the work and our collaboration.

Sarah Frost: The posthumous scientific review of an oeuvre is done without consultation of the most authentic voice, that of the artist!

In *Reflexionen-Reflections*, you have taken that process of documenting and presenting your work with excerpts from your diaries into your own hands as well as inviting female scholars from different disciplines to write about the various aspects of it from their point of view. Can the publication be understood as a reflection of your oeuvre?

Gisela Weimann: Yes, it is in the truest sense of the word with regard to the presented works, in a metaphorical sense: however it is also reflective look at the reasons for the loss of female art history, which was only rediscovered by feminists of my generation and is now continuously worked upon and published. To me it was important to lead a dialogue with female art historians and musicologists, by sharing my daily thoughts, feelings and problems with quotations from my diary during the developing process of the works they interpreted.⁶

Sarah Frost: What other works in which mirrors play an essential role are particularly important to you?

Gisela Weimann: All the works were created from certain life situations and experiences and are important to me, like *Zellophonie* (first version, 1994) with its relation to travel and departures, but especially two that concern my national origin: *Anfang Ende Hier Jetzt/Beginning End Here Now* (first version, 1996), an exploration of my problematic relationship to recent German history and *Zurückgespiegelt/Reflected Back* (1993) where after the reunification a goods wagon equipped with five hundred East German Trabant-car rear view mirrors contributed to the discovery of my German identity and became an element of a *Garden of Memories* (first version, 1996).

Sarah Frost: *Beginning End Here Now* was also the title of your retrospective exhibition for your 70th birthday at the Kunsthalle Brennabor in Brandenburg an der Havel (2013).

Gisela Weimann: Yes, in that exhibition the installation of a music room with the same title took up a central position. The simultaneity of beginning and end, included in every moment, is a threat and hope at the same time, and was a reference to Olivier Messiaen's 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps'/'Quartet for the End of Time'. The title of the quartet and three sets of the composition are related to the Book of Revelation, the Angel of the Apocalypse, and to the dark period of National Socialism in Germany, into which I was born. With the concept of a new, imaginary quartet of audio players, sitting in a darkened room on four mirrored chairs instead of the musicians, I presented an analogy between my associations and the genesis of the quartet. The piece was written by Messiaen in the German POW camp Görlitz-Moys for four instrumentalists who were interned there by chance: the clarinetist Henri Akoka, violinist Jean Le Boulaire and cellist Étienne Pasquier – the composer himself took over the piano part. The premiere took place on 15 January 1941 in the camp before about 400 prisoners. '**Outside, night, snow, misery and here a miracle**' is how a musician described the scene. I also put chance as a starting point, by asking four composer friends – Mayako Kubo/cello, Franz Martin Olbrisch/violin, Conrado del Rosario/piano, Friedrich Schenker/

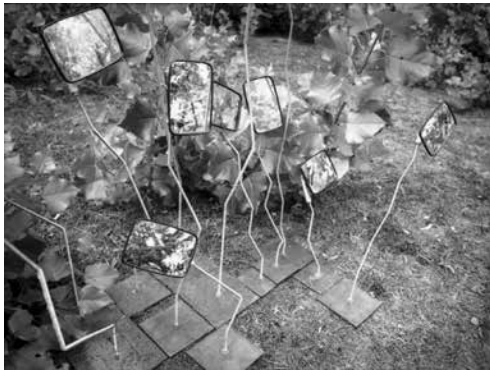


Left: *Beginning End Here Now*. Music room in retrospective exhibition at Kunsthalle Brennabor in Brandenburg an der Havel, 2013. Photo: Gisela Weimann

clarinet – to let me have voices from existing pieces for the four instruments used by Messiaen.⁷ When visitors entered the music room they aleatorically triggered the players with the individual voices and small light spots via sensors: always new, without beginning or end, here and now.

Sarah Frost: Why do the players sit on mirrored chairs?

Gisela Weimann: An aware-unconscious choice. Mirrors have a secret, they discontinue time and space, appear immaterial and are in literature and art passages into other worlds. Mirrored mirrors create a meditative image of infinity. When designing the music room for Olivier Messiaen's 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps', with the reference to the Apocalypse and the ending of our time, the space and the objects had to be dematerialized. A simulated view into infinity was generated by convex mirrors attached to the walls around the room in which, from changing angles, the whole space shriveled up. To blackout the windows – in analogy to place and mood of the first performance of the quartet – I had prepared enlarged photos of a snowstorm in a dark winter night, which generated an association of a remote starry sky. A strange connection to the power of the mirror and the subject of the rear view mirror can be found in Cocteau's play 'Orphée'. Night after night a black princess steps out from a mirror, murders and also kills Eurydice. When



Left: *Garden of Memories II*, detailed view, Berlin (2009). **Photo:** Ingeborg Gerdes
Right: *Reflected back*. Art train project *Derailment-Disaster or Emancipation*, Hilbersdorf railway works, Chemnitz (1993). **Photo:** Gisela Weimann



Orpheus has almost managed to retrieve Eurydice from the world of the dead he involuntarily sees her in the rear view mirror of the car of his driver Heurtebise and loses her forever.

