

## Put Out More Flags: recent works by Eva Grubinger

*Yes or no? Yes...or...no? YES OR NO?*

You've met this person before. It's usually a man. You hear his whiny voice: an irritating student who hasn't grasped nuance, he's sat at the back of the auditorium as you lecture. Or you've seen him in a studio audience on television, baiting a politician, demonstrating that same tiresome inability to draw fine distinctions in debate. He comes to mind seeing *Charlie, November* (2020), an artwork by Eva Grubinger. We're in Bad Saarow, a municipality in the Oder-Spree district of Brandenburg, Germany – a spa town known for its hot springs and mud treatments. Two flags fly side by side on the Scharmützel Lake. *Charlie*, meaning 'Yes' in the language of the maritime flag alphabet, has five horizontal stripes: from the top there's royal blue, white, scarlet, white again, then a bottom line of blue. The other, *November*, is 'No': a chequered flag with sixteen squares in navy and white. Both are mounted side by side on a wooden pier and flutter gracefully in the breeze. The flags are, if you like, in a bipolar non-dialogue. Endlessly they ask us: yes or no, yes or no. *Charlie, November* is Grubinger's strikingly concise metaphor for binary political life today, a telegraphic illustration of how discourse has been shut down, how we live in a time of absolutes. You're either bluntly right or wrong in discussions ranging from climate change to Trump, from Brexit to trans issues. The unsubtle world now barks at us constantly: whose side are you on?

Away from the tumult on land, there's always the relative calm of the sea. Grubinger has a love of all things maritime and is attracted to the apothegmatic language of flags. If you're in trouble on the waves you need to be terse and literally flag what you have to say crisply; there's no room for ambiguity. Here's one place where subtle debate *is* inappropriate. Maritime flags are used again in *S.O.S.* (2021), a functional sculptural work, an outdoor living space-cum-leisure lounge made from glazed larch and pine with steel and enamel fittings; a yellow neon mounted on the front wall gives us its title.

This landlocked cabin is also a bar serving drinks. The painted flag designs that line the back walls are a vexillophile's dream. They could easily function as wonderfully laconic cries for help, pithy heraldic quips that guests might point to if caring for the deeply inebriated; blazons for the blitzed. Sensing that a fellow drinker is now three sheets to the wind (one of many phrases that link alcohol and the sea), you might finger the quarterly gules meaning *You are running into danger*. If they're utterly legless, there's a red diamond lozenge on an argent background that cries *I am disabled: communicate with me*. One step beyond sees you dealing with the incipiently comatose, so you should run up the flag with three rectangles, an inescutcheon gules within a fimbriated argent itself inside an azure border, demanding *I require medical assistance*.

If, on the other hand, the night is going well and you crave, *a la Abba*, a man after midnight, you might point to the vertical bars of alternating yellow and blue – a paly of six – that requests *I require a pilot*, a silent variant of 'Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!' (Tastefully, the primary-coloured saltire that asks *I require a tug* is absent.) If you've dumped your partner, those two conjoined triangles next along (per bend) in yellow and red mean *Man overboard*. And lastly, if someone has overdone the stimulants, we might run up three horizontal bars of azure and argent which, together, scream *I am on fire and have dangerous cargo on board: keep well clear of me*.

We need to behave better: if at first you don't succeed, you must try, try and try again. Grubinger's works are highly crafted – her works value skill and precision engineering. They argue that practice makes perfect. Trying to do the right thing in this world can be difficult and mastery doesn't come easy – even acts of courage or kindness can be easily misconstrued. Advertise your generosity by flagging it up online and you'll be promptly accused of virtue signaling. Is there any hope for us? Grubinger would argue there is, with her public work *Elpis* (2020).

In Greek mythology *Elpis* was the spirit of hope, a young woman carrying flowers or a cornucopia in her hands. *Elpis* was the last spirit in Pandora's jar and thus hope remains an eternal possibility, even if the lid on the jar is replaced. We may, if we're lucky, get it right in the end. As a teenager talking with my father and a daft uncle I

thought I'd use the word 'cornucopia' in a sentence. The pair fell about laughing (dad first) when I pronounced it 'corn-ooo-soap-ee-ah'. Promptly corrected, I now know how to say it; so, yes, there's always hope. (But not for my uncle: he didn't even know what 'cornucopia' meant. Bastard.)

