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**ALTHEA THAUBERGER**  
*Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt (Social Service ≠ Art Project)*  
 January 4 - February 19, 2012

During a 2006 residency at Berlin’s Künstlerhaus Bethanien, the Canadian artist Althea Thauberger reached an agreement with officials from the Zivildienst (civilian service) office that allowed her to work with a group of “Zivis” – conscientious objectors opting for community work instead of the military service that was still compulsory in Germany at the time. Their collaboration focused on the writing and production of a project exploring issues related to military service, national identity and unity, labour ethics and community service, but also a number of more personal questions.

Over a period of three and a half months, at the rate of two meetings per week, eight young German men (ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-one) devoted some of their civilian service hours to Althea Thauberger's project. The result was a series of photographs, fictional biographies written by the Zivis and an eighteen-minute black and white film recording photography sessions and performances illustrating a succession of *tableaux vivants* on such themes as isolation, despair, cooperation, idealism, division and unity.

From her earliest works Althea Thauberger has been pursuing a creative process that involves collaboration or interactions with communities of individuals who are both the protagonists and the subjects of the social/political/economic realities that preoccupy her. This artistic approach, which is manifested in performances, discussion panels, photos, films, videos, audio recordings and publications, is rooted in Thauberger's interest in "the social document" and "the transformative power of individual imagination." At the heart of her practice, which invariably includes lengthy periods of research, is the idea of shared creative responsibility: the participants bring a personal dimension to each of her projects. "It's difficult for me," she says, "to separate media from subject matter, from concept, or from form. My projects usually begin with an image or sense of something that feels important ... I appreciate the way Joan Jonas speaks of the temporality of gesture. Giorgio Agamben identifies gesture as making visible the human state of 'being-in-a-medium,' opening up an 'ethical dimension.' We now can't understand art as separate from the gesture of bringing it into being."<sup>1</sup> As was the case for *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, Althea Thauberger often works with "people who are in a situation of extreme social control." Having grown up in a fundamentalist Christian family, she recognizes how the experience of being hemmed in by an ideology "profoundly shaped [her] own interests and sense of self."

Over the past decade Althea Thauberger has produced an extensive body of work based on performances created in collaboration with her "subjects." The diverse groups targeted by her practice have included adolescent girls, young tree planters in British Columbia and the members of a linguistic minority residing in northern Italy. The 2005 piece entitled *Murphy Canyon Choir* features military wives living on a base in San Diego (the largest military housing complex in the United States), while *The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen* was made in 2008 with a group of Canadian soldiers. In the winter of 2009 Althea Thauberger travelled to Kandahar, Afghanistan, under the auspices of the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP).

Althea Thauberger made *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, 2006, in collaboration with Jan Eller, Thomas Friedrich, Martin Harms, Ingo Kabus, Garane Leyli, Alexander McLarren, Matthias Obenaus and Dennis vom Berg. The black and white film, which is punctuated with subtitles, opens with the notion of restriction: “The protagonists find themselves together in an unfamiliar environment – Trapped! – Each must accept the unthinkable.”

In societies where military service is compulsory, where order, obedience and discipline are seen as a necessary rite of passage in the education of young adults of military service age, declaring oneself a conscientious objector implies reflection and a degree of ethical awareness. The huge industrial scaffolding erected in the Bethanien’s main space, which provides the setting for the eight protagonists of *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, symbolizes the duress they are under. Silently, the Zivis act out a series of tableaux that illustrate their situation and their reaction to it. One of the participants calls a meeting to defend the necessity of individual rights, consensus, training and armed defence. Another protagonist disagrees. A vote is taken. The only sounds are those they make as they change position on the scaffold, which echo through the empty space like a kind of nervous discharge between each tableau.

In 2006, the year that Althea Thauberger was in residence at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, there were reportedly twice as many conscripts who opted for civilian service (community work in hospitals, seniors’ residences, day care centres or homes for juvenile offenders) rather than service in the armed forces. During her residency Thauberger invited the sociologist Andreas Ringer to write an essay on the history of the Zivildienst. He recounts that in 1946, still reeling from the catastrophe of the Second World War and eager to convey a clear message of peace – but also to pay tribute to the thousands of conscientious objectors who were summarily executed under the Nazi regime – the states of Bavaria, Hesse and Baden-Württemberg all passed laws guaranteeing the right to conscientious objection. With the reintroduction of conscription in 1956, this alternative to military service was enshrined in the German constitution. Over the years, and particularly since 1968, the number of conscientious objection applications has grown steadily. In 1989, at the time of German reunification, some 95,000 Zivis were working in the social services.