Sarah Frost: *Zurückgespiegelt / Reflected Back (1993)* has emerged as well from the symbolic character of the rear view mirror and includes the look back as a temporal dimension.

Gisela Weimann: Both, time based and evaluating. I look back on quite a number of years: *Looking backwards while going forward* belongs as a subtitle to the work *Reflected Back*. This large, mobile object was part of an art train composed of old, rusty goods wagons, which rumbled from Chemnitz – formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt – via Dresden to Görlitz on the Polish border, soon after the German reunification. I had equipped the outside of my wagon with five hundred Trabant-car rear view mirrors of the model known as “*luxury right*”. What seemed to me like a Socialist joke had been an expensive reality. The East German car brand Trabant was sold only with a left rear view mirror, the second had to be purchased separately as a luxury object and was stored in large quantities in central sales offices and at the manufacturer’s. This right, capitalist luxury object was a powerful symbol of insight and reflection for me. It triggered in me a new sense of Germany, its culture and my heritage from the East, as if I had previously only existed half. In my dreams this awareness mingled with

fears and nightmares because my early experiences are marked by war, destruction, loss of every security and escape.

berlin, 12 september 1993...had unsettling departure dreams last night – i wanted to take a ship to america or south america, and stood a few metres away from the quay with a huge amount of bags and cases, became nervous, because it was time to depart, went with two bags towards the ship and saw that it had already started to move – i screamed "help, help, i'm supposed to come with you", was seen and heard, and then the ship docked again at the quay – i left both bags there, ran back to the other luggage, found someone to help me, and loaded down with unwieldy pieces of luggage and other bags, stumbled to the ship, which had drawn away again in the meantime – once more the big ship came back upon my desperate cries, and i embarked exhausted, and sought a place where i could rest...

Sarah Frost: A look back is also the theme of *Garden of Memories*, first implemented in Zakopane, Poland. The installation was the stage for the world premiere of Witold Szalonek’s ‘*In die Gegend des kleinen Prinzen*’, a composition which is about memories as well.

Gisela Weimann: The premiere took place in a full moon night on 24 August 1996 in the garden of the Kulczyckich Museum. Here, the mirrors turned into flowering plants. Screwed on to bent and angled threaded

rods, they stood swaying like a hedge of flowers in the park or individually as part of the flower beds leading into the surrounding gardens. They lent the gaze into the mirror new, unexpected directions, showing details that would not otherwise have been perceived, reflected the light and surroundings, and depending upon the source of light, became a blind mirror of an imaginary surface that showed nothing.

At night, using targeted illumination and projection, the *Garden of Memories* changed into a secretive, shimmering place that created the associative framework for the inaugural performance of Witold Szalonek's suite for children aged 5 to 105. Musical scenes took on the dream-like motifs of literary characters and personal memories, which combined with reflections, light and shadow to create a garden of memories of internal images, sounds and poetry.

Sarah Frost: Internal images and poetry. The autobiographical aspect of this work brings me to your extensive text project about time and death, which has emerged from your diaries where one finds many parallels to music. Rhythm, pause, repeat, speed, sound collage and reflection are here of great importance as well.

Gisela Weimann: Time and duration are a fundamental element of music. Through your questions about my memories of sound elements I realized, how much the collection of 'Thoughts on Time and Death', recorded since 1981, has to do with music, space and time as an omnipresent conversation partner and with the titles of many of my works.

berlin, 6. 11. 2014 ... too many thoughts in mind to think clearly - they race back and forth from one time to another; one place to another and thereby loose the gap in between, this precious moment in which time halts ...

berlin, 9.5. 2013 ... on a dark day in may time stands still - the trees keep silent and the heavy lead of the sky plays with deep purple and the archaic knowledge of the end of the world – yesterday in the sun along the river it was only my own exhaustion, now everything is deadly tired ...

berlin 15. 2. 2011 ... the time disintegrates into a

thousand fragments - i have not counted, but it can also be much more than a thousand - i try to pick them up, recompose them and fail every day - to accept that i only hold parts of the whole in my hands is difficult for me ...

