

**"How do
you know?"**

**Well, you
have to
take my
word for
it that
I did
know."**

staging credible narrations
by Theresa Büchner

“How do you know? Well, you have to take my word for it that I did know.”

K. Sage, ‘From Chapter 11: Ethics’ in *Voicing Our Visions*, Mara R. Witzling (eds), The Women’s Press, London, 1992, p.238.

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Beginning with the production of photo series and short films as well as short stories, I became aware of the process of fictionalization (dt. Verdichtung) of reality as part of my artistic practice. I precisely select motifs from my surroundings to form narratives which evoke the poetic attraction of the everyday. To make these constructions of reality appear convincing I make use of visual and verbal narrative tools.

The following text is structured in six chapters. Among other text forms it consists of script fragments. Starting from my short story “My father’s better half”, I examine how other narrators give their stories the appearance of verisimilitude. The artist (Sophie Calle), the lobbyist (Ludger Fischer) and the playwright (Andrea Dunbar) enter the stage. With the help of further literature and media their methods of ‘reality making’ narration are analyzed. One makes use of the autobiographical realm. One states a story has to be convincing to be true. And one writes what is actually said, while the same event is given contradictory interpretations by different individuals involved. All other characters in this text – according to their appearance: The Father, Claudia, Me, the Interrogator, the Mother, the Daughter, Iris and You – are entangled in narratives, too. The text ends with my short story “Demolding a Daughter”. A fragment of the autobiography of the painter Kay Sage functions as epilogue.

Theresa Büchner, 2017

**My
Father's
Better
Half**

At the beginning, I found it easy to believe. My father's better half is called Claudia. They share an apartment in Brussels. In 1991 Claudia became world champion in a horse championship. A few years ago she gave up her career due to health issues. Now she works as a secretary. I visit my father every month in their apartment in Brussels, but Claudia is never there. I haven't seen her for more than 10 years.

My father is a writer. He writes books on cooking, lobbyism, architecture and even a crime novel. He comes up with a variety of convincing stories about Claudia: He outlines her past and ambitions, what she likes and what she doesn't like and he even adds a few harmless neurotic habits to her character.

Horse figures of all sizes are on display in the living room. My father explains, that Claudia collects them. On a closer look, you see trophies, medals, and documents that testify her successes. The staging of her career as a world champion is elaborated. Claudia is a subscriber of several magazines about Icelandic horses. A few recent issues are piled up on the little coffee table.

Claudia had a cousin with severe skin diseases. This man was bullied throughout his whole life. He didn't get very old. Claudia always took care of him. That's where her caring and social character comes from, my father says. She is a smart and loving woman who looks after him.

Like my mother, Claudia loves everything that is blue. You can find blue objects everywhere in the apartment. There is only one exception: The yellow bathroom. Only yellow objects can be found here. My father often jokes that Claudia confuses "blue" and "nice". "That's nice" she would say, pointing at an object she likes. My father replies "No, this is just blue".

Their bed is a true mystery: The rumpled bed sheets of my father's side show that someone slept there. The other side of the bed is always neatly done. The bed sheets don't have any human odor. But my father changes both bed covers.

He says Claudia can't stand my presence. That's why she leaves the apartment every time I come to visit him. Sometimes she goes on vacation. Sometimes she takes a hotel room somewhere in the city. Like this, she doesn't have to meet me.

Once my father bought a yellow dress for me that I really wanted. It was so beautiful. A few weeks later he got into a huge fight with Claudia. She was jealous and complained, that he had never bought her such a nice dress. I shouldn't expect further expensive gifts in the future, he told me. Later I found out that my father had money issues at that time. It seemed like he could only tell me as "Claudia".

Sometimes Claudia is on my side, my father says. Then she urges him to be less harsh on me. The situation is quite schizophrenic. I once went to see a psychologist. She asked me whether I would be happier if Claudia wouldn't exist. I had no answer to that question.

