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Eleanor Heartney, "In Conversation: Cosima von Bonin with Eleanor Heartney," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 4, 2018.



INCONVERSATION

COSIMA VON BONIN with Eleanor Heartney

PETZEL | FEBRUARY 23 – APRIL 28, 2018



Cosima von Bonin, *HERMIT CRAB*, 2018. Steel cement mixer, fabric, rubber, 52 x 50 x 38 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

Cosima von Bonin, born in Kenya and raised in Austria, came of age in the midst of the storied Cologne art world of the 1990s. She immersed herself in the art scene alongside artists like Martin Kippenberger, George Herold, Albert Oehlen, Diedrich Diederichsen and Michael Krebber. Her early work was sometimes faulted for being hermetic, but she is best known now for playful installations filled with found and manufactured

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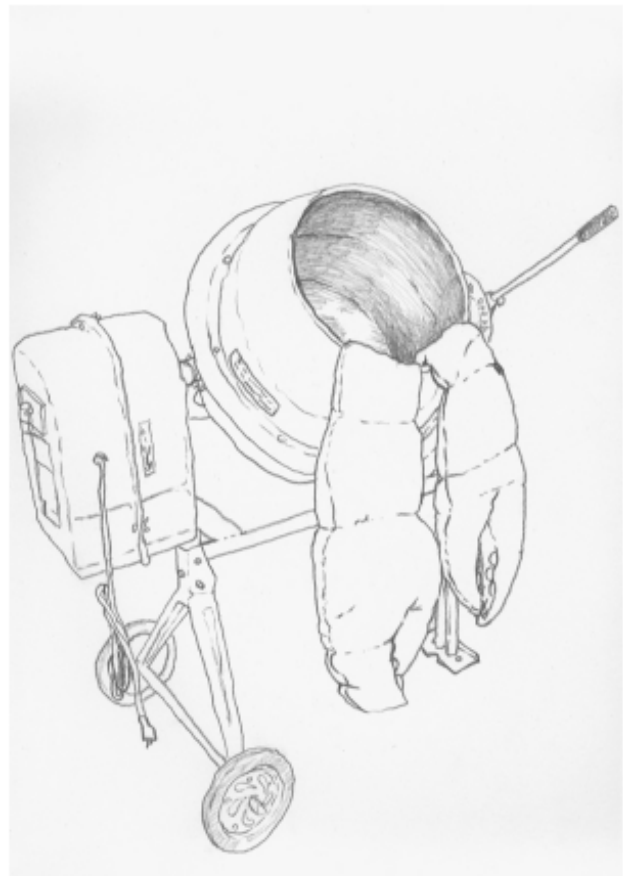
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sailboats, mushrooms, fences, dogs, rockets, and fish. Her work was last seen in New York at the SculptureCenter in a show that presented a marine theme.

I went to interview von Bonin two days before her show *What if it Barks?* opened at Petzel. The gallery was a hive of activity. In the front gallery a sculpture consisting of a pair of soft lobster claws emerged from a cement mixture. It stood in the center of the gallery under a suspended cardboard cylinder that I was told was a prototype for a big sculpture of a cat food can that was coming later. In the next gallery, a seamstress was putting the final stitching on a triangular soft sculpture that I was told was the nose cone of a rocket. Other soft rockets in plaid and patterned fabrics rested flaccidly against the wall. Installers were rushing in and out of the back gallery that appeared to be a holding pen for a number of huge plastic fish swathed in beads and chains. Von Bonin herself was nowhere to be seen, having slipped outside for a walk and a smoke. She reappeared shortly afterward, and we settled down for the following conversation about her work, life, and love of animals.

Eleanor Heartney (Rail): I saw your 2016 exhibition at the SculptureCenter *Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* It was a wonderful show, full of soft scallops and octopuses and sharks. This show has some of the same motifs. How does this show relate to that one?

Cosima von Bonin: First of all, I never explain my work. And I didn't make any new work for the SculptureCenter show. Before that I did nine shows in four years with all new work. So from 2014, I had three more shows, but they were all old work. I gave the curators carte blanche and I just did the title.



Portrait of Cosima von Bonin, pencil on paper, by Sean David Morgan. Courtesy the artist.

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Rail: So this is the first new work you have done in four years. What made you start working again?

Bonin: I thought I could just walk my dog and make my garden but Petzel has this ability to persuade me. I have known him for three thousand years in Cologne. He teased me about not working, so I started again, with no idea what I was going to do. Give me bait and I rise to it. I'm lazy but I'm also a workaholic.

Rail: How did you go about preparing this show?

