

KATE JUST
AIR KREMS REPORT 2011

My residency in Krems was extremely productive and invaluable experience.

I applied to come to Krems because of its close proximity to the town of Willendorf, where the famous Paleolithic artifact, the Venus of Willendorf, was found in 1908. The statuette, measuring 11cm in length, was discovered by archaeologist Josef Szombathy during excavations preceding the construction of a railway line. Produced between 24,000 and 22,000 BCE¹, it is one of the most famous early images of a woman, and a sculptural object widely posited as a fertility symbol carved by an Ice age man.

Because my practice centres around the creation of tactile sculptures and installations reinterpreting historic, mythic and iconographic objects and figures often linked to women's histories, I wanted to come to Krems to explore my own long time fascination with the Venus of Willendorf, and the culture and region in which 'she' was situated. Since I had such a specific focus for my residency, I was invited by the curator Karin Pernegger to mount a major solo exhibition at the Factory Kunsthalle Krems, which would open two days before the end of my stay. This was a major and welcome opportunity, but also in the early stages added a bit of pressure to the residency!

My work began from my longstanding personal interest in the Willendorf figurine's bodily tactility and mysterious background. I had done a lot of research on the object before I arrived in Krems. When faced with this curvaceous female topography, few early scientists, archaeologists and historians attributed the body meanings beyond her perceived sexual and reproductive role. However in line with scientific and social developments, many have begun to approach the object from new angles.

In approaching my sculptural work I drew inspiration from three specific areas I had encountered in my study of the Venus which I felt were ripe for exploration. One is in the female body's inextricable and often tenuous relation to language, something epitomized by the Willendorf figurine's original mis-naming as Venus, and the ways people continue to define her. The second is the theoretical possibility the Venus of Willendorf (and other Venus figurines) was a self portrait by a woman, an autobiographic rather than iconic account. The third is the focus on the Venus' headcovering, posited in one instance as a woven hat, said to offer insights into female textile practices, and other instances suggested to be hair, representing the body's erotic odor.

I decided that throughout the two month residency and exhibition I would weave a cross-lineage between this age old female figurine and representations of my own body, as a means of revealing how binary conceptions of gender in which the female body as reproductive matter might give way to contemporary feminist conceptions of a body invested with interiority, thought, language, agency and subjectivity.

The Work I Made and the Exhibition VENUS WAS HER NAME

I came to Austria with my partner, Paula and our four year old daughter Hope who became an integral and joyous part of my experience in Austria.

Prior to arriving I organised to stay for a month in Vienna and I was glad I did because it allowed me direct access to the Natural History Museum where the Venus was held. I spent a long time studying and sketching the figuring and thinking about the works I would make. I also enjoyed visiting numerous cafes, major museums, and the grand history and architecture of this old European city. I found I sourced many art materials in this early period in Vienna including found objects, clay, paper, old magazines and knitting needles!

Arriving in Krems, I felt, suddenly that the pressure to make a major solo exhibition in eight weeks was pretty huge. However, because the location of the residency was in such a beautiful, idyllic, town and right near the

river, I found I achieved so much more than I usually do in my inner city life in Melbourne Australia where I am juggling a Phd, parenting, teaching and making artwork.

I arrived in Austria in the midst of making a self portrait - my own knitted, cast off skin an idea inspired by Catherine McCoid and LeRoy McDermott's hypothesis that the Venus figurines may have been created as self-portraits. Because accounts of the Venus had previous been so focussed on her surface, rather than her interior, I decided a skin would be a good way to deal with the entwinement my own exterior and interior worlds, since in so much literature this is what a skin represents, a literal 'fabric' of the self.

After the complex knitted skin I moved on to a series of collage works. I ultimately produced eleven photo collages of Venus-like female idols I call Matrikas, in which I re-assembled various archaeological, artistic and historical pictures to form a suite of intriguing women, as a way of questioning the persistence of women's position within the world of objects. They are placed up high, to acknowledge how female idols of these kinds, in sculptural or pictorial form, have often been held aloft, literally 'looked up to'. I enjoyed sourcing magazines from an antiquarian book store in Krems, and was inspired to place my collages on wood, due to the lucky find of a piece of plywood in the studio from an artist who had been before.