I wanted a confrontation. Even if I didn't know what I wanted to get out of it. So I tried to trick them into it. We had to leave the house before Claudia was supposed to be back home. I told my father, that I had forgotten something at their place. We went back, but Claudia was not there yet. "She's stuck in traffic", he claimed. I was not convinced. But now that he is with Claudia, my father doesn't seem as lonely as he used to be.

The interrogator is sitting next to my desk. Carefully the interrogator reads everything I type into my computer. The interrogator has a warm but persisting way of speaking.

I: Theresa, please tell me, who is Claudia?

T: Claudia is my father's partner. She appears in the story 'My father's better half'. Of course, she does not exist in reality. I mean of course she does! There is a story about her, one that I wrote.

I: So you say this story is all made up? That isn't possible! No one can come up with this. Right?

T: No, sure. Everything in this story is true.

I: Um. That, I cannot believe either.

T: Why not?

I: The way you say this, and I mean, how you depict this woman... really no one is like this.

T: No, of course not, that's only my narrative perspective. And that is a quite powerful one.

Especially, when I am speaking from a seemingly autobiographical place. Listeners and readers have to trust me in the first place to enter the story. They have to believe me and they cannot question my personal story that easily. I have a lead in credibility, which I can crush or extend.

I: How?

T: By the use of tools which break the impression of truth, the creation of doubts, the play with evidence, I use anything to get my way.

I: But why would you do that, to undermine your narrative perspective?

T: Because I want to examine, which elements lend credence to my story and which don't. It is all about the perspective from which a story is told and whether it is a believable one, as a believable one is a powerful one. I hope to find out soon how three other narrators – the artist, the lobbyist and the playwright – give their stories the appearance of verisimilitude.

The Artist

My mother is standing next to the window scrolling through a stack of paper sheets. I am standing next to her. She pulls out a letter.

M: Do you remember when I turned 50 and you turned 13? Secretly, you would go to the library of the museum every weekend. There was this exhibition you found fascinating and you transcribed all the stories from the exhibition catalog.

T: Right, the 'True Stories'. The title sounds plausible and paradoxical at the same time. But how can you remember something I was doing secretly?

M: Later you told me what you were doing on these weekends. So, I think I take your story as my memory. And on my birthday you would lay out all these inscribed paper sheets in our living room. As a present.

T: You loved it!

M: Of course I did! You even made a self-portrait posing the way the artist was on the exhibition poster.

T: And you decided that the artist should hear about this.

M: Really?

T: Yes. You made me write this letter to her. I felt uncomfortable with it, but in the end, I thought we actually sent the letter somewhere. Did you keep a copy of it?

The book “True Stories” gathers a series of texts and photographs by Sophie Calle. Each text is contrasted with a photograph. The photographs show objects which play a role in the texts, sometimes the reproduced photograph is the object itself, sometimes they show re-enacted scenes or function as metaphors in relation to the text. They serve as evidence for the stories - like the title, this is a hint, that the stories are possibly fictional. The title suggests that we can expect “true stories” to be told. Is that a contradiction in itself?

The stories of Sophie Calle are often taken for autobiographical texts. Rather, it is the possibility of autobiography that is being offered. They are told from the first-person perspective, and this first-person perspective encourages the reader to share the narrator’s point of view. The story’s main character is the artist herself and the stories often serial, interlinked quality mislead to think they are necessarily autobiographical. Sophie Calle is a reliable narrator. She makes use of an autobiographical realm to tell her stories, whether they are fictional or non-fictional, and deliberately leaves the reader in uncertainty about their autobiographical quality. The stories appear to be believable.

The plausible appearance of the scenes which Sophie Calle describes causes that the objects she uses to create the stories are

mistaken as banal: “Gewöhnliche bis harmlose Dinge, die der Erklärung bedürfen”¹. The bed, the shoe, the postcard – behind all these objects there could be a story, possibly behind every object imagined. The poetization of everyday objects is an effective tool itself. But the ones the artist chooses are not as ordinary as they might seem at first gaze. The specific cultural history and symbolic value of shoes, beds, and postcards come into effect and make the choice of objects important for the creation of a story. A red high-heel, Mary Jane’s shoe is an object loaded with associations, which give the viewer material for speculations about the owner’s social status and taste.

