

Adorno-Award 2017

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Of course, there are many reasons to visit Amorbach. Theodor Adorno spent his most beautiful childhood days in full summer bliss there. Christine Scherer, the author, who took the pseudonym Thea Dorn in honor of Adorno, lead a journalist hightail through the Odenwald in search of a murderer. “I must go to Amorbach“, said the Berliner imploringly in the novel *Die Hirnkönigin* to the Indian taxi driver, who had no idea where to go. “Just drive me to Amorbach. I’ll tell you how to get there.” (1) And once they finally reached the Odenwald, the wonderful town’s names, Erlenbach, Klingenberg, and Kleinheubach (2) brought back happy childhood associations.

Remembrance and childhood are Adorno’s magic words for this Amorbach, where the strict rules of parents and school seemed powerless during the era of the empire. Amorbach was a safe-haven from the cold, bleak world of ‘life which does not thrive’. (3) The small town was a synonym for happiness, for craving warmth as experienced in childhood, and at the same time a reflection of his philosophy. In this place, the young Adorno discovered a possible alternative to the ruling status quo. Here he discovered the ‘dream of a world unwarped by purpose’, (4) not alienated, but a friendly and livable world. The Odenwald presented a place where the need for blind respect of elders was replaced by respect for everyone equally. Amorbach with its forests and wild boars also molded Adorno’s perspective of nature, which didn’t let people willfully domesticate it, and yet at the same time showed him what truthfully happened in wild nature, as the animals were not fed for their own sake, but to preserve hunters’ prey. (5)

As for the music: the amicable heart of the city of Amorbach, which the philosopher later wrote is fully in the sphere of Wagner’s myths and melodies, as if he came across the Nibelung himself in the depth of the Odenwald. (6) The beauty of the place and the joy that it gives, is not to be disconnected from Adorno’s life-story that has merged with the magic of the city. This comes full circle only here, as Adorno wrote to his mother on September 24th 1949: “It is not deliberate, but now it appears symbolically to me, that I spend your 85th birthday in Amorbach. It is afterall the only piece of home that remains for me – outwardly its remained the same, and yet it is possibly even more peaceful than before.” (7)

The place has long since been awakened from its sleeping beauty slumber; since 2015 an artist residency began for young graduates, that allows for a 4-month stay – like the summer

break, an interim, but something more, while the summer break entices one to break free from the surroundings, a residency begins with arriving at the site. The difference between breaking-free and arriving are worlds apart. In this case, the delightful anticipation of a slow, soft, and mild time, begins with a journey to its destination, which can be likened to a cleansing ritual. There, lingers the taste of army bread. Dry and hard. Both seem irreconcilable, until the two unequal beginnings come together to something new: the residence. Once begun, both create from the location, and when one leaves it is with the indelible marks of this place, while at the same time, undermined by all that one had brought with them.

Especially at the start of one's artistic process, distance to one's own familiar surroundings can be very beneficial. The perspective shift, the break from the routine, the exchange with colleagues, the concentration on one's own work can clarify the artistic process, accelerate and sometimes even radically shift it, giving it new stimulus, particularly since we live in an art-world without a need to realistically capture its model. There are no abstract, static norms that remain. No definitive right or wrong exists. Nevertheless, there is art, and artworks that enable a deeper view, that enrich us in seeing, in viewing something which does not meet prefabricated answers and bring forth new, internal, perceptions of our own art and world.

Notoriously, Art and the Arts escape their determinability. Therein lies the enigmatic style of art that Adorno called upon, its signature is the break-away. In his essay, 'Die Kunst und die Künste ('The Art and its Artistry') Adorno notes that, the borders between art genres melt, the lines of demarcation fray, that new interrelations, overlays, interchanges and hinges constantly unfold. In the experimentation, the daring new- and the other viewpoint, the break as Adorno would say, still and always gives artistic possibility its refuge. (8)

Bearing this in mind, this year's guests, three artists, have been able to ingest the history and residence of Amorbach— they didn't come to sit inside, but went outside and sunk into it.

The coup d'oeil, during the glimpse of seeing Nicole Jänes unfolds a multi-faceted event, through her spatial drawings using colorful and elastic tights. The artist works with casings and borders of inside and outside, with body and space accented by her interventions, her nexus confides to buildings, bold and new, and naturally the play with opposites in orifice and filling, with addition and conglomeration, with reflection and theatricalization. The exciting becoming and the tensioning of this becoming within the space of the ever-present baroque of Amorbach, which Jänes utilizes in new and uninhibited ways.

Elizabeth Thallauer also plays with opposites, with time and eternity, with light and dark, with retrospect and foresight. Her “Wave”, arose out of an almost meditative process, composed of blue foils, which were formed and melted. The sculpture is a dynamic picture and retains a field of possibilities, that reflects its malleability and modification of all shapes. Like a picture or language it functions as a tool to capture the world, and words change, become translated, are crossing and abstraction, create new ways and connections– which plaques proudly proclaim the praise of the city and the villages nearby, language and picture go down the lined path, reality and imagination mend into one. When these plaques travel beyond the borders into Bavaria, will distance and closeness – the rudimentary experience of an artist’s residence – go into an irritatingly interrogative relationship: How far is closeness, how close is extensiveness? Everything is mirrored in the flow of experience.

Annika van Vugt has faced the people of this town. A series of portraits of locals arose, whom offered to stand model with pleasure. Each portrait created a mirror-image, but the image always has two problems at the same time: on the one hand to capture the reality, the appearance, but at the same time reveal the inner being in the painting. The term ‘portrait’, that comes from ‘protrahere’, to pull out – the term carries the duality: something non-visible needs to become visible, precisely in the representation of reality. At the same time, the conflict arises in the need to become interpreted in the image, its being illuminated. These two concerns are constantly being rebalanced during the process of creating the portrait as are contemporary aesthetic experiences on the question of the human image each re-translated and reflected in the representation itself. Each portrait is a window into the person itself, accompanied by a catalog-like booklet with quatrains of the person (profession, personal preferences, dreams, visions) designed by Annika van Vugt.

The artists worked freely in Amorbach for four months, free-spirited, with a light irony, with a cheerful, lightness, and no timidity of daring compilations. They thus put the always unpredictable impulse of art into play: art as a potential in constant re-modeling. With Adorno, works of art are power fields, opposites come to fruition, (9) stored objects are aroused, resuscitated: in the multi-layered inventories of urban space, the scholarship holders create the correspondences of interwoven visions that allow for the unexpected.

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