

## **Introduction of Jane Mulfinger**

It is in equal measure my honor and pleasure to introduce Jane Mulfinger and the installation she's built right here as an artistic contribution to the question of the productivity of guilt, the very question the interdisciplinary research group Felix Culpa: On the Cultural Productivity of Guilt, under the leadership of Mathias Buschmeier and Katharina von Kellenbach, will actively pursue from October 2018 to July 2019—as framed and illuminated in this work.

First, briefly, to who she is: Jane Mulfinger graduated in 1989 from Stanford University's Royal College of Art with a master's in fine arts. Since 1994, she has taught at the University of California Santa Barbara, since 2009 as a full professor. I only mention this last point because anyone who speaks with Jane about her artistic production understands at once that for her making art and teaching art are peculiarly, that is to say very tightly, bound together. Moreover, as she wrote to me in preparation for our discussions, "I work experimentally, so I'm always open to criticism." A sentence rarely uttered by artists, which already indicates how porously and yet specifically these works are embedded in their present configurations—in configurations of space, objects, artifact, memory, and the human body.

Since the end of the 80s, her works have been viewable in the most varied places in America as well as various European countries. Living in wild, pre-unification Berlin from 1985 to 87 and thereafter in London from 87 to 1994 has given Jane a great familiarity with European culture, reflected in a certain proximity to the artistic positions of European artists like Christian Boltanski or Sophie Calle.

Her works have been visible in the classic institutions of artistic activity, in galleries and museums, for the past 25 years, but she has also developed projects for university spaces and church spaces, both abandoned and not. In addition to these were conceptual works of the 2000s, which were described in one publication with the fitting term “action-research-collaboration.”

Looking back, I am very grateful to the ZiF for their request that I speak here today because it allowed me—following a thorough discussion with Jane the previous week—to spend a weekend, aided by the artist’s well-structured homepage, exhaustively engaging with an artwork that, with its enormous variability, emotional depth, and visual persuasiveness, cast a spell on me. Nevertheless, you would be putting me in a tight spot if you were to ask me to describe briefly the peculiarity and the individual signature of these works—using all these categories which art historians and art critics so readily and probably too facilely employ. There are, of course, certain constants I would say can be named. For one, there’s the use of everyday things, of things used and found—things that do not cease to speak of people, indeed practically conjuring them and remaining attached to them, to put a twist on a phrase of Antoine Hennion’s. Textiles, for example, but also furniture, glasses, photographs, books, and many other things (up to and including a work with down feathers). In turn, the media, which Jane simultaneously employs as instruments in order to listen in on these things’ knowledge, to make it audible or visible, to transform or translate it, are likewise multifarious, and yet, it stands out how often light finds employment in connection with glass, mirrors, lenses, and projectors, something that makes clear how much the works circle around approaches to making visible and uncovering. And last but not least, these expeditions always put the relationship of images and text into play,

the difference between the visible and effable and really everything that does not disappear in this symmetrical confrontation.

I would like, in order to convey the impressively vast spectrum of works from Jane Mulfinger and to add and transition to the work displayed here, to briefly discuss two very different older works of hers.

In the work *Lost for words*, which was displayed in the Flaxman Gallery in London in 1991, 186 commercially available pairs of glasses were arranged on glass shelves, many pairs next to and beneath one another, just as one offers glasses for sale, even as the strong lighting, which cast dark shadows on the wall behind the glasses, worked against the usualness of the impression. If you stepped closer, you noticed that various sentences were engraved in the glasses, only decipherable with great difficulty because they were mirror inverted and meant to be read from the other side. The texts themselves thematizes the borders of the effable; one could say that the ineffable suddenly, surprisingly, becomes visible. You stumble, by way of example, on sentences from the visions of St. Bernadette Soubirous, then, in the lenses of another pair of glasses on a description of the sublime at the sight of the alps. Glasses, those banal, cumbersome little seeing aids become the screen on which that which is temporally and categorically extracted from sight inscribes and displays itself. And what's more, the work challenges in a quite considerable manner one of the foundations of our Western thinking; the idea that we are independent subjects who, unmoored and at a safe distance from the world, observe things and subject them to our sight. Jane's glasses scramble these ordering principles. The prosthesis, which counterbalances a weakness, suddenly possesses an unsettling life of its own, oscillating between closeness and distance, materiality and metaphysics, testifying to that which *they* have

seen in order now to dictate it to any potential wearer, enchanting his sight with it after the fact. It is the gaze of others, which suddenly emerges here in sight.