Neither the objects by themselves are banal nor are the scenes which derive from the meditation on these objects banal. They are almost always about existential, if not existence-threatening situations: The death of a new tenant who sleeps in Sophie Calle’s former bed suggests an act of revenge². A red stripe appears on a photograph on the neck of the artist and is presented as to be interpreted as a sign for an attempt of murder, which is committed shortly afterward³. The tool, which can be found here, is the tool of suggestion. To imagine the actual denouement of the scene and its background is left to the reader.

The use of the medium of photography plays a key role in the work of Sophie Calle. Not only is reality rendered, scrutinized and evaluated for its fidelity to photographs as

1 K. Ebeling, *‘Indiz und Intrige – Zur Archäologie des Intimen bei Sophie Calle’* in Sophie Calle, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, 2002, p.143.

2 S. Calle, *Wahre Geschichten*, Prestl Verlag, München, 2004, pp.26f.

3 *ibid.*, p.39.

Susan Sontag points out, but photographs have also become the norm for the way things appear to us.⁴ This is where they still draw their trustworthy appearance from. Their 'reality making' (realitätsstiftend) ability works to the advantage of the artist.

The play with evidence is not limited to its staging in the form of a book: In her installations, Sophie Calle gives numbers to the physical objects she presents. The form of presentation resembles the handling of evidence at a crime scene. Every object refers to a story, which is presented in the form of a text as part of the installation. Here the 'reality making' medium of photography is skipped and the objects are directly elevated to the status of a relic. This transformation works only insufficiently in the case of a plate with ice cream and one half of a banana: This cannot be the exact same food, which was served to Sophie Calle in the story. But in the case of the single shoe, it is possible that it was the exact same one which touched the foot of the renowned artist when she was just – especially star cult can not be excluded from the art world.

Between the white walls of a museum, these arrangements function under different conditions than for example in a residential house. Especially, if it is the one of Sigmund Freud, where Sophie Calle's stories were presented in 1999. Embedded in the now museum-like atmosphere of the former private living environment, her stories and objects appear in various relations, contradictions and back couplings to the psychoanalyst's belongings. In the Madison Avenue's Lowell Hotel, where Sophie Calle installed her stories in 2011, they appear again in a differ-

4 S. Sonntag, *'The Heroism of Vision'* in *On Photography* Penguin Books, London, 2008, p.87.

ent light. Again a highly symbolic and loaded scenery is chosen: The Hotel Room. Could the stories have taken place here, in this particular room? The visitor suspects the impossibility and can experience the trickery as exciting.

In his text “Indiz und Intrige – Zur Archäologie des Intimen bei Sophie Calle” Knut Ebeling uses the terms “Verschlüsseln und Entschlüsseln”⁵ (decrypt and encrypt), as well as “Dokumentation”⁶ (documentation) to describe the practice of the artist. But what is to be documented here? A reality? The work of Sophie Calle rather shows the staging of reality, than its documentation.

Reality has to be staged. It is an ongoing process, not an arrival. Through its staging in the form of a story, or more specifically a narrative, reality is simultaneously created, supplemented and confirmed. In that sense, Sophie Calle does not work much differently than other artists, writers, or historians, but she also addresses their and her own methods of reality making. It becomes apparent that every so-called documentation is staging, that observation is interpretation. Reality is not just there to be depicted. It is produced while writing as well as while producing visual images. Every text, every image creates a narrative, which can be perceived as a reality. Of all the possible narratives the most trustworthy one is called “reality”.

5 Ebeling, op. cit., pp.146f.

6 *ibid.*, p.150.

The Lobbyist

The lobbyist is on time. He walks through the door of the pub “The Grapevine” at Place du Luxembourg in Brussels, right in front of the European Parliament. He quickly approaches my table. We greet each other and he throws his coat on one of the wooden chairs. He must be in his forties. After the exchange of courtesies I start with the interview.