*Elpis* is a painted steel construction, a grey column eight metres high, snared with four oval rings in a contrapposto arrangement, their inside linings coloured variously in red, green and yellow, the latter suggesting a slice of boiled egg. These rings are caught on the column as with a game of deck quoits – more maritime referencing – four hoops thrown at a target shaped like a raised peg. (Said peg or spike is sometimes called a hob, a molt or a pin.) Several other rings lie on the ground: they have missed their target, failures, like mispronunciations. Get it right next time, with a bit of luck, a bit of hope and – hoopla! – the game is won.

*Elpis* is a site-specific work for Munich city centre, located near a school and the Lenbachhaus, today the home to many art masterpieces. The museum owns paintings by the Blue Rider group and the New Objectivity movement, represented by artists like Rudolf Schlichter and Christian Schad. Many of their works were confiscated by the Nazis and labeled as 'degenerate'. Today the Lenbachhaus is one of the centres of provenance research that finds solutions to the proper ownership of artworks stolen by Third Reich functionaries. *Elpis* thus stands by an educational establishment as a symbol of renewal in a new age where modern Germany is contrite, where the people have recognised that what happened with Hitler must never happen again.

Of course, denazification did not rid the world of greed. At the time of writing, Vladimir Putin, the rapacious leader of Russia, accuses others of being Nazis as he and his cronies plunder billions. The UK has just seized its first Russian superyacht, the 192-foot, £38 million *Phi* with an 'infinite wine cellar' as part of the fittings. Cassandra-like voices like Grubinger's have been highlighting such greed for some while: her work *Malady of the Infinite* (2019) is entirely apposite to our times.

Artists crave pertinence and prophetic works are a clear marker of success.

Grubinger's giant sculpture *Malady of the Infinite* couldn't be truer to the current

moment. We quickly recognise what might be the superstructure of a superyacht; Grubinger's design is not dissimilar to *Phis*. We confront a white colossus, a cetacean skeleton, made from glass fibre-reinforced polyester, metal, and enamel. Fittingly we see three small black sculptures, mines, scattered threateningly alongside the yacht: these uncannily predict that nemesis is nigh. *Malady of the Infinite* is a startlingly prescient work given the current war in Ukraine and the aforementioned expropriation of vessels by various countries, the long overdue stripping of oligarch assets.

The surface sheen of *Malady of the Infinite* reflects the rapacity of the oligarchs. Not content with gross theft, the confiscating of state monies, these monsters purchase yachts worth billions precisely to avoid tax. Why help others? Their lust for luxury goods is boundless and, just like that infinite wine cellar, their malady (here Grubinger takes her title from sociologist Émile Durkheim) is that they endlessly crave more and more; enough is never enough. And those primed mines of hers? Those bombs stand, it seems, for the silent majority willing the destruction of such neo-czarist avarice.

The planet is dying and there's the imminent possibility of World War Three. Are we all at the farewell party? Do we, as an anonymous Chinese sage once wrote, 'get drunk and strike a musical note, in order to strengthen (our) spirit'? Or should we, as the wise man went on, 'put out more flags to increase our military splendour'? In 1942, Evelyn Waugh borrowed part of this phrase for the ironic title of his sixth novel. Reviewing *Put Out More Flags* L.E. Sissman said the book 'fused...savage, deadly comedy...with ominous seriousness.' Hard not to reach the same conclusion seeing Grubinger's work as her ambushed hull sinks into an imaginary sea.

*Ominous seriousness.* Sitting at Grubinger's *S.O.S* bar, trying to relax, our glasses filled with a fine Spätburgunder, we may also recall Waugh's other epigram, a quote from Chang Ch'ao: 'A little injustice in the heart can be drowned by wine; but a great injustice in the world can be drowned only by the sword.' War and swords, mines and bombs: couldn't we just settle this with a quiet game of quoits? Yes or no?

John Quin