

THE CONFERENCE OF THE ANIMALS

Conversation between the Curator Amy Zion and the Artist Ulrike Müller.

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The Conference of the Animals is a two-part project at the Queens Museum in New York, by artist Ulrike Müller and curator Amy Zion, which was set to open on April 5, 2020. After a five-month delay, the exhibition opened in September 2020, and shortly afterward, Müller and Zion sat down to reflect on the project, the pandemic, and broader questions about their respective practices.

At the Queens Museum, school children are a large segment of the audience, and the director is actively thinking about expanding the institution to include a children's gallery and playground. Unlike other contemporary art museums in the city, the Queens Museum is a very particular institution that crosses from contemporary art to historical exhibits documenting two World Fairs, for which the building was originally conceived and served as a pavilion. It also functions as a community center in a neighborhood that is home to many recent immigrants. *The Conference of the Animals* consists of a monumental-sized mural by Müller and an exhibition of children's drawings by Zion.

Ulrike Müller: Let's start where we are, sitting in Corona Park under the Unisphere, following an opening gathering for our exhibition. It feels incredible that the project came together after this interruption. That we actually had a chance to see it together with a small group of friends today is a big deal. We were installing in the galleries in August while a food bank was underway, literally on the other side of the wall, and we are processing the incredible loss that this neighborhood has experienced and how this reflects on the museum's role in relation to their immediate public.

Amy Zion: Yes exactly, it's a very different situation from where our collaboration began, and really from where you began: your invitation from the Queens museum to realize a project for their Large Wall. How did you go from that to the subject of children's drawings?

UM: One thing that immediately struck me was that the Large Wall encloses the Panorama of the City of New York—a miniature version of a big city enclosed by a huge wall, that was going to be the support for my painting. I had this idea that putting children’s drawings directly onto my mural would do something productive, both with my work and in the space of the museum. I wanted to use this opportunity to push my formal thinking into an explicitly social space, and I realized that the larger scale raised questions about modes of address and how the work positions its viewers.

My smaller scale paintings are premised on a one-on-one encounter between an object and a viewer. By sheer scale, this mural was going to cross over into a conversation of public art. I was worried about losing a sense of playfulness and arriving at something that could be perceived as controlling and prescriptive.

The connection to children’s drawings came out of a conversation with students at the Cooper Union where I taught a painting and drawing class last year. I had them read Winnicott, and was aware of how he had collected drawings made during the London Blitz by children separated from their families. One student, Cate Pasquarelli, told me about drawings she made as a child after 9/11, in which smoke played a recurring role. She referenced a drawing of a cat with smoke coming out of its ears. Something clicked for me; it had to do with a kid’s perception, the way in which children experience the city. I made a connection between the miniature city, children processing things that happen in the city, and the history of the building, but I didn’t know where to go from there.

AZ: Yes, and that’s when the curator Alhena Katsof introduced you to me. She knew about my interest in children’s drawings and an exhibition that actually was meant to happen in 2018 but was cancelled. So the show was in limbo and I had been trying to find a context for my research.

Katsof first facilitated a meeting with another curator who I greatly admire, Lynne Cooke, which helped to clarify my thinking. The original exhibition was going to create a roughly chronological history of the United States through children’s drawings. My initial research found that there is a tendency in Western societies throughout the 20th century and still today to document political events with children’s drawings and that was really what held my interest. In talking to Cooke, however, she expanded my thinking and said no, that’s one part of a show that should be more expansive: How do children’s drawings fit into psychology? How do they fit into art history? How do they fit into international diplomacy? and so on. When you and I met, it was this nice opportunity to think of this exhibition as chapter one: an exhibition, as part of your project, site-specific to the museum; to the history of the building, which hosted the UN General Assembly from 1946–1950...

UM: Children’s drawings are at once ubiquitous and overlooked. They are often meaningful to people

close to a child but they don't register within an art world. Where does that leave creativity, in a moment when imagining that things could be different seems crucial and our collective future is at stake? Meaning production as a social process, which drives my work, is very directly present in kids' drawings, at least up to a certain age. They invent the language for what they want to say as they're saying it.

AZ: It really was interesting for me to come into the project through your invitation. You had an intuition that you needed children's drawings to do this sort of scale thing, but how that would happen remained very open.

UM: Yes, it was a slow process from an idea toward a concrete approach. You came on board relatively late, with only months to put together the exhibition. Now that the work is actually up we can start thinking about how there isn't one conceptual bracket between the mural and your exhibition. Instead, at least to my mind, the two parts are held together in several different ways.