T: So you earn your money with the arrangement of truths?

L: You name it, it's plural, truths. But no, not really. I earn my money with trustworthiness. It's about the representation of reality. I can't leave that to other people! I have to construct it myself.

T: So with the help of convincing stories you create reality. Don't you feel bound to “truths” during your work of construction? Or do you sometimes lie?

L: In this regard the term “lie” is out of place. Like I said, it's a matter of trustworthiness.

T: And by this, you are always on the right side?

L: What is the right side?

T: What's true!

*L: And you know what's true?
Lucky you!*

*T: Don't you mind what position
you represent?*

*L: I represent the position I get
paid for. This is my job after all.
An advocate represents the in-
terests of his clients, too.*

*T: You consider yourself an ad-
vocate?*

*L: Of course, I do. As an advo-
cate of the ones, who want their
voice to be heard.*

*T: At least the ones who can pay
you. Is your personal opinion the
same as your lobbyist opinion?*

*L: That doesn't matter at all. I
represent my client's interests
as convincing as possible. Ev-
eryone can attain power and
improve one's position with the
help of a believable story.*

*T: That means you have a big
responsibility. After all, you have
an influence on the law in Eu-
rope.*

*L: As much as the other 50.000
lobbyists.*

T: I see. Can I trust you?

L: If not, who else?

T: Maybe I would trust another lobbyist more. There are thousands as you said.

L: If you like. But it is your choice. You have to decide for yourself who you want to trust and whom not and especially how much of what you are told.

T: So a lobbyist is a storyteller?

L: He argues on order. The better he argues, the better for his clients. His story must be convincing. Then it is true.

The term “narrative” is used hereafter as the mode in which a story is told. In social sciences the term is used to denote a meaningful narrational motif which sets for a specific cultural circle or social group how a story is to be perceived.

We live in a world which constantly produces a single narrative of who we are, what we do. Like authors, we are constantly occupied with telling stories about ourselves and about the things we experience. Even more important than the verisimilitude of the specific account is which effect is intended by the respective professional and private author hereafter referred to as referent. They all create or make use, and therefore confirm, (existing) narratives to communicate something. There are intentions that underlie every

kind of storytelling. This is not yet problematic itself. It only becomes problematic, if the appearance of truth is so convincing that it is forgotten that the stories we are listening to, follow a certain interest.

Roland Barthes describes this issue in his essay “The Reality Effect”¹. Barthes argues that the purpose of the “Reality Effect” (effet de réel) is to establish texts as realistic. His analysis can be applied not only to literary texts but to everyday accounts too.

According, to Barthes, it is exactly the insignificant details which add to the verisimilitude of a notation in an essential way: He distinguishes significant details which contribute to the narrative and the insignificant which at first glance do not contribute, followed by the playfully posed question what the significance of this insignificance could be.² The lavish use of linguistic embroidery can surely make an account unintelligible and mistakable – a stylistic and therefore substantial issue. The use of embroidery really becomes problematic, if it serves the appearance of “objectively notated” reality and obscures the intention of the referent. Barthes describes this as a resistance to meaning which “confirms the great mythic opposition of the true-to-life (the lifelike) and the intelligible”³. The insignificant appears as simply “having-been-there”, an object of a “pure” observation and description by an uninvolved observer. Barthes called it “the pure and simple ‘representation’ of the ‘real’, the naked relation of ‘what is’ (or has been)”⁴. As soon as the “real” is perceived as self-suf-

1 R.Barthes, *The Reality Effect* in *The Rustle of Language*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1989.

2 *ibid.*, p.143.

3 *ibid.*, p.146.

4 *ibid.*, p.146.

ficient, it is strong enough to belie any notion of “function”⁵.

