

Views of Berlin

On a new series of works by Kathrina Rudolph

By Michael Stoeber

The biographical element plays an important role in Kathrina Rudolph's new series of works. This begins with the title. The artist's works owe their title to a television series. "Berlin, Berlin" was broadcast as a comedy in four seasons with a total of 86 episodes between 2002 and 2005 and enjoyed great popularity in the Rudolph family. The adventures of the young Charlotte Holzmann, known to everyone as Lolle, who followed her great love Tom to Berlin and had all kinds of adventures there, were particularly popular with the artist's ten-year-old daughter. Her enthusiasm for Lolle ensured that the Rudolph family gathered together once a week in front of the television screen. The artist had to think about this when she worked artistically during repeated stays in Berlin in 2020 and 2021 and in turn discovered the German capital. What she saw, thought and experienced during this time she recorded in works that are as personal as they are supra-personally important. They do not remain within the narrow confines of idiosyncratic perception, but show the city in panoramic expanse. In doing so, Kathrina Rudolph focuses on political, economic and cultural phenomena and at the same time reflects on Berlin's history as well as its present and future.

The artist materialises her observations and reflections in new works in which she draws on the dispositifs of the pop-up book and the collage. She brings them together in a way that has not been seen before in the visual arts. The pop-up book has been around since the middle of the 19th century. Such books function like peep-box stages to give the narrative events of literature the equivalent of a visual vividness in the third dimension. In this form, they have always been reserved for the book. Collage, on the other hand, is entirely in the modernist vein of the visual arts. It is no coincidence that it experienced an early heyday in the middle of the First World War in the designs of the Dadaists and those of the Hanoverian Merz artist Kurt Schwitters. On the battlefields of this war, which was fought with barbaric means, not only shells and bullets exploded. Traditional values and old religious certainties were also torn apart. The result of this epochal disruption was captured in laconic style by the British Nobel Prize winner for literature,

T. S. Eliot, in his epic poem "The Waste Land", written between the two world wars, when he wrote that what we hold in our hands today is "just a heap of broken images".

Collage - from the French "coller" for to glue - tries to put these broken images together in a new way. In the process, its narrative changes. It no longer proceeds in a linear but in a polyperspective manner, no longer holistically but in fragments. This is exemplified by Kathrina Rudolph's collages. For them, the artist dissects images and dismantles people, objects and architectures in order to reconfigure them and breathe new life into them. When they then tell their story, they challenge our viewing habits in the manner of Bertolt Brecht. When the latter produced his first play, "Drums in the Night", at the Kammerspiele in Munich in 1922, the audience read on the walls the exhortation: "Don't stare so romantically!" They were supposed to think! Rudolph reinforces the impetus by raising her collages vertically in a theatrical way, so that we can walk with our eyes in her picture stages. Kathrina Rudolph has taken the material for them from the city's image fund. They are flyers and invitation cards that she found in the city's museums, art institutes and theatres. But she also uses city maps and orientation aids, the advertisements of bars and restaurants, references to dance and sporting events as well as recommendations not to underestimate the dangers of smoking or to give one's vote to a certain political party. In this way, she draws inspiration for her art from found footage, as she did earlier when she was inspired to create drawings and paintings from photographs in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

The construction of the pop-up collage, which like the series of works is entitled "Berlin, Berlin", is essentially supported by various flyers from performances at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Rudolph's picture stage, on which the staff move, and the background of the scene she has built consist of a gridded architecture of steel and glass, which also appears in one of the theatre's productions. Not different are the many protagonists who combine to form a colourful crowd of people, typical of the streets of the capital. They recall the first lines of a famous monologue from William Shakespeare's play "As You Like It", spoken by Jacques, who takes us on a journey through the entire cycle of human life: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." In the process, at the centre of Rudolph's work, our gaze is drawn to a mannequin who, with hat and high heels, penis and breasts, is as much man as woman and in this way acts like the memorial of a contemporary edict of tolerance that could

not be more typical of Berlin. Surrounding it are personnel from various productions, including "The Tin Drum" and "The Plague", which the artist has seen as an audience member. Both performances are dramatisations of books, in this case by Günther Grass and Albert Camus, which are currently very popular on German stages. This includes the fragmented reference on the left-hand side of the work to the book "Franziska Linkerhand" by Brigitte Reimann, which was also dramatised and staged by the Deutsches Theater.

