

Utopia as Freedom of Imaginative Power
Essay on a Utopian Sculpture by Barbara Caveng
Paolo Bianchi

Heaven Heaven Heaven by Barbara Caveng (*1963) consists of human bones in almost the original scale of a Kalashnikov AK-47. She used a shoulder blade, a thigh bone, an ulna, a radius, a humerus, a lower leg bone, a foot and a hand skeleton. We know that contemporary artists previously worked with materials such as fat, felt, rags, elephant dung, snail shells, chocolate and animal bones. In the present piece of Caveng, human bones have been used for the first time to represent a weapon whose sole purpose is to kill people. Hundreds of millions of these fully automatic weapons are presumed to be in circulation worldwide. Vietnam, Afghanistan, Congo, the Balkan, Palestine, Syria, Egypt – the Kalashnikov is missing from no bellicose crisis: Death as a dystopian motif.

Art as weapon

Art can also assume the power of a weapon and can be consciously deployed in this capacity, whether in literature or visual arts, whether commissioned for the purpose of political propaganda or autonomously. As Friedrich Wolf put it in 1928, “Art today is a flood light and a weapon!”¹

The Swiss artist Barbara Caveng had already replicated a Kalashnikov out of banana skins in 2010 and later made an attempt with cattle bones. During a stay in Syria in 2011 she experienced at close hand the menace of everyday weapon use. Standing against the wall looking into the barrel of a gun is, according to Caveng, to “experience a pure moment”. The artistic search for the adequate expression of such an existential moment of presence led to the idea of constructing a weapon out of human bones, in this case the AK-47, the most numerously manufactured assault weapon in the world. Its name and its image are a symbol for relentless violence, revolution, war of liberation and terror.

“Art today is a flood light and a weapon!” Under this banner, Barbara Caveng has aimed the flood light of her archaeological-seeming weapon at the global problem of war and everyday violence. For Caveng, art not only has a weapon-like form of expression, but is also a subversive act of denunciation, at once testimonial and provocation. Her work is directed against society’s inclination to lethargy and rescues the aura of art against the medial using up of images.

The artist as nomad

Caveng’s work is also guided by the impulse to react to the loss of utopia, of the utopian imagination both in society and in art. There is no overlooking the fact that art has lost its appeal, appearing increasingly bereft of emotion and content. As an “operating system”, art has institutionalised itself in the status quo, without recognisable ambition to go beyond this. Caveng confronts this situation with the attempt, in her image worlds, performances and installations and with patience and consistency, to articulate the necessity of an aesthetics of experiment and existence, most recently in her grant-funded project *Kunst fürs Dorf* [Art for the Village]. In 2013, the artist moved into a village in the borough Blankensee on the Polish border and researched the local geography and social structures. The biographies of the older locals include flight and expulsion, the newer ones try to adapt to life on the land. The desire to settle in and settle down, the need for a secure existence and the question of what it takes to belong somewhere are pertinent to both urban and rural living. The artworks, made in collaboration with around 200 of the 600 inhabitants of the village, have the taste of the home-baked cake sold by the Tourism Association at the Art Kiosk, the smell of the freshly

1 Friedrich Wolf, *Kunst ist Waffe!* quoted here from: <http://www.litde.com/textsammlung-zur-deutschen-literaturgeschichte/friedrich-wolf-kunst-ist-waffe.php> (last consulted: 4.2.2014) Transl. SB.

felled timber from the Timber Brigade, the feel of the soft, worn out cotton fabrics used by the sewing workshop to make patchwork parasols.²

Caveng approaches her projects with no pre-set intention. She sees herself not as a social worker, but as someone doing field research. Originally from Zurich, she has lived in Berlin since 1996, establishing herself with participative projects in which art and life fold together to form a living artwork. Her most well-known, often copied work is *Final Meals* from 2000, a photo installation depicting the last meals of people on death row. *Neuköllner Sozialparkett* (2010) was also much acclaimed, showing a stylised floor. It now belongs to the Berlinische Galerie.