These mechanics make it possible, that history can appear as “objective”, while its “verisimilitude (...) is entirely subject to (public) opinion”⁶. While “the contrary is never impossible, since notation rests on a majority, but not an absolute, opinion”⁷, a realistic description avoids appearing as a product of imagination and stresses elements which underline the “objectivity” of the account.⁸ “[R]eality’ becomes the essential reference in historical narrative, which is supposed to report ‘what really happened’”⁹. Barthes concludes that a new verisimilitude can only be structured by a discourse which accepts “speech-acts” justified by their referent alone.¹⁰ Can you believe the artist, the lobbyist and the playwright, based on their skillfully crafted narratives?

5 *ibid.*, p.147.

6 *ibid.*, p.147.

7 *ibid.*, p.147.

8 *ibid.*, p.145.

9 *ibid.*, p.146.

10 *ibid.*, p.147.

The Playwright

Andrea is wearing a light yellow jacket and a grey sweater. She looks exhausted but wide awake, leaning against a brick wall. A strong wind ruffles her hair.

T: What gave you the idea for your plays and the film? Was it personal experience or just viewing the life on the estate or something entirely different?

A: Parts of it was, and parts of it wasn't. But you sort of see things happening on an estate anyway, wherever you live. If you grow up on an estate, live there, you know everybody. I mean I don't find it shocking to write about it.¹

T: Some people in Bradford, where your stories take place, didn't like the image that you draw of their town. How did you feel about that?

A: I've had a few reactions but I don't think its nothing to worry about. You know, I've only had, sort of, you know, like about three people, complain. I mean, its not bad of a whole estate is it?²

1 *The Arbor* (2010), DVD, Artangel Media, UK:
Clio Barnard

2 *ibid.*

T: That film that Clio Bernard made about you is told mainly from the perspective of your daughters Lorraine and Lisa. They have quite conflicting views on you as a mother. What do you think about it?

A: You know, I was imagining my life differently, too. But I tried my best. I was working on my plays, often staying up late and then there were the kids too, you know. But let's not talk about that. I mean my daughters have their stories about me and I have the ones about myself. I live my version and they live theirs.

Andrea closes her jacket and pulls the collar of her sweater up.

A: So you are writing about a family, too? How is it going?

T: It's a puzzle. Sometimes it all seems to fit together and then it all falls apart again. The story changes all the time. I first wrote it in German as I could find the words in my mother tongue more easily. When I translated it into English, I noticed that some sentences could be expressed even better in English while some nuances of the German

version got lost in translation. Now that I try to transform the story into a script for a film, it seems to change once again. It feels unpredictable what will happen to it next.

A: But don't worry about that. Nowadays people want to face up with what's actually happening. Cos it's actually what's said. And you write what's said. You don't lie. If you write about something that's actually happened, you're not gonna lie and say, "It didn't happen" when it did all the time.³

Clio Barnard's movie "The Arbor" from 2010 tells the story of dramatist and author Andrea Dunbar who died in 1990 of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 29. Barnard has interviewed Dunbar's family, friends, and grownup children, talking about their memories and asked actors to lip-sync to the resulting audio soundtrack.

Barnard stages passages from Andrea Dunbar's plays in open spaces in Bradford, Buttershaw Estate, known as "the Arbor". What was happening here in the rooms of the surrounding buildings was brought to the theater stage in London by Andrea Dunbar in 1980. In 2010 Barnard, who grew up on the

3 *ibid.*

outskirts of Bradford⁴, put on the play where Dunbar wrote it. The grass field of the very estates where the play writer Dunbar grew up becomes the stage, surrounded by the presumably real residents of 2010 looking on. A man steps out of the crowd and starts talking to the camera. As it turns out, he is the brother of Andrea Dunbar and shares his memories of the scene that was shown just before. The effect is compelling: Suddenly, the whole audience is possibly part of Andrea Dunbar's story, fact and fiction merge. Could this man actually be the brother of Andrea Dunbar? But as the man continues to talk the illusion is shattered. What was proclaimed at the beginning of the movie becomes apparent: "This is a true story, filmed with actors lip-synching to the voices of the people whose story it tells".

