

BUT SHE WAS LIKE I CAN'T DO THIS

Interview with
Gabriele Baring

Annette Weisser: Ms. Baring, I would like to talk about your research regarding the transmission of traumatic experiences from one generation to the next. In my own research, starting from my own experience, I have been interested, for example, in the effects of “second order” trauma through exposure to images of atrocity. My installation piece *Alle Tage Abstraktion* (Every Day Abstraction) deals with this difficult subject. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*,¹ writes how, when she first saw the photographs taken by the Allies after the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, something broke inside her. Even though I and many other people have had similar emotions in seeing these pictures, there seems to be no public debate around this kind of “injury,” especially not here in Germany. There seems to be a silent agreement that turning toward one’s own damaged psyche implies a lack of empathy for the true victims of National Socialism. Personally, I think the opposite is the case. How did you, in connection with your therapeutic work, come across the subject of “war traumas”?

1 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York 2003.

Gabriele Baring: It started about two decades ago. I took part in a number of “family constellations” therapy seminars, where we tried to work on the various problems of the participants—self-harming behaviors, depressive feelings, physical ailments—by looking for the underlying dynamics of their behavior. In doing so, I found that in over eighty percent of cases, we were able to discover things going back up to two generations. And that means for us Germans, as well as for most other European nations: right in the middle of the Second World War. This means oppression; persecution; the terror of air raids; rape; an extremely cold, cynical way of raising children; mass murder. We know since Freud that all information about a family system is always present, either consciously or unconsciously. And that which is not “known,” is what most occupies and blocks us. We must empathize with the personal stories of individual members of our families. To quote Freud: “The present cannot be enjoyed without being understood, and it can’t be understood without knowing the past.”

AW: How can it be that war traumas that happened to our parents or grandparents so strongly influence the lives of people from my generation, as you state in your book *Die geheimen Ängste der Deutschen* (The Secret Fears of Germans)?² What are the routes of transmission here?

GB: It happens on various levels, some of which haven’t yet been fully researched. It’s obvious that a traumatic experience influences the feelings and behavior of the person who is affected. This applies similarly to prenatal and postnatal traumas. Every interaction with close relatives, especially children, is affected by it. In my book I demonstrate this in the example of the “cold” mother—that is, a woman suffering from depression. Meanwhile scientists know that maternal depressions during pregnancy are associated with changes in the child’s cortex that can later lead to behavioral disorders and psychiatric problems.³ Early traumas weaken the immune system and can cause anxiety disorders. On

2 Gabriele Baring, *Die geheimen Ängste der Deutschen*, Munich 2011.

3 Christine Heim et al. in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, no. 170 (2013), pp. 616–23.

the physiological level, this can lead to, among other things, infections or obesity. Among the psychological consequences are depression, antisocial behavior, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse. Our genes are changed by environmental influences; this is called epigenetics. The problematic early life experiences of our forebears have consequences for our health and our behavior throughout our entire life spans. This is being intensively studied in the US and in Germany.⁴

AW: In addition to these scientifically researched connections, you speak of the “energetic transmission” of traumatic experience. Could you expand on that?

GB: I might be skating on thin ice here! [*Laughs*] An example: a colleague of mine who also works with family therapy had his brainwaves measured while he responded to a client who was also hooked up. It turned out that the two EEGs were totally identical. And that’s exactly how we have to imagine that children respond to their parents. They have to do it, to belong, to survive. If the parents have experienced trauma, it also shows on this level, and the child is resonating with it.

AW: So children do everything they can to ensure that this family system is upheld, even when in doing so they damage themselves?

GB: Yes. And even into old age.

AW: The title of my exhibition at the Kunstverein Langenhagen alludes to this: “He had a killer body and he was an awesome dad but she was like I can’t do this.” I notice, in myself and in many people around me, that we unconsciously don’t allow ourselves many of the things that others take for granted—a “successful” life, for example, with the “perfect” partner. I suspect that the origins of this kind of blockage lie outside our actual field of experience, and that we therefore have little influence over it.

4 Among the leading research institutions are the University of Miami, Emory University, the Max-Planck-Institute for Psychiatry, McGill University, the University of California Irvine, the University of North Carolina, the Helsinki University and the Charité University Clinic Berlin—there, especially, Prof. Dr. Christine Heim and Prof. Dr. Claudia Buß.

GB: That's where the family conscience comes into play, and respect for the older generation. It takes enormous chutzpah to allow oneself more happiness than one's parents or grandparents had. Children have an intuitive sense for the inner-family ranking, and join the end of the line. It would take a great deal of reflection and generosity on the part of the parents to say: be happier than we were. Only very few manage to free themselves from this conundrum without therapy. Like many others, the term "family" was discredited by National Socialism, which is why the 1968 generation strongly distanced itself from it. "Society" was the only acceptable category. With that, problematics with roots in the family system could no longer be addressed. But every person has a father and a mother, grandparents, perhaps uncles and aunts or siblings—that can't be ideologized away.