Sarah Frost: Usually diary entries are soliloquies, an intimate communication between one's past and present, a kind of self-assurance and inscription into the world. They accompany your life and artistic work. What do they mean for you? Do you think about an addressee while writing?

Gisela Weimann: I confess that I am talking in thought with myself and my friends while I am writing. When I am by myself in the studio or in lonely places, I also talk aloud. But it happens on the street as well. Sometimes, when an issue or a dispute particularly occupies me, dialogues with multiple parties and distributed roles and voices take place. I also talk with animals and say 'hello' when I meet them, or 'hey you' to the funny dogs in Schiller Park on the doorstep. My diaries are letters that I write to myself and they are folded and inserted into envelopes. They are an inner dialogue about the time in which I live, the place where I presently am, about my successful and failed plans, about the phenomenon of time and death. These envelopes with different contents are a symbol of communication for me. Angels fly *Par Avion* in envelopes with air mail stickers, and I also write letters to the rainbow. However, by affiliating my thoughts and feelings to my artistic work, I share them with others.

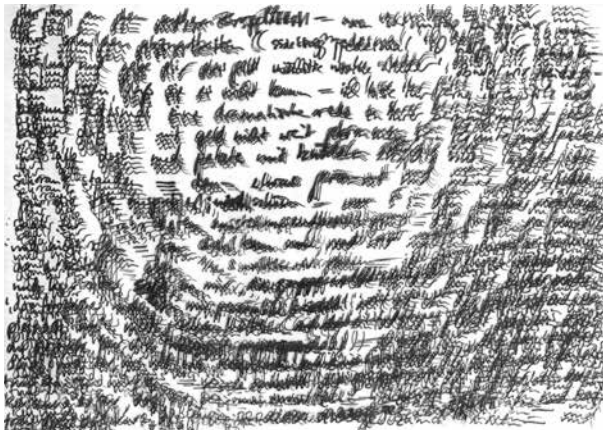
Sarah Frost: How should I imagine *Letters to the Rainbow*?

Gisela Weimann: I have produced hand folded envelopes in various sizes, made of different materials. *The Letters to the Rainbow* are manufactured with Iris foil, a shimmering plastic material, on the surface of which the light generates delicately changing colours. *Letters to the Wind* (first version, 1998) are transparent envelopes with inserts of superimposed handwritten texts of mine that give the impression of a musical notation.

Sarah Frost: Will you post these letters to people?



Above: Villa Aurora diary-letters, Los Angeles (1997) and *Chamberstorms* installation. Musical intervention Thomas Sander, Schwerin (2008). Below: *Letters to the Wind / Klaipeda* (2012), one letter from the preceding installation *Winterlied / Winter Song* (1987). Photos: Gisela Weimann.



Gisela Weimann: Not these, they are fragile art objects. But of course, there is a mail-art project with my artist friend Paula Levine, with whom I studied in London at the Royal College. It is called *100 letters to, 100 letters fro*. This has nothing to do with sound, but with surprised exclamations and laughter when a particularly beautiful or funny painted letter reaches its respective recipient.

Sarah Frost: Communication, cooperation, sound-intense public actions, but also still, inwardly directed projects are approaches that are present in many of your works. The diaries and the *Garden of Memories* are very personal, especially your interactive sound installation *Zimmerwind / Chamberstorms* that seems to me like an abstract self-portrait. I see this work as a metaphor for your travels, for the constant moving forward, but also as an expression of restlessness and escape. The current version – first conceived in

2009 – seems like an anticipation of social conflicts of the present. Already, the visual evokes much of your intentions, but another layer of meaning is presented in the sounds and meanings that are hidden in the objects and texts.

Gisela Weimann: Like many of my projects *Chamberstorms* (first version, 1998) is conceived as a work-in-progress that changes according to space and conditions. The inherent symbolism of the installation stands for movement and change, for fresh wind and travelling as well as for the transitoriness of life. It is an interactive sound-installation conceived for a moving audience. Ventilators of the most diverse styles and making sit on stools and approach lined up in my old shoes. Via sensors the audience sets the ventilators into motion with pulling, whispering, crackling, buzzing and rustling sounds. Concept and the visual and acoustic elements are indeed linked to the various places of my life. For years I have been collecting ventilators and stools and also my memories by writing a diary wherever I lived. I kept all my old shoes as well, that were bought and worn in many places all over the world. Ventilators remind me of the ship's propellers on the overseas steamer that brought me to the United States in 1962 or of my frequent flights to London in small propeller planes in the 1970s. And later, in my house in Mexico they buzzed cooling the air during hot nights. My old shoes know their way around in Berlin, Istanbul, Madrid, London, Tepoztlán, Mexico-City, Cheltenham, Salamanca, San Francisco, Zakopane, St. Petersburg, Dublin, Chemnitz, Odessa, Los Angeles,

Bremen, Lefkara, Tecklenburg, Paris, Asilah, Casablanca. They remember the sounds and the feel of their steps on grass, soft forest ground, sandy country roads and hard pavement.