Caveng's work communicates her understanding of art as militant and optimistic, realistic and hopeful, critical and utopian. Her work is characterised by its participatory and interactive approach, integrating individuals, networks and entire art circles in collective work processes. Her utopian spirit also expresses itself in a desire for change that sees her travelling far afield in the international art scene to locations such as Iceland, South Korea, Syria, Norway and Switzerland. As a nomad she can easily plant her tent anywhere and is everywhere at home and foreign in equal measure. According to the philosopher Rosi Braidotti, nomads possess a certain tactical shrewdness, their lack of place becomes mobility and this in turn becomes an instrument of critique.³ Social spaces like villages, families, university, projects, media and pubs are, depending on the circumstances, oases, transit stops, rest places, battle arenas, playing fields etc. It is never a room with entrance and exit. There is no door and when there is it is always open and the nomad has one foot on the threshold.

The idea of social sculpture and the aspect of intercultural understanding through art mean that in Caveng's art the Utopia of cohabitation⁴ accrues value in the context of an increasingly established global art. If cultural diversity is a characteristic of Swiss identity then Caveng's work refers, whether consciously or not, to cohabitation rather than collision between different cultures, communities and world views.

Minimising fear and cruelty

The presentation of the unpainted anti-war sculpture *Heaven Heaven Heaven* at the Werkleitz Festival *Utopien vermeiden*, calls to mind that the overriding aim of the liberalism that predominates public life here in Germany is to secure the political conditions necessary to ensure personal freedom. The American philosopher Judith N. Shklar, little known in Germany, set down an alternative liberalism in her prominent essay from 1989 *The Liberalism of Fear*.⁵ For Shklar, one of the most important aspects of liberalism is that its institutional mechanisms harbour the potential to help prevent the worst forms of human rights abuse. The aim of her theory is not to attain an ideal society but rather to discover ways of preventing menacing situations. Shklar's thinking is not guided by human sensibilities, never emphasising the striving for popular freedom, but focuses instead on the avoidance of the fear instilled by cruelty, the infliction of suffering and the terror of modern warfare.

She writes, "the governments of this world with their overwhelming power to kill, maim, indoctrinate, and make war are not to be trusted unconditionally."⁶ This is not a call for weak government. It is unequivocally directed instead at all those state practices outside of the law. This implies a liberal trajectory from below, from citizens demanding their rights. "If citizens

2 The arte documentation can be viewed online: <http://dorf.creative.arte.tv/de/show> (last consulted: 6.2.2014)

3 Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York 1994.

4 Cf. Hans Saner, *Gespräch über die Utopie. Experimentalutopie als Lebensform für Gemeinschaften. Fragen von Paolo Bianchi*. In: *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 143 (1999), p. 74–79.

5 See Judith N. Shklar, *The Liberalism of Fear*. In: Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 21–38.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

are to act individually and in associations, especially in a democracy, to protest and block any sign of governmental illegality and abuse, they must have a fair share of moral courage, self-reliance, and stubbornness to assert themselves effectively. To foster wellinformed and self-directed adults must be the aim of every effort to educate the citizens of a liberal society.”⁷

Schklar argues for the avoidance of physical suffering inflicted on humans. Statements of basic moral and ideological convictions are deliberately kept vague. She considers feelings as deserving of attention as political ideas and the attempt to put them into practice. The basic idea of this minimalist programme is most apparent of all in the striving to reduce and eliminate human fear and cruelty. This includes the fear of a society of fearful citizens. Fear has two roles to play in Shklar’s thinking. On the one hand, it is important to lessen fear. But on the other hand the imaginative power set in motion by fear is advantageous. This can be transposed onto the Werkleitz Festival motto *Utopien vermeiden* [Avoiding Utopias]. The imagination ignited by the utopian impetus is needed to avoid utopias. Fantasy and overshooting thought are required to sound the depths of utopian possibilities.

Concrete Utopia and experimental utopia

A key sentence toward the beginning of the essay commits the author to a categorically realistic liberalism. “Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult.”⁸ Fear and prejudice have indeed always stood in the way of freedom and have mostly been exercised by governments. Shklar is less inclined to celebrate the blessings of freedom than to reflect on the dangers of tyranny and war that pose a threat to these blessings. Liberalism of fear does not offer the *summum bonum*, the highest good, to which all political agency should aspire, but rests rather on the avoidance of the *summum malum*, the greatest evil. The author observes that the liberalism of fear makes universalist, cosmopolitical, eclectic and non-utopian claims.

Herein lies a deeper correspondence with the work of Barbara Caveng, characterised as it is by the idea of a universalist, cosmopolitical and eclectic aesthetic. When Caveng speaks of non-utopianism she does not mean anti-utopia or doing without utopia. She means instead a utopia not only expressed in literature but also in dissident practice and alternative life-styles. Over and above the classical concept of utopia as the dream of a better life in an ideal society, the term also refers to the attempt to set free possibilities for society beyond the given in the here and now. Not abstractly but as “concrete utopia”, as it is called by Ernst Bloch.

