

*The Millwheel Everyday: Working with the words of Gertrud Kolmar*

“The Millwheel Everyday” video work: <https://vimeo.com/211312523>

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In 2003 I was living in London while going to grad school, and found out from my uncle in Germany that I could be entitled to apply for German citizenship. This was a surprise to me; my father, who passed away in 1986 had at the time been in the process of applying for US citizenship. However, as he didn't complete this process he was never forced to give up his German citizenship. This then gave me the right to German citizenship and a passport (which I had no idea about until I was 25 years old). For me, this circumstance touched off a small “identity crisis”, or at the very least an identity shift; I left grad school, and this didn't leave my mind. It took a number of years, but eventually this helped to trigger the project I'm going to describe.

I am very interested in my family's experience of wartime Germany and Europe, my family's Jewish background (and changing Jewish identity), and how these experiences affect my identity. Both connected to and independent of this work, I am gathering information and research in order to discover more about my family's experience and changing identity during this time. As a way of introducing the background and context for the video work I'm going to show, I'd like to tell you about the project within which it is situated, and give some context about the subjects in this work.

I call this larger project *Self-Surveillance*. This project is an ongoing body of work comprising many different types of media including video, sound, installation, print, performance, and mixed media assemblages using film and other objects. With this project, I'm interested in exploring my family past and my past through a number of different lenses, while collapsing the time and space between individuals and history. The research behind this work has been an imperative since the beginning, as I will discuss after showing the work. In this project, I'm exploring particular family members who have left behind evidence of their thought and ways of living in the world, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to me. In the early stage, this has led me to focus on those who have published writing, and to begin with I have focused on my father's family, who are historically Jewish. Due in some part to residing in Germany and the

surrounding countries during WWII (and the subsequent disarray resulting from the war), my immediate family has not maintained a religious Jewish identity; this is a factor that has been of growing interest to me, and which I'm still trying to understand.

I have primarily begun the work in the *Self-Surveillance* project with my father Walter Kaufmann-Bühler (who had a career as an author and editor for a large scientific publisher) and with my father's cousin, the writer and theorist Walter Benjamin. In this new work I have moved to largely focus on another family member, the poet Gertrud Kolmar (family name: Chodziesner), and this work focuses mostly on her life and voice.

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Gertrud Kolmar (who was born in 1894 in Berlin) was the first of four children, and along with many in my family was a victim of the Nazi regime. She built a large body of poetry and prose during her lifetime (along with a growing recognition of this work), and at least some of this can be read as a commentary on her life and the ways her times were changing around her. To quote the biography "Gertrud Kolmar: A Literary Life" by Dieter Kühn: "Poems should never become an instrument for making statements about biographical details. However, poems within the biography of a poet can show how such details were stylized."

Kolmar was raised and lived most of her life in or near Berlin. She never married nor had children, and although she was educated in languages, teaching and had employment as a tutor and a kind of governess, she only took on short term positions. From the late 1920s through her later years Kolmar did secretarial work for her father while caring for her mother (who passed away in 1930) and later her father as his health grew worse. Due to her father's ill health he could not leave Germany when the Nazi regime's grip on the country tightened; as a result, Kolmar decided that she would also not emigrate during this time. In 1943, Kolmar was deported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered.

Walter Kaufmann-Bühler (born in 1944 in Heidelberg) was the youngest of five children. Very soon after he was born, his mother Elisabeth was sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where she survived until the camp's liberation after the end of the war. Kaufmann-Bühler spent the first two decades of his life in Germany, and studied mathematics at Heidelberg University. After university, he went to work for the scientific publisher Springer-Verlag, and in

the 1970s he was promoted to an editor position at the New York office. He emigrated to the US, and never returned to live in Germany. Along with editing books on subjects related to mathematics, Kaufmann-Bühler authored a biography of the mathematician Gauss, along with authoring and co-authoring a number of articles; he had a great deal of interest in the history of mathematics, and his work (both as an editor and author) had a large focus on this.

My work in the *Self-Surveillance* project really began with those in my family who are closest to me, and with whom I am most familiar. So, my father is at this origin point, and while Walter Benjamin (born 1892) is quite a bit further on the family tree, I have known about this relationship for quite some time. The Benjamin and Chodziesner families were close when the two were younger, and Walter reportedly assisted Gertrud in publishing her work in later years.

