

Hannover within one hour of launching the offensive that would signal the start of the next global conflict.

Carl's gaze, distanced by time, looks back at these protest singers of her youth, a phenomenon that grew out of an apparently very real condition of life in Germany at the time. Yet, what she sees now, if her drawings are anything to go by, is the particular kind of Christ-like suffering that these young men cultivated as a persona. There is a way in which the work observes the personas, now disentangled from the subjective impetus of immediacy, and recognizes something about the particular typologies of performative social identities arising out of that divided Germany. It is almost as if, in order to be politically credible, in order to prove that their politics were *echt*, they needed to show that they suffered for their compassion for humanity; like Christ.

At times, Carl's drawings are almost delightfully cruel, something of a punk parody filtered through the satirical traditions of Weimar and underground comics, yet always with an eye on the canonical approaches to drawing within a 'high art' context, a Formalist approach being important to her. They certainly don't let these minstrels off the hook. They note the Christ-like self-image and yet they move our way of seeing closer to Don Quixote or even Sancho Panza. But, in so doing, there is also a mode in which the work evidences Carl's understanding of how the unusual political condition had immediate and real consequences for almost all aspects of German daily life up until the end of the 1980's. She enables us to see how it has evaporated so quickly in particular ways that, in hindsight, its veracity is questioned. Was it ever actually like this? These works don't seem to be offering a definitive answer or even a photographic document of those times. One gets the feeling that even Bettina Carl might be uncertain.

The mechanisms that make the connections between her personal experience of a thing – such as having spent time hanging around on the same scenes and circuits as the protest singers – and the intellectual understanding of a political history are something of a constant in the work of Bettina Carl. It could even be argued that, in this sense, they indicate a particularly German artistic sensibility. This is hardly surprising. Germany, after all, has specialised in spectacular and extreme political developments and events over the last hundred years, making it difficult for any thinking German artist to fully discount the political sphere in his or her practice.

Unlike some, however, Carl's practice is anchored firmly in finding the intersection between the personal and the political that is not presented as a doctrinaire format; does not come to a prescriptive conclusion. It could even be argued, from a radical Marxist perspective, for example, that the work is indulgent since it fails to apply its critique towards a specific political goal or ethical outcome easily grasped by a mass audience. The relevant point, though, is that it is analytical or even dissects historical political conditions using a visual language, but never from the position of a pre-determined political outcome. This is not the work of a committed Marxist artist seeking to underscore the ultimately desirable option of Socialism by showing disparities in political circumstances that can be pointed in the direction of a socialist solution. It is almost phenomenological, as Carl seems to be weighing up, documenting, describing and, above all, trying to understand entities that have cropped up in the timeline that she has so far shared with a bigger German history.

This intersection of the personal and the historical is a recurrent theme in her practice and perhaps we can even take an early installation work 'Path' (1999 to 2001) as something of a document of intent that pre-empts many subsequent ways of exploring variations on the theme. In this installation, the cut-out figures centred around the assassinated Marat (after David) and text create something akin to a fairground attraction in which people pay to have their photographs taken with their heads poking through openings in crudely painted boards, recasting themselves for the camera as a slapstick comedy character or the caricature of some historical figure. Carl reworks the format in a way that the same principles apply. The viewer is no longer a passive viewer but, by implication, subsumed into the action of history unfolding. The work speaks of the disparity between general social notions of 'history' as a contained, distant thing and the reality of living through it as a fragmented and highly subjective process. Carl's work presses us into the position of an active participant within the momentous political debates since the French Revolution and, as such, demands that we reconsider our relationship to the apparently divorced experience of history.

This very early work is demonstrative in a way that is no longer present in the subsequent series of installed drawings. It's almost as if, having made her point, Carl was free to move on and explore related ideas much more laterally through other media. Furthermore,

Bettina Carl, 'Ich hab mich wohl im Tag geirrt/Grober Reiter', 2006-2007, ca. 235 x 360cm. Mischtechnik/Papier.

