Andrea Morein
MAY DAY – R.O.C.

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Eight rectangular stacks of paper 150 sheets thick lie on the floor, carefully arranged in a two-by-four grid. Even at a cursory glance, you see that each top sheet of paper has words arranged in three lines on it. All the words are nouns; of them only six are more precisely identified by adjectives or quantity. Preceding each word is the indefinite article 'Ein' or 'Eine' (in English 'A' or 'An'), which is capitalized, as if each started a new sentence that remained unfinished. No punctuation separates the words or the lines from each other.

Several weeks before MAY DAY opened, the artist told me during a studio visit that she was yet to decide all the details of how the paper blocks would be arranged, but that she had settled on the essentials. These included the idea of allowing visitors to tear off and take individual sheets of paper from the blocks. This struck me as an offer, or even a request, to do just that immediately – what happened in the two to three seconds it took me to bend down and take a sheet from the bottom-right stack still preoccupies me. As I bent down, I saw myself skimming over the words on the eight pages and immediately decided to seek out the sheet of paper that seemed the least deceptive, the most 'harmless': *A turnip / A dream / An egg.* I'm not sure why I did this. The context from which the words came was not known to me at this point in time. Maybe I had already sensed after a superficial glance at the words that this context was anything but harmless.

Thus, even at an early, premature stage of my involvement with the work B L O C K, I realized how complex the seemingly simple gesture of bending or squatting down – performed in order to take a piece of paper on which a few words are written – can be. This gesture is the one that Andrea Morein places at the heart of this work. It is the minimal performative aspect of this text installation around which everything else revolves. Admittedly, the show's visitors experience B L O C K under conditions of reception that clearly differed from those of my preliminary viewing. Visitors enter the room in which the text installation is located one-by-one – this is the basic principle of all the shows in Morein's showroom ART ONEonONE. The visitor may take as much time as they feel appropriate in their encounter with the work, which consists essentially in being able to bend down to, to approach physically and emotionally, the texts on the floor and tear off a sheet of paper, or indeed several or even all eight. Even if the visitor decides not to, for whatever reason, the unperformed gesture remains a negatively inscribed possibility.

The three-by-eight lines of words on B L O C K make up a poem called 'Selbstverständlichkeiten' ('Self-evidences'), which Andrea Morein first published in her book *Das magische Leben der Steine* (The Magic Life of Stones), published in 1989 (see page 87). In this publication she documents her solo performance of the same title – an offensive, unsparing examination of what it means to be the daughter of two Holocaust survivors. The book's subtitle is 'The Autobiographical Journey of a Second-Generation Survivor'. 'Selbstverständlichkeiten' is in the book's second part and includes some personal texts by the author revolving around this existential theme in multiple ways, including quotations from authors such as Franz Kafka, George Steiner and others. 'Selbstverständlichkeiten' is probably the only text in the book able to be transferred to other contexts. In the context of the book, the enumeration of things – *a bed with a white sheet / a loaf of bread / a toothbrush* (...) – becomes legible as a set of objects, wish-images and memories that obsessively preoccupied camp inmates in their existential distress and abandonment, dominating their thoughts and dreams. A fixation on self-evident things whose existence had become anything but self-evident in the camps was an (unconscious) survival strategy. In her own text about MAY DAY, Andrea Morein suggests 'a topical new reading' of 'Selbstverständlichkeiten', a shift in context: 'The poem speaks of existential situations of survival, like those that refugees have undergone in recent years. And they are not alone in suffering distress and exclusion...'

Refugee policy, frequently labelled the refugee crisis, came to determine and alter political and media discourse in Germany – and not only there – within the space of a few years and in a fairly alarming way. The all too often ideologically charged debates on this subject tend, however, to lack any simple, 'self-evident' empathy with the plight of people in extremely difficult, if not desperate, existential situations. Yet precisely empathy with the hurt and vulnerability of human beings ought to form the humane basis for any pragmatic decisions and regulations we must necessarily make. The strength of Andrea Morein's work B L O C K is precisely that it addresses this empathy, quietly, indirectly, and with the greatest of delicacy, by avoiding appeals, statements and assertions; indeed, through the gesture of bending down and tearing off a sheet of paper with text, it suggests the possibility of an experience of care that is also physical.

Shifting the context of 'Selbstverständlichkeiten' depends on a shift in the text's medium. A poem in a book that deals with the traumatic situation of a 'second-generation survivor' is turned into a text installation for an art exhibition, which the artist herself describes as dealing with the following: 'Topics such as exclusion, xenophobia, the intensification of right-wing elements in everyday life and the enforcing of political decisions that are increasingly opaque and made over and above the heads of citizens'. In the book, the poem is given a precise

context through its position. In the installation, however, it is fragmented into eight parts, corresponding to its eight verses, and is transferred into the hands and pockets of the visitors, who thus take it with them, scattering it in all directions, inserting it into a variety of original personal contexts. In this way, B L O C K corresponds to an artistic strategy that characterizes Andrea Morein's work in general. Keywords that may be used to describe it are circulation of artistic signs, translation from one medium to another, shifting of contexts and expansion of meaning-associations. Two works, X-ILE and FÜNF FREUNDE (FIVE FRIENDS), are close to paradigmatic examples of this artistic practice. They are based on posthumously published texts from Franz Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks,* to which Morein gives the general title KFFK. For both series, the artist first copied the respective Kafka text onto twelve (X-ILE) or twenty-five (FÜNF FREUNDE) sheets of paper in stylized capital letters, marking (not illustrating!) them pictographically by taking up and exemplifying the occasional word in the text. She then photographed these text-drawings, taking great care to ensure that this transformative process from text-drawing to photograph itself is marked through the visibility of the table-top, the slight irregularities of the margins and suchlike. She then digitally adapted the photographs on the computer and adopted a blue-grey colour scheme. Finally, these works, which the artist refers to as photo hybrids, are either printed out (in the case of X-ILE) or screened as a slideshow (as in this version of FIVE FRIENDS).