The philosopher Hans Saner makes productive use of the term “experimental utopia” to refer to forms of life, or more precisely, cultures. “Experimental utopias are forms of life that expose themselves to trial and error und can thus be falsified or affirmed.”⁹ The crux here is for Saner that individuals are in two cultures at once: in a framing culture consisting of everyone and in a local culture consisting of a few. That means that the local culture must always attempt to fit into a generically different frame. “One lives in ones own country somewhat as foreigners do, living differently in the community than in society.”¹⁰

Utopian thinking as critique of the status quo

Despite the disparities in their outlook on the world and society, Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno came to an amazing accord in a radio dialogue from 1964. Bloch says, “Teddy, I think we’re nevertheless in agreement on this point: the fundamental function of utopia is the critique of the status quo. If we had not already jumped over the hurdles we couldn’t even begin to see them as hurdles.” Adorno replies, “Yes, utopia is lodged fundamentally in the

7 Ibid., p. 33.

8 Ibid., p. 21.

9 Saner, op. cit., p. 78. Transl. SB.

10 Ibid.

definite negation, in the definite negation of that which merely is and which by rendering itself concrete as falsity always refers to what should be.”¹¹

With his books *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch is an important intercessor for utopian thinking, whereas Adorno is radically opposed to “colouring in” what would be a better future. Adorno’s aniconism¹² draws on the insight that we are all so intricately in social conditions that we are unable to think the other and the new in all its dimensions. The absence of freedom can be criticised. But what *is* freedom? The attempt to provide a clear answer to this question is doomed to fail. What remains possible is a step by step approximation to the meaning and substance of the concept. Bloch is also against finished images, but not against colouring-in in general.

For both Bloch and Adorno, permitting utopian thinking means not accepting things as they are. Hans Saner agrees with this while pointing out that “utopian thinking is inevitably critique of the status quo, either by opposing a positive alternative or by extrapolating and exaggerating as catastrophic its negative aspects. But it is not only critique. Its utopian thinking is also the play of ideas, art, construction, invention of the new, thinking what has never been thought before, dream and vision. If you only see the critical function of utopia you degrade it to an instrument, rendering it weak and banal.”¹³

The yearning to make an ideal life real is indelibly written into the human. Yet philosophy views the ideal in distinct opposition to the real. The real is temporal, individual, processual. The ideal meanwhile is timeless, general and unchanging. Saner notes that utopia can only make an image of the ideal way of life in the form of text, whereas utopia in the form of experiment is reality. “As reality it cannot avoid tensions and ruptures, mortality, randomness and suffering. But it is bound up with the hope that violence among humans can be reduced to a minimum and that a community can confront suffering with solidarity.”¹⁴

Saner comes close to Shklar when he explains: “At the heart of my consideration of utopia is the question: how can we live together although we come from and create diverse traditions? The answer is that it is possible if we have a liberal cultural frame within which there is space for cultural communities both traditional and utopian.”¹⁵

Utopia as the removable figurine of change

Burghart Schmidt, a German philosopher living in Vienna and an expert on Bloch and Utopia, writes that when the Soviet Union collapsed, a socio-political experiment went bankrupt that had been deeply anti-utopian, “in that it put its citizens in prisons and psychiatric clinics for the crime of diverging from the utopia of socialism.”¹⁶ After the victory of capitalism and liberalism “the utopian recovered under the name of the visionary, the imagination and creativity”.¹⁷ As Schmidt points out, the rise of the creative class landed the final blow on utopia “in its critical function, which it then lost”.¹⁸

The NSA espionage scandal caused by Edward Snowden showed how the Californian utopia of Silicon Valley was perverted from the hippy culture of the seventies, from Marshall McLuhan’s vision of a society freed by technology into domination by technology. The dream

11 Adorno & Ernst Bloch. *Möglichkeiten der Utopie heute* (SWF 1964), online at: <https://archive.org/details/AdornoErnstBloch-MglichenDerUtopieHeuteswf1964> (last consulted: 4.2.2014) Transl. SB.

12 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt/M. 1966/2003.