AZ: Definitely. It's interesting, too, that you mentioned your initial interest in children's drawings stem from this anecdote about your student and 9/11. When we met I said I'm totally interested, but let me just make sure I can find material directly related to New York City, and then I found the drawings from the Children's Museum of Art's 9/11 collection. That discovery was enough to give me confidence that a whole exhibition was possible. Of course, that was October 2019 and no one predicted the pandemic. Now it turns out that the project is bookended by these traumas; especially how they affect children in New York City, which is very much on people's minds at the moment, particularly with schools closing. Children and animals are protagonists in *The Animals' Conference* [Erich Kästner's *Die Konferenz der Tiere*, 1949], the book from which the exhibition takes its title. Together, our projects are also populated by both figures. How did this coupling become important to you?

UM: I had arrived at animal-like shapes working on monotypes in the print shop, where the process literalized questions of legibility and image, and that carried over into drawings for the mural.

The title was another at first intuitive connection. At some point, I remembered *The Animals' Conference*, a book I had as a child. When I reread the book, I realized that it also is tied to a very particular historical moment: the story that Erich Kästner tells is directly informed by his pacifist stance in the wake of World War II. So yes, many small steps amounted to a stringing-together of Western 20th century history as anchored by traumatic events, a history that is present in the building, and is in stark contrast to the progressivist ideals of the World Fairs, for which the museum's building was initially conceived.

AZ: It's true and it's a reminder of the moment we were living through before the pandemic hit. I mean the scale of the kind of repetitive crises was different but that it had still become this moment where... nothing was ever stopping, and it never felt any more like there was a break from an environmental crisis, or a political crisis. And this kind of adjustment, that many if not most parts of the world have already experienced, of just a perpetual state of craziness, I think this was very much on both of our minds: what do you do as an artist in this situation?

UM: Absolutely. In practical terms the lockdown of New York City was a complete break and interruption of our lives, but then also the pandemic itself just pointed to what we already knew: that our way of life is destructive and unsustainable. Along those lines, the changed situation emphasized concerns and amplified resonances. It's not like all thinking was completely resituated.

AZ: No, and I think that's how a lot of people are talking about the pandemic. It just highlighted all these things that were going on before. Everything just became unavoidably present.

UM: The pandemic in a lot of ways is a further redistribution of a dystopian present, where some are shielded by privilege and many are not. The crisis is on such a bodily level that it made people who had felt relatively safe aware of vulnerabilities, especially also white middle and upper class people in this country. As we've seen over the past months with the movement for Black lives there is a potential for solidarity that wasn't in place before.

AZ: I'm really glad that our project opened, for one, but also that we weren't sitting at home when the lockdown started thinking, 'How do we move this online or how do we turn this into something else?' It was an immediate shift in time and pace. Suddenly we had no idea when—or if!—the show would open. So I started these additional dialogues: with Petrit Halilaj to get his childhood drawings in the show; and with Nancy Gillette, a curator at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. This became a compensation for how fast the show came together. The postponement meant a lot of extra work, a lot of uncertainty, and a lot of institutional hurdles that we wouldn't have had otherwise. But at the same time, it did provide this weird addendum: you're ready to install and then all of a sudden you have five months to think through what you put together really quickly.

UM: One of the things that I was actively researching and looking at while I was working on the mural were animal sculptures in socialist housing projects from the mid 20th century, specifically in Vienna, Austria, where I lived before moving to New York. These low-key public sculptures belong to a particular historical political moment, but also to a particular mode of making art that isn't about an international

art world or a star system. It could be an artist's job to come up with the group of seals or playing ponies that inhabit the courtyard of an apartment complex. They signify something about the space while also stepping away from the heroic figuration of the more radical socialist imagination of the earlier part of the 20th century.

Socialism morphed into social democracy, and instead of workers muscular bodies one is looking at bears and cubs and animals at play... the role of art changed from agitprop to something that aims at integrating people across party lines and speaks to values such as family and play and intimacy and togetherness and all of these things, somehow cozy but enforcing norms and creating exclusions and therefore problematic. I wanted to have both a critical relationship to this history and the immediate emotional appeal of those animal figures. You could say that I also use animals as vehicles, but I tried to make them not-nameable, creaturely in a more open, unspecified way.

AZ: It does, but when you talk about being referred to as an abstract artist, but not seeing yourself that way, do you mean that you see the works as representational in a sense?

UM: No, the work seems to be moving towards images, slowly. Abstraction in a 20th century sense where you look at a still life and then you end up with a bunch of cubes. But kind of the other way around where shapes are building blocks and they can be precariously stacked to suggest an image, a kind of inversion.