The printouts of X-ILE are presented in a row on two adjoining studio walls and their open structure, which prescribes no viewing order, corresponds to Kafka's rather cryptic, non-linear textual fragment, which begins with the words: 'There are many waiting. A vast crowd, lost in the dark...' In the aforementioned context of the show's theme, it's almost impossible not to think of the masses of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Africa and so many other parts of the world who are making or want to make their way to Europe to escape war and expulsion, or intolerable living conditions. That this is not what Kafka had in mind should be evident. Andrea Morein is not concerned with a philological interpretation of Kafka, but with using his texts to attempt to describe and emotionally penetrate our current virulent situation.

The photo hybrids of the FÜNF FREUNDE screen presentation have a stricter chronological sequence corresponding to the narrative structure of 'Gemeinschaft' ('Community'), an unabridged Kafka parable titled by Max Brod.[1] The 'Five Friends', who have all 'come out of one house' and have positioned themselves 'beside the gate', form a community whose foundation remains mysterious, since, according to the narrative voice, their being together is 'pointless'. The community's meaning seems to derive only from the fact that the five 'friends', who are apparently not friends in the usual literal sense, deny access to a sixth. This denial is

[1] This brief text is also translated as 'Fellowship'. See *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

left unexplained, justified solely by a declaration of will: 'we are five and don't want to be six'. Like all Kafka texts, this parable has been interpreted in many various ways. The interpretative approaches range from seeing it as a metaphor of writing (the five friends as the fingers of the writing hand into which the pencil always wants to push itself as the sixth) to viewing it as a parable about the rejection of Jews by the five other ethnic groups in the Czechoslovakian state founded in 1918.[2] Andrea Morein accentuates the Kafka quote through sparse graphic interventions. For example, some of the capital letters she emphasizes with extremely elongated vertical or horizontal strokes, giving the words an aggressive and piercing quality. Or else she uses simple markings such as crossed lines, which sometimes combine to form a house-like construction, and markings for the numbers five and six, which appear repeatedly in the text and are emphasized in Morein's work by lines or numbers in diverse colour variations. In this way she emphasizes the oppressive logic of exclusion that structures the text. The 'community', the 'togetherness' of the five supposed friends, seems to function only through the exclusion of the sixth. Identity is established and reinforced by the exclusion of the other. Thus, the 'friends' form a space of power that is clearly marked by a latent disposition to engage in violence: '(...) we push him away with our elbows, but however much we push him away, back he comes'.

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In a darkened section of Andrea Morein's studio, two steel grids are suspended at the same height – approximately chest- or eye-level – from the ceiling. Their horizontal and vertical struts protrude threateningly in all directions. The grids are part of a spatial installation, which is completed by the projection of three slides using old-fashioned cast-iron single-frame projectors. The projections, which partly touch each other, partly overlap, again show grid patterns: windows illuminated from behind with grid bars – this is at least how it seems. Long and patient observation is required to understand that the window shapes are light and shadow cast on a floor, the images of which have been rotated through 90 degrees. Andrea Morein has used these photographs in an earlier work, the 2010 'Architecture of Memory' series, which is composed of photographs taken in Morein's Amsterdam studio, where she worked from 1994 to 1998. In this installation, three different levels of reality overlap: the material steel grid, the immaterial projection of the photographed light and shadow cast by a window, and the real shadow of the grid, which is created by the light of the projectors and mixes with the pictoriality of the photos. One can view the work as an observer from the outside, but one can also enter the installation space, by passing under the grating, thus interrupting the light from the

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[2] On this point consult Manfred Voigts, *Geburt und Teufelsdienst: Franz. Kafka als Schrifsteller und als Jude.* Würzburg, 2018, p. 37.

projectors and casting a shadow on the wall. The rigid structure of the floating grids in particular creates an oppressive atmosphere of danger, cordoning off and confinement.

Andrea Morein calls the installation *Rescue Our Century,* a surprisingly appellative title, whose pathos and urgency, however, is softened by the abbreviation R.O.C. It is not difficult to understand why our still fresh 21st century is deemed in need of rescuing. The spread of authoritarian, nationalist models of society and right-wing populist ideas; the diffusion of a political style characterized by blatant lies, known in trendy new German [as in English] as *alternative facts*; the expression of exclusion, malice and acts of vilification against entire sections of populations, including in democratically elected parliaments; the erosion of democratic decision-making processes by economic interests; a renewed virulence of anti-Semitism... All these and many other disasters have haunted democratic societies in the West for years. Projects crucial to the self-image of free Western societies, such as the European Community or the Transatlantic Alliance, have come under pressure, if they are not already starting to collapse. Of course Andrea Morein does not believe that the world can be saved through art. The naivety and/or arrogance of the artistic avant-gardes from the first half of the 20th century in attempting to revolutionize the world through art has long since vanished. Nevertheless, artists must also respond to the social and political changes that are taking place. This is exactly what Andrea Morein makes clear with R.O.C. The installation is an abstract artistic reflection of a situation of real threat. To take cognizance of this and not to suppress it from art discourse is a microscopically small but nevertheless necessary contribution to 'saving our century'.

Translated by Steven Corcoran