

KITSCH-EN TALK: An interview with Germany

Sitting in her kitchen, it's hard to marry the figure of this gentle-looking, kindly and softly-mannered woman to the often turbulent story of her past. Indeed, Germany and her surroundings seem completely at peace with each other: the 1970s fitted units could easily be a beloved relic from her childhood, yet she "was already quite an old woman" when it was installed. Why, I ask, does she keep it? "Well, it's very functional. I've always liked its soft colours [the kitchen is a mixture of beige and shades of blue in various swirling patterns] and I haven't ever had the time or the inclination to change it. After the climate catastrophe of the twenties, we all had to take a long, hard look at our possessions and decide if they really needed changing anyway. It was a revolution of sorts." She smiles sagely, "We all realised that we'd have to slow things down a bit." Progress in the lack thereof perhaps? "Exactly. There was much less trying to get everything all at once. We realised that unless we changed we wouldn't survive the coming years."

But survived she has. Does she regret the time before the catastrophe? "Yes, but there's no use crying over spilt milk, as it were. We realised after the scandal of '24 [the scandal in which it was exposed that journalists were being paid by certain member-states of the EU to hush-up the effects of climate change in other parts of the globe] that there was something fundamentally wrong with the structure of our society and we did our best to change that. Of course many blamed the markets..." Here she trails off and spends a moment contemplating. "It wasn't until later years that we really got a grip on that." And what of the structure of modern financial institutions? Immune to my probing, she again pauses for thought before saying, "I think it's more a question of how those institutions fit into the other fundamental parts of our society. Financial institutions cannot exist in their own little bubble, and I think that this is something that I and others have learnt over the past few decades."

On other subjects she is less revealing. What is her response to the rumours that she and France have re-ignited their affair of the early twenty-first century? "For a long time now France and I have been close and despite having our differences, that hasn't changed." But you are no longer an item? "I'm not sure if we would ever have called ourselves that" is her mysterious reply. She stops to pour tea, a ritual that seems to be a strangely contemplative procedure for her, and indeed she seems to have reflected upon the topic when she adds, "Love-affairs like that come and go, it's more important to me to work on building friendships." Here she hesitates, before continuing, "I'd like to think that I'm not unpopular!" If she is fearful of unflattering perceptions of her from other countries, her fears would seem to be unfounded. Trade with other countries is at an all-time high and she is spoken very fondly of in the press, notably starring in a five-page pull-out feature on the museums, shops, nightlife and architecture that she has spent decades nurturing in the world journal with the highest readership (2.4 billion), 'Globe'. Does this make her any more confident? "I'm conscious of growing too accustomed to others liking me and then getting complacent." I pass a comment on the unlikelihood of that, but she will have none of it. "I feel that we must never not worry about complacency, it can lead to terrible things happening." Such as what? "Well, I wouldn't call this terrible, by any means, but the old railways caused us no end of trouble. I had one of the best train systems in the world for so long that no-one thought to change to a more efficient system

of transportation for really quite a long time.” Now, of course, she is fully-equipped with one of the fastest and most comfortable zip-tunnel networks in the world, allowing passengers to travel from Hamburg to Munich in just over half an hour. “I am really rather proud of it now”, she adds.

Is she also proud of her cultural development in recent years? “I am indeed. Berlin’s popularity a few years ago, for example, was such that the city was bursting full of new people, new ideas. Those people either stuck around or maintained their relationship with me. And of course there is still a lot of cultural energy here.” What does she mean by ‘cultural energy’? “A feeling that something is happening... and tangible things, new film, new art. Virtual experience bubbles have yet to grow on me, but I’m excited by the idea of an entirely new medium.” How does she feel that she has adapted to changing fashions? “I hope I’ve managed well. I’m quite open, really. When the English language fell out of fashion, I just learnt a new one.” Her answer pleases me: it is exactly the sort of can-do comment that I had expected from her.

I thank her for her time, but instead of taking the opportunity to get rid of me she offers me more tea and as she passes it over I gaze into it momentarily. I ask her what the future holds for her, to which she smilingly replies, “I’d need to be able to read tea leaves to know that.”