Jacques Lacan sends his regards.

Richard Dyer described the playfully subversive potential of this work with the absolutely apt words: “Mulfinger transforms spaces, both exterior and interior, breaks and inverts codes, laughs at the irrationality of language and”—and this is important to me—“shatters the syntax of remembrance the better to help us remember, not just the past but its meaning in the present.”

I’ll come back to this last sentence. For now, however, on to a different work from the years 2005–2008, a work residing, so to speak, on the other end of her vast spectrum of works and which, in one respect, is easier to connect to the work installed here, namely because, for all its variety, it likewise looks toward a specific feeling, that of regret. While her work in the ZiF approaches questions of guilt, the conceptual, interactive study Jane carried out in Paris, Linz, Cambridge, and Santa Barbara examined the phenomenon of regret. In Cambridge in 2005, this occurred by means of telephone-like mobile elements, which were temporarily erected in the city space inviting passers-by to take part in a localized, artistic sociological experiment. A computer took the place of the telephone in the open, semi-circular, moveable cells, masked by which the passers-by could enter their very personal stories of regret. Those who took part immediately received five “similar,” as determined by an algorithm, expressions of regret transmitted by nearby people, a form of repayment in a certain sense, above all, however, a method meant to provide relief. In place of the confession, contained in many world religions, we meet a digital variation, the updated model, a concept that intervenes in the individual work of remorse and by

way of comparison means to make the burden more bearable. “It is calculated”—according to Jane—“to share the burden.”

A few of the anonymously entered statements in Cambridge were also projected onto city hall across the way, another interesting medial transformation of old rituals.

The works in the ZiF bearing the title *Spectral Latencies—An Overview of Guilt* to a certain extent take a middle position. They were preceded by a sort of “field research expedition,” wherein the artist went out asking citizens of Bielefeld to write down stories associated with a deep-seated feeling of guilt, stories which as everyone knows don’t simply slip away with time into oblivion but that have long lives and root themselves in memory. At the same time, Jane stumbled upon the photographic flotsam and jetsam of the story in junk shops and flea markets, which, plotted on vinyl film, she has employed in the space—on the windows and walls.

Jane Mulfinger does not so much investigate the multifaceted origins of the feeling of guilt, the events which called forth this feeling in those affected. Rather, she pursues the transformations the feeling has passed through in the memory and over the course of time. Put another way: It’s not about a phantasmagorical return to a potential “original image” of becoming guilty. It’s not for nothing that we don’t get to see the photographic material from the 60s. The memories’ transformations remain coupled with the medial transformation processes they’ve passed through and continue to pass through. In place of the famous exclamation “It’s her, yes, it’s her, it’s finally her,” with which Roland Barthes wanted to abandon himself to the magical potential of photography, the belief in contact with the past—in his case his dead mother—perhaps only realizable through photography, a tension and oscillation emerges in Jane’s work between the various temporalities of the now. They come into being as the faces on the film,

faces looking out at us from a particular moment in the 60s or early 70s, are separated from the photographic paper of their time, and thereby somewhat de-materialized, only to become visible and legible to us again on another light spectrum. Whether we want to connect these downright radiant everyday scenes with the quotations strewn about the space or not, whether we want to put these words in the mouths of the photographed Bielefelders, that's up to us. Just as the question of whether we want to take part in the collective indulgence process offered by an old-fashioned book on an equally anachronistic lectern, in which we can add our own stories of guilt to those already gathered, remains an open one.

One could, and I'd like to conclude with this, modify that so very fitting statement by Richard Dyer with a view toward the subject treated here and say: Jane Mulfinger destroys the syntax of the memory of guilt in order to help us remember it, not only in light of its past but in that of its meaning for today.

Let's thank Jane for such a wonderful work.