I also created a table of faux archaeological objects, titled *Of Hearth and Home*, which was inspired by the fact that female figures such as the Venus of Willendorf, were often found among other amulets, and sometimes believed to have been invested with special power for use in shrines, household altars, and granaries. Carefully crafted with resin based ceramic clays, my small sculptures resemble such 'women of the hearth'. In my collection, they are also accompanied by other types of bodily 'relics' including tools which have assisted my own practice as an artist (including knitting needles, thimbles, spindles, and sewing needles), motifs of femininity I have previously employed including spider webs, eggs or vessels, and sometimes humorous, personal objects or body parts including a tampon, my glasses, my fingers and a second version of my knitted head.

However for me, producing the knitted sculpture which spells VENUS out of archaic knitting symbols was the most significant work and experience of the residency due to the communal effort involved in its making. Making contact with knitters from Vienna, Krems and beyond, I located more than fifty women, and a few men, to help me create this tactile sculpture. We held knitting events in the Burggarten, Vienna, the Kunsthalle Krems and in front of the Karikatur Museum in Krems. The convivial spirit of the knitters gave me the sense of having friends with me at a time in the residency when I was missing my own friends.

My use of the word VENUS as a sculpture attempts to mesh particularly Western, classical notions of femininity inherent in the word VENUS, with other aspects of the Willendorf figurine, mainly her image of unrestrained sexuality, pockmarked body, seemingly knitted or ropey hat or hair, and her ultimately unknowable, paleolithic origin. We knitted a skin for the VENUS letters with pungent smelling, ropey twine called spagat, once knitted in early forms of armour. Spaced out acrossed the entry (or exit), it marks and claims a territory.

The exhibition opening was a big affair, and fell on a day with three other openings which were all connected. Dr Walpurga Antl Weiser from the Natural History Museum in Vienna opened my exhibition, and there were speeches by the curator and director of the Kunsthalle. It was all in German, but by then I could understand a little bit. Looking around at the exhibition, I couldn't believe I had made the work, so many friends, and mounted the show in two months.

SUMMARY

The apartment and studio was large and light and perfect and I had ample room to relax, make food, make art and be with family! We loved the sound of hourly chiming bells from the prison across the street! I regularly coordinated drinks nights or evenings out with the artists, writers and musicians in the building and found they were very happy to be socially networked to each other. On the day of my opening I made soup and bought cake and bread and wine and invited everyone to lunch with our family before the ceremonies

began. It was a lovely way to thank and say goodbye to my fellow artists and the curator who had made the event happen.

I found the residency period to be productive, and staff at KREMS AIR, especially the curator Karin Pernegger and the program coordinator Elke Pehamberger-Müllner, to be incredibly generous, welcoming and helpful, especially in the later months as the deadline for the exhibition got closer, my laptop died, and many logistical issues regarding the exhibition needed taking care of.

I was actually glad to be in 'full gear' producing an exhibition in Krems. The quietness of the town meant that even after my partner and child and I took time to go to playgrounds (and also enrolling our daughter in the local Kindergruppe Krems), learned some German, cooked, met friends, read books, cycled, lunched and had coffee out regularly, there was still plenty of time to make a whole show. With none of the usual cares of life, it was a pleasure to produce work quickly and showed me that I will be able to do this again. As I had been worried about working in a short time frame, it totally changed my thinking about what would be possible with an international show or opportunity.

However, because there was initially virtually no funding for my show apart from the building of plinths and tables, I found I had a lot negotiating to do regarding how the work would be returned, something I had expected automatically since I was making a substantial institutional show. However, ultimately I found the staff to be extremely reasonable, supportive and fair. As the months went by, we became entwined in each other's lives, seeing each other daily and making visits to the local heurigers, taverns where beer, wine, cheese and meat plates are unbelievably cheap and delicious!

Having also connected with many lovely people in the town of Krems who owned or worked in shops or local wineries, I can attest that the kindness and generosity of Austrian people is really overwhelming. Coming back to Australia, I recall the time and exhibition I produced in Krems fondly, and know it has forever shaped my art practice and experience of the world.

THANK YOU

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