

"The water we drink first runs through the veins of the servers."

Der Blaue Distanz in conversation with Lena Fritsch and Mathilde ter Heijne

The Blaue Distanz is an artistic duo consisting of Anna Erdmann and Franziska Goralski, who have worked together since 2016. Their practice explores queer ways of living and learning, lesbian experiences, (digital) feminist perspectives, knowledge sharing, and questions of visibility within hierarchical structures, including political systems.

This conversation was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of the artistic project Assembling Past and Present, which was later expanded for Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition Women to Go: The Personal and Impersonal in Presentation and Representation at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

We design spaces for people who are not given space in society

Lena Fritsch: What is the 'blue distance'? Why did you choose this name for your artist collective?

Anna Erdmann: "Blaue Distanz" refers to the visual point between the sea and the sky, which is not exactly defined as a line. It is perceived more as an area, that reflects our approach. We started our collaboration about four years ago and our starting point was the feeling of isolation in the cultural sector because we have had the experience that in the cultural sector one often stands alone and is also exposed to competitive pressure. Personal experiences of discrimination on the basis of one's own identity, which led to this merger, were also central to the start. As a woman, it is more difficult, because of your position in society, which is why it's perhaps more important to join forces. I personally have often experienced being judged from the outside and that, based on normative ideas, people I didn't even know on the street or at school commented on my clothing or haircut. These comments were not an expression of a willingness to enter into dialogue or to experience something about it, but only a sign of separation. In this way, a distance is meant to be consciously maintained. It is an important step for me to integrate myself if I am to dissolve this distance.

Lena: What does the collective "Blaue Distanz" want to achieve? What are your goals?

Anna: One of the main areas of our collaboration is the design of spaces, namely spaces for people who are not given space in society or who find it difficult to take up space themselves. The delimitation of this group of people is close to our own identity: it is mainly about women and queer people. It is very important for us to design these spaces together with other people. We don't want to design these rooms only for these people, but we want to give them space where they can express themselves and exchange ideas. It's also important to us that visibility is created in society for women and queer people.

Lena: In which way does the creation of a community of solidarity play a role in "Blaue Distanz"?

Franziska Goralski: Voluntariness is absolutely central. Those people decided voluntarily to stay, for example. That sounds so banal, but for us, it's a very important linchpin. We assume that if I ask myself, am I here voluntarily at the moment, do I want to spend the next two hours working on something with people I may not yet know? Once the question has been taken seriously, we believe that it's also possible to engage in listening.

Anna: In my own socialization I was never allowed to get to know such spaces. They simply didn't exist in my environment in the 1990s and 2000s, when I realized early on that I did not correspond to the norm or to the majority of society. It was quite a long way to come out of partly self-chosen isolation. It is still an ongoing process in this cooperation and meeting other people who may have had similar experiences to generate and maintain self-confidence and to continue to gain the feeling that it's important to create this visibility.

Mathilde ter Heijne: Queerphobia often goes hand in hand with racism, misogyny, contempt for people with disabilities, Islamophobia, all the different forms of that expression of hatred that continue to be stirred up and carried out by some people. Solidarity is not forged with words. Solidarity is usually forged on the ground, locally, to liberate your own life, your own body, your own mind, your own imagination, your everyday life, and your future together. Fortunately, we also see many initiatives and groups around the world that try to denounce this hatred, to make it visible, perhaps even to defend themselves against as yet unknown attacks and repression and to overcome this abuse together. Only coordinated solidarity will enable us to continue doing this. On the one hand, "Blaue Distanz" is a group that wants to make empowerment possible, and on the other hand, it's a platform. Do you also see yourself as an activist? And how would you describe your different strategies?

Anna: I realized that when we wanted to go to a more effective place in society through our work, that it was helpful that it's necessary and helpful to exchange ideas with particular people and groups about strategies and how work is done in activist groups. This is really a place where society-changing work is done. Part of our collectivity is that the methods are thrown together and one sphere is not closed against the other.

Franziska: For me, solidarity means giving each other support and, most importantly, addressing events or circumstances that cannot be negotiated on a personal level, but are larger, i.e. structural matters. To stand up for each other, to stand up for people who have experienced similar things, perhaps even that I, who have strength at the moment, can stand up for people who suffer from structural violence. A major concern of ours is also to encourage reflection, naming, rethinking patterns and breaking patterns that shape categories, that encourage compartmentalized thinking. Because what we don't want to do is to say: "You can't do it like that, and that's the right way". We would rather make a proposal where you don't have to decide immediately whether it should be A or B. Perhaps it will be A AND B for the time being.

Lena: Is this activist strategy transferable to the art world?

Franziska: The idea of genius is totally central in the art world. Both that the genius is discovered and that it must then deliver. The goal is often to make as much profit as possible from one's own artistic practice. The artworld is almost completely flooded and saturated with capitalist thinking and growth. This is something we cannot or do not want to think or work with. Perhaps that is also our internal strike against the whole thing. The way we work, as we're following it, to get involved in situations, to reflect on our own position, is time-consuming, and in that sense not efficient and not immediately profit-oriented. For us, it sometimes feels as if we create an empty space for ourselves so that if we put our foot in the door again it doesn't close immediately. It's a working method that works in the opposite direction from the way work is usually thought of, or how it works, which is something we also discuss. This can be compared to reproductive labor. If we were to do all this behind closed doors, we would not get away with it as well as we can when we make it a theme of our work. In this way, we also give space for people to join us or for a dialogue to develop out of it. Because for us, it's also true that we cannot fight against this as individuals, but that it only works together, because many other artists suffer from similar situations. These have a structural origin and not a personal one. It's not because I personally don't have any good ideas, but because there is no place in society for these ideas or this form of art.