Since July 2011 military service has no longer been compulsory in Germany.

**LOUISE SIMARD**, Head of Multimedia Events

**Althea Thauberger**, who was born in Saskatoon, is now based in Vancouver. She studied photography at Montreal's Concordia University (2000) before earning a master's degree at the University of Victoria, British Columbia (2002). Last spring Althea Thauberger was the recipient of the 2011 VIVA Award. She was also one of the finalists for The Grange Prize 2011, awarded by the Art Gallery of Ontario. In 2004 she was shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award with her video *A Memory Lasts Forever/Un souvenir pour l'éternité*. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held in Canada, the United States and Europe, including a show at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 2008; *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt* at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, in 2006; and *Songstress*, one of her first individual shows, presented at Montréal's La Centrale in 2003.

Althea Thauberger has taken part in numerous group exhibitions, including *WE: Vancouver*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in 2011; the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010); *Diabolique*, at the Galerie de l'UQAM, in 2010; *Nomads*, at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in 2009; *Farewell to Postcolonialism*, at the Guangzhou Triennial, China, in 2008; *The Soul*, at Manifesta 7, in Trento, Italy, in 2008; *The Tree: From the Sublime to the Social*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in 2008; *Explorations narratives*, at the Mois de la photo in Montréal, in 2007; *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, in Berlin, in 2006; *Sound and Vision*, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in 2006; and *Baya to Vancouver*, at the Seattle Art Museum, in 2003. Althea Thauberger has taken part in several public projects; notably, her work *Décarie Devotional Choir/Le Chœur fervent* was featured in *Décarie*, a community exhibition project organized by Montreal's Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts in 2005.

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## **Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt**

**(Social Service ≠ Art Project), 2006**

Performance filmed in digital video with sound

Running time: 18 minutes

The video begins every 20 minutes, starting on the hour.

**Director:** Althea Thauberger

**Writers/performers:** Jan Eller, Thomas Friedrick, Martin Harms, Ingo Kabus, Garane Leyli, Alexander McLaren, Matthias Obenaus, Dennis vom Berg

**Project and production co-ordinator:** Helena Klitzsch

**Project consultants:** Andreas Ringer, Kate Greenslade

**Direction assistance:** Kerry Tribe

**Director of photography:** Nadja Kurtz

**Camera operator:** Caro Krugmann

**Lighting designer:** Siri Klug

**Lighting assistant:** Anne Pöhlmann

**Audio recordists:** Kenji Tanako, Kerry Tribe

**Production stills:** Althea Thauberger, Helena Klitzsch

**Production photography:** Helena Klitzsch, Kerry Tribe, Germaine Koh, Mungo Thomson, John Connelly, Althea Thauberger

**Scaffolding architects:** Yuima Kaneko, Andreas Otto

**Scaffolding construction:** Gerüstbau Tisch GMBh, Berlin

**Cinema rentals:** Cine-Service, Berlin

**Editors:** Althea Thauberger, Brendan Woolard

**Sound designer:** Greg Sabitz

**Translators:** Catherine Nichols, Sybille Mall

**Special thanks:** Helena Klitzsch, the Zivis, Andreas Ringer, Georg Dombrowski, Kate Greenslade, Vanessa Ohlraun, Laura Schleussner, Sybille Mall, Kerry Tribe, Bijan Dawallu, Philip and Shelley Aarons, John Connelly, Andreas Otto, Yuima Kaneko, Gabriele Spindler

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**Production support:** The Canada Council for the Arts, Philip and Shelley Aarons, John Connelly Presents, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Zivildienst authorities, The Canadian Embassy in Berlin

## **PHOTO**

Althea Thauberger, *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt (Social Service ≠ Art Project)*, 2006  
Courtesy of the artist