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Global Cargo in the Poetry of Brigitte Oleschinski

Brigitte Oleschinski rejects the belief that poetry is a subjective genre, and argues that it is instead what she calls ‘die allgemeinste Form’. She claims that poems themselves have agency (in a Foucauldian sense), and can make connections and cross borders that conventional, everyday language cannot. This essay demonstrates the way in which her poetry serves as what she calls a ‘Sprache zwischen den Sprachen, ein Denken zwischen den Kulturen’. In her work, she begins by applying this motto to German–German tensions in Your Passport is Not Guilty. In Geisterströmung, she goes on to express transcendent intermedial and intercultural encounters of the Indonesian and the German.

Gedichte … gehen über Grenzen, von denen ich nicht weiß, ob ich sie überqueren kann.¹

Brigitte Oleschinski believes in the agency of poems. They think, they speak, they cross borders, they have their own time and space. Her poems buzz and crackle with the minute vibrations of particular places, compelling her readers and listeners to lean in closer to the language of the landscape. While her earlier work is located in specific or non-specific Eastern German or Polish landscapes, her recent work moves farther afield, drawing inspiration from Bulgarian and Indonesian locations. The poems’ focus on the minutiae of a specific environment paradoxically opens up a space for a global communication, as suggested by the Indonesian epigraph in her latest volume:²

Kami tak ingin menjadi meteor;  
kami hanya ingin menjadi sesuatu di angkasa

We do not wish to become meteors  
but merely to become something in space  
Amien Kamil

Kamil’s words emphasize the solitude and humility of the individual, as well as the organic unity of the cosmos. The individual travels, small and alone, through the vastness of space, yet has a position relative to everything else around it.

Oleschinski rejects the conventionally held belief that poetry is a subjective genre, and argues that it is instead ‘die allgemeinste Form’, akin
to mathematics or music. As such, it can make connections and cross borders that conventional, everyday language cannot. Her work has always been imbued with a strong sense of movement through space and time. *Your Passport is not Guilty* protests the authority of borders – of bodies and landscapes, in fascist, cold-war and post-unification Germany, as well as in Poland – and gives poems the power to cross them. The essay *Argo Cargo*, which originated from the author’s post-cold-war travels to Indonesia and Bulgaria, together with *Geisterströmung*, the travel cycle, now allows the word – and the poem – to transcend borders and speak in a voice that carries through time. She strives to write poetry that can be a ‘Sprache zwischen den Sprachen, ein Denken zwischen den Kulturen’.

This essay demonstrates the means by which the author lends what she calls ‘agency’ to her poems to reach this goal.

Both the author’s biography and her work reflect a particular response to socio-political developments of the 1980s to the present. The author has a politically inscribed background, both personally and academically. Her father’s family came from Upper Silesia (hence the Slavic name), lived in Güstrow in the 1930s, and settled in Cologne after the war. Born in 1955 in Cologne, Brigitte Oleschinski became politically aware and active in the 1970s. Her political involvement affected her career choices, as she told me in our conversation – she initially studied law, but decided against this path in favour of political sciences in Berlin at the *Freie Universität*. She has worked as a political historian who specializes in questions of state control over bodies and lives. The object of her research was prison camps under authoritarian regimes in Germany, and she has a number of substantial publications to her name, dealing with the NS-period, but especially with the SBZ (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*) and GDR. She helped establish an information and documentation centre in Torgau, site of Soviet special camps 8 and 10. She is thus intimately familiar with GDR history and landscapes, including that of Mecklenburg, where she has revisited her father’s home. Before her first volume of poems, *Mental Heat Control*, appeared in the *Wende*-year 1990, she had been virtually unpublished as a poet. Seven years passed before the publication of her next volume, *Your Passport is not Guilty*, which received a Förderpreis zum Bremer Literaturpreis and the Peter-Huchel-Preis. Oleschinski was then hailed by Helmut Böttiger of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* as ‘die wichtigste zeitgenössische lyrische Stimme neben Durs Grünbein.’ In 2002, she published the ‘poetics project’, *Reizstrom in