

ARTFORUM

SUSANNE M. WINTERLING: "Complicity"

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Susanne M. Winterling, *Eileen Gray, The Jewel and Troubled Water* (detail), 2008, two 16-mm films, seven photographs.

Susanne M. Winterling is an artist based in Berlin and Oslo. "Complicity," her project at Amsterdam's Kunstverein, gathers works by painter Romaine Brooks, architect and designer Eileen Gray, and the writers Carson McCullers and Annemarie Schwarzenbach and will also encompass film screenings, dialogues, as well as the launch of The Correspondence Book, which comprises newly published correspondence between McCullers and Schwarzenbach. The show is on view from May 21 to July 5, 2014. Here, Winterling discusses the project and her recent work.

THIS EXHIBITION continues on from other projects I began in 2008 around Eileen Gray's life and influence. For me, she always represented the "other" modernism—a more human approach to design practiced by her and her contemporaries. It's a part of early-twentieth-century architectural history that's been largely ignored. Brooks, Gray, McCullers, and Schwarzenbach all brought a body-consciousness to their work that now seems very contemporary. The sensibility of these women was informed by empathy, and that is what makes them seem so fresh.

One of the shortcomings of classical modernism is its neglect of the visceral. The more mundane, bodily aspects of living had to be sacrificed to achieve an idealized cleanness. These women engaged with some of the same design issues as their modernist contemporaries, but came to different conclusions. I think this is largely because their engagement with formal questions was never wholly divorced from their own lives, their consciousness of how they were living. These are some of the ideas that contributed to *Eileen Gray, The Jewel and Troubled Water*, the installation I made for the 2008 Berlin Biennale. In "Complicity," I concentrate more on the aesthetic "community" and friendships that existed between Gray and her contemporaries while looking at what has been transformed from the domestic to the public realm. Art history thrives on singularity. I prefer to focus on the relations themselves and the dynamic between these iconic figures. Their connections, rather than their individual personas, become the exhibition's unifying visual, sensual marker.

All of the projects I've worked on during the past decade have been at least laterally related. In 2008, I invited girls who worked in a manufacturing/assembly plant to perform a traditional Chinese childhood game as part of my exhibition at the Shenzhen Biennial. This was to be the most important part of the exhibition, but the performance never took place, because it was censored. Clearly, the biennial's administrative committee recognized the implicit cruelty of this gesture when they forbade it: I was asking fourteen-year-old girls to perform scenes from a childhood they've been deprived of. Since then, the misery of Chinese migrant workers

has become more internationally visible: Strikes and riots erupted in 2013 in response to the mass suicides of Shenzhen workers manufacturing iPhones under appalling conditions. Yet this hasn't stopped most of us from using iPhones. Still, my idea for that piece was at primarily architectural, driven by ecological and urban observations. Considering Shenzhen, I was struck by how the new city had been conceived without any provision for games, play, or informal entertainment. There is no public space: just corporate glass cubes, with security guards or military everywhere, even in places where play *might* be possible. In a cruel vision a la *Hunger Games* or *Snowpiercer*, all the teenagers are inside the factory.

I did another project that year in Berlin, a performance called *On the displays of light, inside and outside – there might be no victory over the sun*, which featured four girls dancing with light projections in Le Corbusier's 1957 *Unité d'Habitation* in West Berlin. The house is famous largely for the number of youth suicides committed there. During the 1980s, I think it had the highest number of suicides committed in Germany. I believe this focus on the entanglement between architecture and communication informs "Complicity," which is organized around correspondence between Schwarzenbach and McCullers—a fragmented but tender exchange of letters written after their unhappy romance. There's also an amazing, early self-portrait by the Brooks. The room is arranged so that viewers can immerse themselves in the art works, letters, drawings, furniture and thoughts of these artists, and experience the connections between them. It's a kind of asylum for friendship and solidarity.