Gertrud Kolmar is a relatively new person for me; I have only recently discovered her and been able to learn about her history and work. I had already been working closely with text from various writings, so it was a natural progression to look at making connections to Kolmar's writing in this way. However, Kolmar's work is very different from the kind of writing I have worked with, as she is the only published poet (that I know of) in my family, and she was writing at such an important time in the history of Europe, the world and Jewish culture. I've begun by looking at Kolmar's voice in her poetry, and also in her prose and letters. She was a prodigious letter writer, only some of which has been published; during growing Nazi control of the country, her letters were subject to surveillance so she learned to censor herself and write in code. She had likely learned about this earlier in her life, as during WWI she had worked as an interpreter and letter censor for nearly a year at a German prisoner-of-war camp.

With Kolmar's poetry (as with poetry in general), I realize that the voice is very important; not only reading from the page, but giving voice to the words. I believe this was at least somewhat important to Kolmar, as there were public readings of her work during the late 1930s; a well-known German actress (named Erna Leonhard-Feld) performed her work alongside the work of other poets. For this video work, I chose the poem "Farewell" (titled in German: "Abschied", from the cycle of poems "Weibliches Bildnis" or "Image of Woman"). I chose this for its sense of autobiography and also for its address; it has a feeling of correspondence that moves between spiritual and corporeal worlds. In this video work, the imagery concentrates on words committed to the page and meant to be read from it (which are just as easily covered up, or redacted). The soundtrack focuses on the voice, a different part of being in the world which gives a corporeal

sense to the words, coming and going all too quickly; the read poem is bracketed initially by a playful rhythmic soundtrack, and followed by a mournful and ambient soundtrack.

The structure of this work is multifold; it is meant to contain and spotlight the poem, to give space for different types of voices, and to make connections between these voices. I chose the stop-motion animation method for this work so that pacing could be quite controlled, and so that the film on which text appears could be “re-animated” in the video. The words I use are also fragments of identity; in the first part of this piece, words from my father, taken out of context and re-purposed, are used that originally referred to the historian’s responsibility to history: “Naturally, much of what is said had to go without substantiation, but I took care to qualify most of my more dubious assertions.” (W.K. Bühler, “Gauss: A Biographical Study”).

I have used this statement in other works in different ways (for instance changing the order, and framing it differently), giving it different contexts. In the context of this new work and the meaning of this statement for it, much of the “substantiation” of Kolmar’s life and her work’s relation to it has to be inferred based on very partial evidence; from what I have found, this evidence is as much in her literary work as other documents. As the biographer Kühn did in his book, there is some reaching to be done in order to fully connect Kolmar with her times. So here the words of the historian advance in a very measured way, and are in fact not just words, but images of words. These image-words build up with a rhythmic accompaniment as a kind of prologue to the poem.

Following the poem, two letters written by Kolmar advance into the frame, accompanied by a mournful, ambient soundtrack; these letters were written to Walter Benjamin in 1934 (a time when surveillance and censorship of postal matter had been increased in Germany). The historian’s image-words then reappear, advancing over and partially masking Kolmar’s words. The historian’s words become a method of redaction, moving to alter and censor Kolmar’s words in her letters on the page. Kolmar herself at the time of writing had to be careful, and perhaps censor her own voice particularly in letters. When a document such as this passes through history, it is very difficult to know how much of the voice was free, and how much was burdened by its present moment. While Kolmar’s voice in letters may have been bound up in that moment, the identity of her poetic voice may in fact have been more free in its expression (or so we hope).

To discuss this work in the context of Harold Rosenberg's essay, "Is There A Jewish Art?", I will go back to my time spent participating in the Jewish Artists Lab here at UW-Madison. I first read this essay as part of the Lab, and at the time was only beginning to become more familiar with my Jewish identity (yet I still feel this familiarity is only in the early stages). I was then also at the very beginning of the *Self-Surveillance* project, and this essay along with other texts and discussions in the Lab fueled my thinking about it. With this new work, it has struck me that visually it is driven by text, yet features these so-called image-words, and that a discussion of the second commandment might be fruitful. However, there is a real distance between my family (even going back to Kolmar's day) and the practice and culture of Judaism. In my research I have found that Kolmar and her immediate family were not completely assimilated, yet they did identify strongly with German culture, and this perhaps kept her and her father from emigrating at earlier opportunities. Gertrud Kolmar did write poetry that was very outspoken about Nazi atrocities, and some on Jewish themes, which were reflective of the times they were living in. All of this makes me quite interested in Rosenberg's notion of an identity-driven strain of art by Jews, which particularly through this work has become a central part of my project.