AW: The method of systemic family constellations therapy has been developed over four decades by therapists in several countries, including in the US, in California. Could you talk about how, in your work, you've linked this method to the specific experience of National Socialism?

GB: In my therapeutic work this is only one aspect among many, but I believe I'm one of the few who doesn't shy away from it.⁵ This is of course also due to my own biography. I'm holding a diploma in political economy, and I worked for many years as an arts editor and traveled a lot. Next I worked for fifteen years as a mother, an assignment I took just as seriously as every other job I had so far. For the past thirty years I've been married to a professor of contemporary history⁶ who has done a lot of research and teaching in the US and in the UK. So I had the opportunity to get to know people from very

5 Another author who is writing about these subjects in Germany is, for example, Sabine Bode. In recent art history, Griselda Pollock should be given special mention. Pollock poses questions about the possibilities of an aesthetic transformation of traumatic experiences in the context of a feminist art history. In doing so she explicitly considers traumatic events that lie one or more generations in the past. Griselda Pollock, *After-effects | after-images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, Manchester 2013.

6 The German historian Arnulf Baring.



Aus: *Zehn Empfehlungen*, Holzschnitt auf Papier, 65 × 96 cm, 2011
From: *Ten Recommendations*, woodcut on paper, 65 × 96 cm, 2011

different walks of life. And this changed my view of Germany and its history. In my opinion, we need a certain distance in order to look at ourselves in an unbiased way.

AW: Since I moved to Los Angeles in 2006, my perspective on Germany has changed, too, although with a different result. I cannot say that I look at Germany in a more unbiased way. If anything, I became more aware of my entanglement with Germany and its history. As such, I can't completely agree with your conclusions. You see the family as the primary site of societal renewal. Granted the necessary critique of the 1968 generation's agenda, I don't believe that political engagement can be replaced with the creation of intact nuclear families!

GB: The ordering of priorities is what matters here. I see in my practice many young, intelligent people who are so committed to political engagement that they completely neglect to build a nest. Their own happiness is prioritized after political activism, and I believe that's completely wrong. You can't have one without the other; the consequence is a kind of psychological hardening. This goes back to a generation of historians and social scientists—the “Bielefeld School”—who negated the family and projected all hopes onto society. It was partly a result of their own familial histories during the period of National Socialism.

AW: That was also the period when the book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (The Inability to Mourn), by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich,⁷ appeared, which tried to explain the German silence in the postwar era using a psychological approach. Do you see your work as building on theirs?

GB: But there are clear differences. In contrast to the Mitscherlichs, I try to look at *all* the victims of National Socialism. The Mitscherlichs were of course products of their time, and they propagated a selective mourning around certain groups of victims. Today that's no longer possible. I also think psycho-

⁷ Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, Munich 1967.

analysis as a method is outdated. Certainly it's still important to study it, but in practice today we have better and more efficient methods available. I also find something misanthropic in the Mitscherlichs' writings. They sum up, and this is a quote: "It has in no way been decided that the human being doesn't represent one of the most fatal of the false paths of evolution, through which the principle of living beings finds its abolition." Kind of a death sentence, don't you think?

AW: You support the idea that in addition to commemorating the victims of German Fascism, the suffering of the Germans—through the bombings, the forced displacement, the mass rapes—should be acknowledged. I'm also of the opinion that this discussion should be conducted openly, if only because when it isn't, a vacuum is created that, especially since the fall of the Wall, is then filled by reactionary or even neo-Fascist elements—I'm thinking, for example, of the instrumentalization of the bombing of Dresden by the radical Right. It's also in the Left's interest to steer the public discussion about dealing with the legacy of National Socialism in a new direction, to reanimate it and free it from the congealed rituals of the generation of people who are now over sixty. But we're walking a fine line here. For some time now you've been a public advocate of this debate, you've been a guest on a number of talk shows. What were your experiences like?

GB: I was attacked, of course, as a revanchist!

AW: Where do we go from here?

GB: We must be unencumbered. Do what feels right to you. Talk about your experiences. That, at any rate, was my strategy. If I hadn't, I would have gone mad.

Shortly after this interview I had the chance to participate in a "family constellations" seminar led by Gabriele Baring. In a small group, we spent the weekend in her office in Berlin's Charlottenburg neighborhood grappling intensively with each other and with our own family

histories. Since at that time I hadn't yet come into contact with this method, I was surprised by the dynamics that were set in motion in me and in the other participants. "Make Yourself Available" is understood here as both making your unconscious available to your own family-related traumas from previous generations, as well as, in a very concrete sense, being available as a medium for unknown aspects of the family history of another person in the therapy group.