The impressive and moving work is an unfinished novel that Reimann wrote for ten years and which was published posthumously in East Berlin in 1974. It describes the dreams of the young architect Franziska Linkerhand in the GDR of the 1960s, which are shattered by the bleak reality of her country. However, the novel not only tells of the adversities of the professional and social everyday life of its protagonist, but also, in flashbacks, how she experienced her father as a convinced National Socialist and of the invasion of the Red Army in May 1945. Reading the book awakened memories of her own family history in Rudolph. This prompted her to look even more closely at National Socialism and recent German history, which is visible in further pop-ups. Especially in a scenario she dedicated to the German-Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst. A place of world-historical significance, where the supreme commanders of the Wehrmacht signed Germany's unconditional surrender in the night of 8 to 9 May 1945 in front of representatives of the Soviet Union, the USA, Great Britain and France. The hall in which the signing took place has been preserved to this day. It forms the heart of the museum. The fragments of images that Rudolph has inserted into her pop-up collage flash episodes from the war of conquest and extermination that Hitler waged against the Soviet Union. They form a black and white tableau of horror with destruction and ruins, misery and hunger, imprisonment and forced labour, which in a compelling way allows only one conclusion: A categorical "never again".

The artist also does remembrance work when she visits places in Berlin that are steeped in history, such as the "Topography of Terror" documentation centre, where the headquarters of the Secret State Police, the SS and the Reich Security Main Office were located during the "Third Reich". Or the "Documentation Centre Nazi Forced Labour", which is the only one of its kind in Germany to portray the living situation of forced labourers during the National Socialist era, or the "German Resistance Memorial" in the Bendlerblock, which keeps alive the memory

of the officers determined to overthrow Hitler. All these impressions and experiences are brought together as if under a burning glass in the large pop-up tableau "Erinnerung sprich", which also centres on an exhibition and a reading experience by Rudolph. The artist used the show "Arbeit am Gedächtnis - Transforming Archives" at the Berlin Akademie der Künste for this. At the top of her pyramid-shaped pop-up collage is a portrait of the writer Uwe Timm. In an autobiographical narrative, he has remembered his brother, sixteen years his senior, who took part in the Second World War as a member of the Waffen-SS, was wounded and died. What came back from the war is depicted in the cardboard box at the foot of the collage: an Iron Cross, a biro, a medallion with a swastika, a comb and a tube of toothpaste. He also left behind a diary that he kept on the Eastern Front, although it was strictly forbidden. Along with a bundle of field letters kept by the family, it becomes the starting point for the writer to come to terms with his brother's death, to ask about the role of his father and about the general processing of the Nazi past in the post-war period.

"Das Vergangene ist nicht tot; es ist nicht einmal vergangen." The exhibition at the Akademie der Künste quoted without attribution two sentences from a famous book by William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." With which the writer found the appropriate formula for the persistence of historical memory and racist resentment in the USA. The situation in Germany is similar with the history of National Socialism. But the past does not speak for itself. It is neither clear nor unambiguous. It must be questioned and challenged. And Kathrina Rudolph's pop-up collages make a valuable contribution to this in their historical dimensions. Also because they do it in a way that Ernst Bloch wanted remembering to be: "Only that remembering is fruitful which at the same time reminds us of what is still to be done." In the service of this remembering, Rudolph's work forms a series of portraits in which each and every one of her members has memorably written and contributed to this dramatic chapter of German history. Uwe Timm is followed by Walter Benjamin, philosopher, cultural critic and Proust translator, who recalled his Berlin childhood in tender, sensitive sketches and who was driven to suicide by the National Socialists. Next to him, Bertolt Brecht, who revolutionised musical theatre with the "Threepenny Opera", first performed in Berlin, and who fought Hitler in exile with plays and poems. We see two other poets, Thomas Mann and Anna Seghers, who also went into exile and from there attacked the "Führer", in conversation with each other. Not far from them Ursula Mamlock, the Jewish composer who set the horrors of the Reich Pogrom

Night to music. And in her neighbourhood, the sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, who already mobilised against the First World War with the call "Never again war".

Goethe was particularly proud of his novel "The Elective Affinities". He had succeeded in "representing an idea" in a perfect way. But not in an easily "commensurable" way. There was more in the book, Goethe said in a conversation with Eckermann in February 1829, than anyone would be able to absorb by reading it once. The pop-up collages by Kathrina Rudolph are no different. They, too, regularly follow an *idée directrice* that is hidden behind a vast amount of pictorial material and which the viewer has to unfold. This is also the case in her two works on the Bode Museum. Built in the neo-baroque style between 1898 and 1902 on Berlin's Museum Island by order of Wilhelm II, the building is famous for its sculpture collection. Rudolph's collage emphasises this aspect of the collection through selected examples. Among them, created around 1645 from ivory by Leonard Kern, is the back view of a group of figures showing Adam and Eve in an antique-like muscularity. While she hands him the apple of seduction, he strokes a hunting dog crouching beside him with his left hand. On the same plane, Rudolph has placed visitors from the present time or the recent past. A woman in a white Courrèges dress and a young couple. When the artist shows a pregnant woman from the present in the vicinity of a Pietà from the Renaissance, it becomes clear how much she is interested in comparative iconography.