13 Saner, op. cit., p. 75. Transl. SB.

14 Ibid., p. 79.

15 Ibid.

16 Burghart Schmidt, *Wie geht es der Utopie heute, 2010? Ein Nullsummenspiel?* In: *Konstruktiv*, No. 277 (2010), p. 24. Transl. SB.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

of an eco-topia, green industry and counter culture with free sexuality and grass roots democracy is mutating into the surveillance system of a data-topia made of chips and bits and to a way of life dominated by pornography and the freedom to express “likes”. The hope of realising liberal ideals like freedom, equality and solidarity has not been fulfilled by a long shot. The circumspect utopianism to which Caveng’s practice corresponds is the idea of a more just democracy in which the commonality among citizens is once again determined by the relations they cultivate with each other rather than by property. For the artist, the conditions for the development of a feeling for a “homeland” is that “people feel themselves as active members of social network and a society. I hold this for more important than the connection to place.”¹⁹ Utopian practice consists in weaving a thread into the network of relations and coping with the uncertainty of the results that can evolve.

As Schmidt, Bloch’s long-time collaborator, reminds us, the important thing about Bloch’s utopia is that it is a kind of removable figurine like those in altars, only this figurine removes itself from itself. Utopianism moves on a plane with no predetermined plan, with a line of flight instead, an exodus. Exodus means altering the conditions under which a conflict unfolds instead of subjugating yourself to them. The occupy movement in 2011 was one such exodus. In the precariousness of occupying important locations, new social relations, new forms of life and organisation are developed as active forms of flight. Flight means here displacement, shift, digression, mutability. Hanno Rauterberg has stated this concisely: “The city becomes a lab for all those who no longer believe in the grand utopia while still believing that the present can be changed for the better [...] It is regarded as the right place to reason about everything important. It becomes the focal point of a hoped-for revolution.”²⁰ Taksim Square in Istanbul, the Maidan in Kiev, Ratchadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok and the Swedish satellite town Husby all lost their political innocence in 2013. The protestors have implicated the places in new histories. Even though the desired changes have not eventuated the places have been transformed into reminders of a concrete utopian spirit of action.

As Schmidt explains, “as the leitmotiv of a practice, utopia transforms itself in the course of its realisation, whereas the plan remains static. [...] The mutability of utopian contents is of the essence to utopia, because utopia comes entirely out of and flows into the motivation to act and because political action is not the execution of plans.”²¹ Just as a liberalism of fear must be postulated with intellectual modesty, so too must “Utopia be modest in all its domains”.²² Schmidt is perspicacious enough to recognise that it cannot be a matter of avoiding utopias but on the contrary we must understand that utopia stands “always at a new beginning [...] and that with a sustained determination to balance out its modesty.”²³ All art has something of utopia in a primal state, utopia as a form of life figures forth in it. Utopias embedded in works of art and living works of art²⁴ should not be understood as illusions that go awry in practice but rather as places of desire in which success can be realised. Caveng’s utopian installation *Heaven Heaven Heaven* replicates with human bones the violence of social cohabitation and is at the same time subtended by the ideal demand to end human suffering and cruelty. In the contemplation of the bone Kalashnikov, the hope remains that the observer may come to attain enlightenment. Utopia as the power of

19 Barbara Caveng in an email to the author from February 13, 2014. Transl. SB.

20 Hanno Rauterberg, *Wir sind die Stadt! Urbanes Leben in der Digitalmoderne*. Frankfurt/M. 2013, p. 12 f. Transl. SB.

21 Schmidt, op. cit., p. 24.

22 Ibid., p. 25.

23 Ibid.

24 On the concept and phenomenon of living artwork see Paolo Bianchi (ed.), *Lebenskunst als Real Life*. Ruppichterorth 1999, in *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 143 (1999); and Paolo Bianchi (ed.), *Lebenskunstwerke (LKW)*. Ruppichterorth 1998, in *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 142 (1998).

imagination leads to “total change”²⁵ and the “blasting of the current society”.²⁶ The totality means here: everything, and much more.

Caption

Barbara Caveng, *Heaven Heaven Heaven*, 2013. Replica in a scale of 1:1 of the Kalashnikov assault rifle AK-47 (AK = Avtomat Kalaschnikova) made of human bones, 87 cm long. Courtesy of the artist.

25 Adorno quoted from Adorno & Ernst Bloch. *Möglichkeiten der Utopie heute* (SWF 1964). Transl. SB.

26 Ernst Bloch, *Abschied von der Utopie? Vorträge*. Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 17. Transl. SB.