‘A Fragment of the World’. An interview with Petra Bauer

Dagmar Brunow

Petra Bauer is a visual artist and filmmaker, based in Stockholm. Bauer's works centre on activist and feminist histories. She is also interested in film as a political and collective practice. Educated at the Malmö Academy of Fine Arts, Bauer is today a professor in visual art with an emphasis on the moving image at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Her works have been exhibited widely, including at festivals and exhibitions at institutions such as 56th Venice Biennale– international exhibition; Showroom, London; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven; Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm; Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; and Frankfurter Kunstverein.

DB¹: Your works are based on archival research. What initiates your archival search? Is it a specific question or a topic?

PB: My working process and research phase always start with a random encounter with materials that trigger my curiosity and desire to know more. It can be a photograph, an illustration, an object, a story or other materials that draw my attention; a fragment of the world that is unknown to me. Needless to say, the randomness is of course produced by the synergy between the material and my previous knowledge, and not the least political and social interests. With this rather romantic description of how the process starts, I would like to emphasize that it is not the archive that makes me look for materials, but rather a fragment that leads me to different archives. And in that sense, the material leads the way.

DB: Let us take a look at some of your works. *Kvinnor i kamp* (‘Women in Struggle’, Bauer 2015) is an installation about the early socialist women’s movement in Sweden. How did you work with archival footage in this project?

PB: ‘Women in Struggle’ consists entirely of group photographs and posters from the early twentieth century. It is an installation, not a film. My research into the material started after attending a lecture by Margareta Ståhl, who talked about the history of the People’s House (Folkets Hus) movement in Sweden. During the lecture she showed us a poster reaching out to potential participants for a film project to be produced within the framework of the labour

¹ The interview, which took place in Stockholm in May 2017, was translated and edited by Dagmar Brunow and Ingrid Stigsdotter.

movement. To me the poster pointed towards a possible film history in which the Swedish labour movement had actively been involved in collective filmmaking. I got curious. Ståhl referred me to the Swedish Labour Movement's Archives and Library. Aimlessly I looked through the database, but without finding any other posters of the kind Ståhl had shown us in her lecture. However, I did find several posters that were produced by different socialist women's clubs in Sweden in the early twentieth century that were trying to reach out to other women. I got curious about their history. After a few months, an archivist helped me retrieve non-catalogued posters from the collection. To get a deeper insight into the socialist women's movement of this period (1900-1921) I started to read the monthly magazine *Morgonbris* that was published by women within the movement. Soon I discovered that in each issue a group photograph of a socialist women's club was published. I was drawn to the photographs because they represented women as political subjects within a socialist collective. Eventually I started to look for the originals, trying to find as much information as possible about these photographs. My final work consists of 70–200 posters and 20–50 photographs, depending on the space available at the institution where it is exhibited.

DB: How do you situate yourself as an artist in relation to archival footage?

PB: The approach I use when engaging with historical material can be described as a 'snowball method', where one finding leads me to the next. A fragment leads me to another history, which leads to another fragment and to a new aspect of a specific history. The final work, however, is not primarily about historiography, or about education, or about bringing forward forgotten, hidden or marginalized histories. For me, it is about letting the material speak its own language: to create situations in which the viewer's curiosity is awoken and new thoughts are generated. It is about creating a situation in which the viewer can embark on a similar journey as I have – at least to a certain extent; where fragments of an event, history or experience can be explored and paths can be taken that lead to a larger history of the women's movement. I want the archival material to generate questions about women's struggles in our times. This is important. Therefore, the material needs to be presented without too many explanatory comments. Instead, a process of reflection should be started among the viewers, generated by the posters' graphic form and the photographs' motifs. This means that the material will be experienced and understood differently depending on the viewer's previous knowledge. To me the ultimate strength of this work is that it changes according to the viewer's references.

DB: I would like to talk about your film *Conversations: Stina Lundberg Dabrowski meets Petra Bauer* (Bauer 2010) which has been exhibited widely. It is a work on authorship,

drawing on feminist film collectives in the UK in the 1970s. How did you approach the question of relating to the archive here?

PB: The aesthetic approach is a conventional setting for a TV interview, during which the well-known Swedish journalist Stina Lundberg Dabrowski interviews me as an artist and filmmaker about my works. In the interview, however, I pretend to be a member of historical film collectives and I claim to be the author of historical films I have not made. Shorter clips of the films are inserted into the interview while I talk about the films' political intentions. On the one hand, the interview is staged in the sense that I hired Stina Lundberg Dabrowski, and that only one of the films is my own. On the other hand, we have no script, and the questions were not prepared beforehand; which meant I did not know what Stina would ask me, while she did not know how I would respond. To me, the fictional construction is clear, as the films and the film collectives we talk about are from the 1970s, the decade in which I was born, and thus too young to participate. I regard this as a clear indication that the aim with the interview reaches beyond simply fooling my audience into believing that I had produced the films, and rather focus on issues such as authorship, subjectivity, collectivity as well as questions about who has the right to write history.