AZ: What was interesting to me was that you were steeped in research about the WPA [Works Progress Administration] murals. A lot of the interesting examples of artworks by children depicting New York City came out of the WPA as well. I was reading some material from the Children's Museum of Art where these collections are held and I realized, the goal of the WPA was to bring art out of this elitist cultural sphere and into a civic sphere, like literally into Children's Schools and into public life more generally. My interest in children's drawings comes very much out of an interest in Art Brut. Jean Dubuffet shared this goal in a way, to take such "anticultural positions" to bring art closer to the people. It was a contamination of sorts.

Müller: I had to think about whether I could actually call my work a mural. It is such a historically charged term, and most often applied to work that is very explicit in its politics and that subscribes to forms of social realism and that kind of figuration. I already knew a little about the very specific history of abstract artists making murals for the WPA in New York City, like the Williamsburg Murals or the murals for the Goldwater Hospital, and it was interesting to research that more while also looking at the spatial organization and color palette of these works. The director of the WPA's mural division in New York

City was an abstract painter, Burgoyne Diller. He hired abstract artists for mural projects, but in order to avoid the ideological battles that would have arisen if an abstract composition had been labeled a “mural” they called them “wall decoration”.

Speaking about decor, I deliberately use common house paint for the mural, and some areas are sponge painted, which is a pedestrian decorative technique, a kind of faux-fancy.

AZ: So it’s interesting you bring up decor because it is a place where so much interesting stuff can appear, not necessarily appear the way it should appear—to get credit and visibility and space—but that the decorative sphere has always been a sort of fugitive space where women can produce and children can produce. My first art history teacher was more so a historian of decorative arts, she always said, that’s real life—it’s the plate we eat off of and what it says, rather than some separate, elite cultural sphere of things on a wall, which tells you less about the common world.

It’s very interesting to think about the two poles to which children’s drawings cling: in art history, they are completely ignored and seen only as inspiration. We can’t name any famous drawings by children. We can name collectors of children’s drawings or people who study them, and assign value retroactively to drawings by famous artists, but we don’t value the children artists themselves. On the other hand, children’s drawings have been used so seriously as evidentiary material with respect to war and lobbying for aid. Hardly a day goes by now that I don’t see some story or something where children’s drawings or writings are being used in that way, totally uncritically, as truth claims about something “really happening.” I think we should be really critical of that impulse and yet there seems to be no method to analyze this material. When of course there’s evidence that they’re steeped in ideology, that the role of adult authority is so present.

UM: Why do you think that children’s drawings have received so much less attention art historically than how Non-European art and art by people in mental health institutions were used by modernist artists as what Susan Sontag calls “models and mysteries”?

AZ: I think because we think of children as outside of time; once they become adults then they make serious work, then they have a name, a career that you can evaluate.

UM: The Western colonial perspective also conceptualizes so-called ‘primitive others’ as outside of time, tied to tradition and, you know, unable to innovate.

AZ: That kind of shift or correction is quite evident with respect to say, African art. It’s like, oh we were

kind of deliberately framing these cultures as unchanging and backwards and it's clear that they're not. Plus, there are scholars from those places and scholars who actually just went to those places and could do that work, because so much evidence existed to the contrary. Similarly, with work that Lynne Cooke did with Judith Scott: she is basically saying here is somebody who has an output and can we take it seriously and insert her into a larger discourse? Why not? With children's art you can't really do that in the same way, unless the children become adult artists and then you look back retrospectively somehow...

UM: Maybe it is because Western thinking is so fixated on progress that once you're an adult you can only have a sentimental relationship to your own childhood. Rather than continuing to resonate with early experiences, the understanding somehow is that childhood has to be over and in the past. On the other hand, I and a lot of people I know are spending tons of money on psychoanalysis and other forms of therapy, which contradicts that notion of time. But also on a global scale we are increasingly and undeniably dealing with the destruction and devastation that is caused by a belief in progress and growth as requirements to keep capitalism going. So now I really made a scale jump.

AZ: No, but it's true. It's true because we have this idea, and it's the way that art history has been structured as well, that time is linear and there's a progression and that there are teleologies. Okay, so now maybe we're trying to broaden the geographic scope of that and to complicate it and to say "this was happening at the same time as this" but it is still just mapping teleologies next to each other. We're not really thinking seriously about the construction of history as something that could be cyclical.

<https://www.springer.in.at/en/2020/4/konferenz-der-tiere/>