The recent, still unrealized version refers to one's own life journey. It is a free, personal adaptation of Franz Schubert's 'Winterreise' (1827), a cycle of 24 songs for a singer and piano after the time-critical poems by Wilhelm Müller. Each poem symbolizes the different stages of life and experience, jolly memories of happiness as well as the loneliness and alienation of the individual in an uncomprehending society. According to the songs of 'Winterreise' I will choose 24 text fragments from my own diaries. Pre-recorded melodious tunes and readings from the diaries, all these sonorous elements are electronically mixed to create a constantly changing texture of sound, ambient noises and a dialogue across time:

Wilhelm Müller, Winterreise, 1827: ... "Das Wandern hielt mich munter hin auf unwirtbarem Wege. Die Füße frugen nicht nach Rast, es war zu kalt zum Stehen, der Rücken fühlte keine Last, der Sturm half fort mich wehen" ... / ... Wandering kept me lively moving on inhospitable roads. The feet did not ask for a rest, it was too cold to stop, the back did not feel the weight, storm helped me drifting ahead...

berlin, 5. 9. 2015 ... sunday morning with bach cantata – jubilant singers on the radio – cannot see how terrible the weather is outside the windows, how lashing the wind, how gray the sky – they praise light-heartedly god in the highest – we down here are grieved, here, virtually, hell is loose and hundreds of thousands of refugees try to escape from it and get from bad to worse in front of barbed wire and beating policemen who, on behalf of their states, are ordered to prevent that the strangers get a foot on the ground in their country...

Wilhelm Müller, Winterreise, 1827: ... "Fremd bin ich eingezogen, fremd zieh' ich wieder aus" / As a stranger I moved in, as a stranger I will move out again.

berlin, 29.8. 2015 ... weakened by the darkness of the night i walk with fast steps and a beating heart towards the day, through the park, where the sun is already cold and yellow and brown leaves are falling on my shade – it is still too early for the autumn, i am not ready for the winter yet...

Sarah Frost works as independent curator and author in Berlin. She recently curated *FINSTERNIS (ECLIPSE in English)* which includes a site-specific installation by Gisela Weimann (Berlin: GEDOK, 6 Nov 2015-23 Jan 2016).

Notes

1. To simplify I name the titles in English. Only the titles of works that are discussed in detail are presented bi-lingually.
2. 'Pea(ce Soup)' is a composition by Pauline Oliveros from my *Kitchen Symphony project – Kitchen Symphony in Five Courses with Service* (2005-2010), see performance Teatro Fondamenta Nuove, Venice, 1 October 2010. <http://vimeo.com/19478104> Each dish – acted out by a singer, musicians and a performer – invites the audience to embark on a culinary journey that stimulates curiosity, fantasy and appetite: Annette Schlünz (Germany, *1964 / lives in France), Hors D'oeuvre 'Tricolore' ♪ Pauline Oliveros (USA, *1932), 'Pea(ce Soup)' ♪ Karmella Tsepikolenko (Ukraine, *1955), Main Dish 'Brtutschi' – I add an aperitif and a concluding dessert. 'Klangspiegel', another composition by Pauline Oliveros is the poetic soundtrack for *Emily's Guests*, dedicated to Emily Harvey <https://vimeo.com/104799996>
3. See Gisela Weimann's artist pages in *n.paradoxa* vol 24 *Material Histories* (2009) pp.45-48
4. A portfolio with most of the sound works is published on my website: www.giselaweimann.de/ewerke.html
5. I kindly ask the readers of this interview to follow up the names of the superb and dedicated participants in the credits of the documentation: <http://vimeo.com/29553276>
6. In *Geteilte Zeit/Shared and divided time* (280 pages, ed. Gisela Weimann, VDG Weimar 2008), I extended the joint survey of my work by a look back on life, time and work of six other female colleagues – and myself – with whom I studied at the University of the Arts in Berlin in the 1970s from a historical perspective. Our personal evaluation is accompanied by an international view on feminist art from seven other countries. The book was presented at the symposium 'Art History as International Dialogue, 1965-2008'. A selection of the papers in English formed issue 20 of *n.paradoxa online*. www.ktpress.co.uk/nparadoxa-issue-details.asp?issueid=20
7. The voices were arranged by composer Ellen Hünigen. Sound-technical realisation Manfred Fox.