Bonin: I work sitting up in bed. My brain works better in bed than in the studio. I only go to the studio if I have to.

Rail: What do you do in bed? Do you draw?

Bonin: No, I can't draw. I can't do anything. I just can talk. I've always had professionals work with me. I can't sew. If I touch the scissors I get really worried. I can't sit at a table. I don't know how. I was a very strange kid and I hid in bed. Now I work in bed. Everyone thinks I'm lying there like Oblomov, but I have all these people and I only have to say something and they understand it. And that's the fun of it.

Rail: So when you work in bed you are talking to people who are making the work.

Bonin: I can do it with email and by the telephone. But I am also watching British shows. I am stealing everything from British shows, I am listening to music, sometimes I get up and go for a barbecue or walk the dogs. It's very different, I think, from how other artists work. And the word "assistant" breaks my heart. It's not in my vocabulary. They are my slaves and I am their slave. It's the same with the word "project." You don't have a project, you have an idea or you steal the idea, or you work together with people on an idea. Everyone is allowed to do what he wants to do.

Rail: So now that you are here in New York, can you still lay in bed and talk?

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Cosima von Bonin, *WHAT IF IT BARKS?*, Installation view, Petzel, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

Bonin: No, no. When I came here I got a bit nervous in the beginning because I haven't done things for so long. Everything was half finished. I thought I would need fifteen weeks to install. But once I got here it was really relaxed and I found the flow. The idea here was to make robed mackerels. They are hard plastic. I didn't want to make any more soft toys apart from the killer whales. And I have these decorator crabs. In the ocean, they decorate themselves in order to hide. If you give them pom poms or pearl necklaces or hair, they decorate themselves. And that was also the idea for the robed mackerels.

Rail: So they are decorator mackerels.

Bonin: Yes, they are accessorized. I love that word, "accessorize." Accessories mean life to those crustaceans and also to me. I'm very lazy, so I dressed one mackerel and Jules [Koep] did another. But she is always, how do you say, too proper, so then I punked them up.

Rail: And you have been out getting things to accessorize them.

Bonin: Yes, Seth [Kelly] helped me out. We went to hardware stores and marine shops and fabric shops. Seth is the chief slave here. He is a goddess, so relaxed, so calm.

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Rail: Where did you get the idea for all this aquatic life?

Bonin: I grew up in Kenya by the Indian Ocean. There are decorator crabs and sea stars there. My best friends were two killer mussels. I loved it there and then my parents imported me to Austria.

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Rail: How old were you?

Bonin: I was six. We went on a ship. They also took my dog and my nanny. I was hiding everyday in the toilet of the ship. I thought they would forget about me and when the ship went back, I could stay.

Rail: Why are animals so important to you?

Bonin: As a kid, I was always a hermit. I think of myself as a hermit crab. We had a monkey, Mr. Nelson, and we had dogs and cats. Once a day I walked alone on the beach. I was three years old, and I wore shorts fastened with elastic, and I stuffed



Cosima von Bonin, *WHAT IF IT BARKS?*, Installation view, Petzel, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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everything I found in them—crabs, jelly fish, everything. Then I put them on the lunch table. I never had anything to do with art, it was always the beach and animals, animals, animals. I love strange animals. I love aardvarks and snails and all creatures. In fact I just freed two lobsters. Lobsters are very intelligent and some grow to 140 years old. I went to the fish shop. A guy in front of me bought five lobsters and I knew how they were going to die. So the next day I went there and got the biggest ones. I paid \$200. I said please don't harm them, because their legs break easily. I couldn't say I was going to free them. The ocean is ice cold, so I was afraid, maybe they won't survive. But I looked it up on the Internet, and they will be fine. When they are in the tanks, they hate it. They get overcrowded and eat each other.

But don't tell my brother I freed the lobsters.



Cosima von Bonin, *AU PAIRS*, 2018. Cotton and wool covering cardboard, wooden table, 55 x 72 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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Rail: Are you a vegetarian?

Bonin: No, I eat dead fish. I tried to be a vegetarian about five years ago, and everything broke down. No vitamins, and my doctor said I had to eat five kilos of tofu a day. I just couldn't do it. I know that pigs and cows have to die, but lobsters are thrown into hot water and they live for three more minutes and struggle and try to get out.

Rail: You use lobster claws in your work.

Bonin: Yes, and also octopuses. Octopuses are also very intelligent and they have a conscience. It's been proved. And hermit crabs. I read a story that they live forty years.

Rail: But this show isn't just about the ocean. You also have a lot of rockets.