In another view of the Bode Museum with the reference to *fair share*, this contemporary aspect is emphasised even more strongly by Kathrina Rudolph. Not only through the title of her work, but also through the emblem of the aforementioned group, which shines unmistakably out of the picture ensemble on a red background. It is an association of activists who have set themselves the goal of bringing a "fair share" of women into leadership positions in Germany by 2030 at the latest, where they are still underrepresented today. This also includes ensuring greater visibility of women artists in museums, where there are still significantly fewer works by women than by men on display. Following the struggle of coloured people for equal rights with the beautiful motto: "Say It loud, I am black and I am proud!", the female activists and artists in Berlin are also fighting loudly for their cause. The young woman with the megaphone on the left edge of the picture refers to this. Scraps of her speech are superimposed on a sculpture from the Bode Museum. This demonstration for more representation and visibility of

the works of women artists did indeed take place. It took place on 8 March this year in front of the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It was the last day of a special exhibition in which works by 43 women artists from the collection were shown, although only five of these works had previously been on display. In Germany, the demonstration continued a struggle that the Guerilla Girls in the USA had already begun in the 1980s. With the provocative question of whether women only come to the museum when they are naked? In Rudolph's work, the sculpture of one of the leaders of the Berlin activists, "Lost Void" by Rachel Kohn, provides the answer. Symbolically, it has already wandered into the Bode Museum.

Rudolph's pop-up collage, which she dedicated to Theodor Fontane's novel "Stine" (1890), is a homage to old Berlin and to the great chronicler of Prussian rank society. Stine is the short form of Ernestine, whom the poet made the protagonist of his book. Like Lene in "Irrungen, Wirrungen" (1898), neither of them can live out their love for their partners, who come from the nobility, because they are of low social standing. Rudolph's work has for its stage a Berlin city map in which the Invalidenstraße is marked, where Stine lived, which was tantamount to a social characterisation. The photographic documents Rudolph used for her impressive collage are not taken from flyers in this case, but from two books, one of which focuses on Fontane's time in the years 1850-1890, while the other describes and illustrates theatre performances in East Germany after 1945. Rudolph's work "Ich bin aus Mitte" is also a homage to Berlin, but in the spirit of the present. This is also made clear by its title, which is superimposed in capitals over the streets and houses of the city, which are depicted in their outlines from a top view as if Google Earth had set its sights on them: As in Fontane's novel, we are not dealing here with the whole of Berlin, but with a specific district that became known after the fall of the Wall due to an influx from the West and corresponding economic investments. The portrait of a gathering of diverse people makes clear how much it stands for plurality. But Kathrina Rudolph also emphatically visualises the hedonism that was supposedly cultivated there: Through the "Oops, now I'm coming" guy at the top of the picture, the sphere with the many windows, which is equally reminiscent of a disco and a television tower, as well as the vending machine that promises a lot of amusement with "2 hours of laughter".

The atmosphere of easy going and easy living is unmistakably conveyed by the artist in terms of form and colour. Just as her pop-up works are characterised by their intensive formal

elaboration. This becomes clear in glimpses of other works. In the composition of her pictures for the "Deutsche Theater", Kathrina Rudolph successfully operates in the spirit of Surrealism. Especially when she has an extremely enlarged leg stretch out of a bathtub with all kinds of flowers and blossoms floating in its dark water. In "Modell Berlin", she convinces us with the accumulation of various writings and texts, which she dynamically lays over a city map of the capital. The different lines of text visualise the diversity of the city in a metonymic manner. Whereas in "Staying Open", this title was also inspired by a theatre flyer, she does nothing more than relating two different city maps to each other. Compared to others her pop-up collage impresses with its minimalist restriction. Yet the work seems as if it wants to make precisely this geometric minimalism dance through its tricks and folds. In general, Kathrin Rudolph impresses with her ability to create tension with contrasts and opposites in her works. They do not only take place on the semantic level when she repeatedly relates the past and present to each other so that we can learn from them for the future. But also on the formal level in the confrontation of coloured and black-and-white images and of collisions in which the large and the small, the near and the far, the light and the heavy, the fine and the coarse, the grotesque and the realistic achieve a convincing unity and balance. Which is not only convincing in formal terms, but also a beautiful humanistic lesson in terms of content.