The working process behind this piece exemplifies the 'snowball method' mentioned earlier: In 2009, I had started to research British film collectives that were active in the 1970s and inspired by Marxism and feminism. I was specifically interested in their claim that they wanted to do politics by aesthetic means. My research led me to the library at the BFI [British Film Institute] where I read articles written by film scholars in the 1970s while also looking for texts and other documents authored by the film collectives themselves. And not least, I tried to trace the films. Some films were archived in the BFI, whereas others were stored in boxes in the homes of former members of the film collectives. Just as in 'Women in Struggle' it was not the archive itself that interested me, but the political strategies and historical events the films related to, or even generated. As usual, I was interested in asking questions about our time, but through historical events, strategies and approaches. The 'now through then', the impact of the past on the present. To ask questions, but not necessarily to give answers. The answers need to be found elsewhere. This is what I mean by saying that I am neither setting out to write history in the first place, nor to inform the audience about historical events. Rather than illustrating or proving an idea, the historical material should act in its own right, as well as generate questions and reflections. Therefore it is important how the material is composed and related to the present, which is why both composition and montage become elements of artistic creation. In the interview with Stina Lundberg Dabrowski four film clips

are shown that stem from works by different film collectives from the 1970s and 1980s. They are, however, connected and politically related to each other by me claiming that I had been a member of all of them. In other words, the connections between the historical films and our present time are foregrounded by my contemporary body.

Since I claim in the interview that I made all those films, it was also important to me not to ask for permission to show the clips. Or rather, there is only one clip where I asked for permission. The reason was out of loyalty and friendship with the distributor and makers of that particular film, there was a trust that I could not break. I got hold of the other films through various other channels. In contrast, when I sold the film to Moderna Museet in Stockholm, all parties who were voluntarily or involuntarily involved had to approve the sale and the contract. The contract clearly states that the work cannot be owned by a private collector and that no individual can make a profit on the work. The profit on the sale was given to a feminist film distributor.

DB: Your work *Sisters!* has come about in collaboration with the Southall Black Sisters (SBS). The film can be considered a moving archive of their work. How did your understanding of filmmaking as an archival practice develop during the work with this project?

PB: The Southall Black Sisters (SBS) is a London-based feminist organisation founded in 1979 that fights for the rights and against the oppression of black and ethnic minority women in the UK. In short, the film focuses on what SBS regards as some of the important feminist issues of our times, which we address through a feminist film aesthetics. In the film, we connect the present with the past. This is accomplished primarily in three different ways: First, we filmed the photographs hanging on the walls in the offices that depict SBS's engagement over the years in different demonstrations, events and campaigns. These photographs, taken by the members themselves, are part of SBS's own archive that holds many photographs, videos and sound-recordings. During the research period I went through all the existing material, but eventually we decided only to use the archive material that the SBS had decided to display on the walls. This strategy made it easy for us to link the past to the present through visuals. Second, over the years the SBS has organised several demonstrations and campaigns. For almost each event they have created a new banner that explicitly addresses the issue being raised. In the film we decided to stage a scene where the members of SBS unfold the different banners and talk about how they regard them today. In other words, the focus in the scene is on the banner as an archival material in relation to a present discussion that includes both political memories and thoughts on today's political

climate. As a third strategy, we decided to film a speech held by the director of SBS during which she talks about the political differences between contemporary and past struggles, from the perspective of the SBS. This account is a form of oral history that I regard as important historical material.

DB: Do you usually change the archival footage, for instance, change its speed, tint it or improve it?

PB: In none of the works mentioned earlier did we make any changes in the archival material; on the contrary, it has been reproduced as it was found in the archive with its tears, scratches and other 'damage' that have happened over time. In 'Women in Struggle' I even regard these scratches as an important part of the work, as they show the layers of time, creating a material connection between different decades. On some of the posters you can even see archival stamps and numbers. Therefore, we did not reproduce posters from the early twentieth century in a strict sense, but an image of time and memory connected to the early socialist women's movement in Sweden. In all three examples discussed here the archival material has been recontextualized, thereby generating new interpretations and new relations between the material and the audience.

DB: Do you see your work as contributing to a counter-archive?

PB: To some extent, one can say that I contribute to an alternative historiography or even to a kind of counter-narrative, as I bring forward aspects of political history that are not acknowledged in a canon; neither the history of the Swedish socialist women's movement, nor the British film collectives, nor the role of Southall Black Sisters is widely known by the general public, and is at times even overlooked by other activists and historians. However, for me, as I have already mentioned, I have no desire to narrate these histories, but to raise questions through visual materials. My artist's practice sets out to let the material 'speak' in its own way. Apart from being overlooked by historians, the materials that I use seem neither to be scientific enough for other academics, nor interesting enough for art historians.

My concept of letting this specific visual material 'speak' is an important strategy when questioning dominant modes of representation and narration. Yet the most important question I pose to the material is: what can we learn from different feminist political struggles in terms of both political and aesthetic strategies today?

Film references

Bauer, Petra (2010), *Conversations: Stina Lundberg Dabrowski meets Petra Bauer*, Sweden.

- (2011), *Sisters!*, UK/Sweden.
- (2015), 'Women in Struggle', Sweden.