Bonin: Yes, it was too much ocean. I also have a giant cat food can. It says “Authority Purée”. It's a real cat food brand. I wanted to have a golden Porsche as an authority symbol. But I spoke to a friend who said, you can't do a Porsche because of Trump.

Rail: Why because of Trump?

Bonin: Because of gold, luxury, assholism, everything. But I said I want something as authoritative as that. So he found a cat food brand that said “Authority Purée.” It's going to smoke. I love smoking and I am really angry about how smokers are treated. Alcohol is not treated in the same way as cigarettes. I have family here in New York and kids can drink as much as they want but they can't smoke. So the can is going to puff. But don't ask me to explain. I don't explain my work.

Rail: You are doing a wonderful job of not explaining your work and I am enjoying it very much!

Bonin: Really it's like Mike Kelley said: It's somehow a making sense of senseless things—you take this and you take that and in the end it's poetry and it's a piece of art. I don't want to refuse to explain my art, but you can stand in front of a piece of art and say fuck you, or it can break your heart.

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Cosima von Bonin, *KILLER WHALE WITH LONG EYELASHES 2 (SCHOOL DESK VERSION)*, 2018. Wood, metal, glass bottle, fabric, 59 x 47 x 47 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

Rail: Did you know Mike Kelley?

Bonin: Yes, he was gorgeous. I have a lot of intellectual friends and when they give talks, I don't understand, but Mike Kelley from Detroit was different. When he talked, I understood and his art broke my heart. It's Cady Noland, it's Marcel Broodthaers, and it's André Cadere that made my day, not Kippenberger.

Rail: Not Kippenberger?

Bonin: Kippenberger was important to me as a friend but not as an artist. I started with art at age twenty-five. I was forced to become an artist by Kippenberger. I met him in a bar. I didn't know anything about art. I had just come to Cologne from Venice.

Rail: That was in the late 1980s. Cologne was very hot at that time.

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Bonin: But I didn't know about hot. I was there for different reasons. The third day I was there, the only guy I knew took me to a restaurant. A man was standing at the bar and he was looking at me. I said to my friend if this man doesn't come up and ask for my telephone number I will go up to him and he said, that's Kippenberger. I said, who is Kippenberger? I didn't know anything. And the waiter came and gave me Kippenberger's number and this is how it started. I started to work in a bar (the Königswasser) and everyone was there. I was scared to death but everybody thought I was super cool. I had a big mouth but I never smiled or looked at them. That was my trick.

Every evening Kippenberger was at the bar, and Michael Krebber. I thought Michael Krebber was strange and he thought I was strange. I went to Walther König Bookstore every morning to read through all the art books, from A to Z. It was in those publications that I saw the work of, for instance, Cadere's and Broodthaers' for the first time. This bookstore and the Königswasser were my education.

I didn't know anything about art. Michael Krebber gave me a list of books to read so I would know about everything that was happening in the Cologne art world at the time. I was in a beginner's class taught by Werner Büttner, and there I was the one who knew about the Cologne art scene, but I was not producing any art at the time.

I hitchhiked from Cologne to Hamburg every Monday and I tape-recorded every lecture. I couldn't go out in the evening because I didn't have any money so instead I transcribed the recordings. At the end of the year I made one copy and I presented it to my teacher. That was my first art piece. Kippenberger said, she has to have a show, but I had nothing to show at that time. Later, I had my first show with Josef Strau in Hamburg, in an apartment of one of the students. That was the balloon show.

Rail: That was an exhibition where you printed the names of everyone in Harald Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form* show on helium balloons.

Bonin: The other artists I knew had an incredible intelligence but they never asked me what I mean. The ones who never ask me what I mean with my art become my friends. I was told a story about a young artist who came in to the museum and said, you have to use this hook to put up my painting. And the technicians said, you can use it if you want

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to but it won't work on this wall. So the young artist went to the curator and said, if he doesn't use my screw he has to go. But that's not how I work. I tell the technicians, you can install it; I'm going out to have a smoke.

Rail: So how do you know when a work or installation is right?

Bonin: When I show my work to the few friends I trust, I know just from the response whether to throw it away or not. But it doesn't have a meaning until it's installed. As Mike Kelley would say, it's about sense making and good humor. Life is too short for anything else.

I was so stupidly hysterical this week when I came to the gallery, as I was worried that nothing would be ready in time. But these guys know what they're doing, and now today I am accessorizing.

Rail: The show goes up in two days. Who makes final decision about how things will be installed?

Bonin: I do, but I always ask the others. I would like to ask them to decide about that too, but Seth won't let me.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/04/art/COSIMA-VON-BONIN-with-Eleanor-Heartney>