The movie consists of various action levels which are intertwined in different ways. In the opening scene childhood memories of Andrea Dunbar's daughters, Lisa and Lorraine are restaged. The two sisters are shown as adults within the scenery of their old children's room. Both are talking to the camera about what occurred in the children's room. Their views are contrasting, even contradicting, underlined by the positioning of the two sisters: They stand close to each other, but act as if they were not in the room together. Lorraine opens a package and pulls out two books of her mother, a DVD and a letter from Andrea Dunbar to Max Stafford-Clark, the theatre director of "The Arbor" which she reads out loud. The DVD contains a TV program about the premiere of "The Arbor" in

4 A. Hickling, *'Back to Bradford: Andrea Dunbar remembered on film'* [Online], Monday 12 April 2010, viewed on 27 October 2017, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/apr/12/theatre>

London in 1980. This way, video footage is introduced and smoothly embedded in the storyline of Barnard's movie. Rehearsals for Andrea Dunbar's play "The Arbor" and the production of "Rita, Sue, and Bob too" as well as parts of the film adaptation of "Rita, Sue and Bob too" are shown throughout the movie. Dunbar's work and life and the tragic story of how her pain was replicated in the life of her daughter Lorraine unfolds. The action levels of the movie appear as much intertwined as the action levels of the stories the actual people are living in, which they tell about themselves and about others. While watching a TV program about the imprisonment of Lorraine, her foster father comments on the way the story is told: "Embroidered it a little bit, didn't they?".

Clio Barnard chooses to let several narrators, tell the story from different points of view. It is up to the viewer to decide which narrator seems most reliable for each part of the story. "Hopefully, it will remind the viewer that, however truthful a documentary attempts to be, it is always subject to the editorial decisions of the film-maker."⁵

5 *ibid.*

Demolding A Daughter

Iris does not live here. This room and everything that surrounds it is strange to her. On the boat that brought her here, she had had to think about the journey she had made with her daughter. Back then the city seemed much smaller to her. Now she does not know where to start. At least the room is compact; a little too small even. There is a chair and a table, a bed, a mirror and a shelf for luggage. Iris is sitting on the bed. She turns the TV on and leans back. There is a programme on about gems. Two women enthusiastically praise the qualities of a green jewel. It seems to be selling well. Only ten of them are left. Now only eight.

When she wakes up it is already dark outside. Two men are discussing knives on TV. Iris needs a moment before she realizes where she is. She stands up, closes the curtains, turns the TV off. It is very dark in the room now. Only her phone is glowing brightly. In the mirror, she can see her face illuminated by the display. She looks beautiful in this light, she thinks, not as many wrinkles.

When I see pictures of my mother when she was young, I see a woman who doesn't need me. She is not thinking about me, not thinking that I will become the most important person in her life, as she says. Back then it was her art first, later it was me. I would have liked to have met her back then. But maybe not. She seems so independent. Would she have liked me?

Iris holds the phone close to her ear. *This is Iris. I am in Amsterdam. You know exactly what I am doing here. She is my daughter, I must find her!* There is no help to be expected, Iris thinks. The darkness does not help her with orientating herself. She switches the table lamp and the light in the bathroom on. The room measures three steps from one side to the other. Now she is standing in front of the curtains. The curtains form stiff, regu-

lar folds reaching from the ceiling to the ground. Its folds curve inwards on her side and outside on the other end, Iris thinks. With one foot she touches the fabric. A waving movement goes from fold to fold.

My mother dedicated her life to her work before giving birth to me. My grandmother could not understand why her daughter had no children. These sculptures, Iris, they really are your children, she always said. When I was born, I became my mother's most important project. She really liked to tell me that.

The folds of the curtain are not moving anymore. They are obtrusive. Iris turns her head away. *What are you doing here? I am looking for my daughter. You are talking to yourself. You didn't even call anyone. But I have the telephone in my hand!* The display is black, it does not say anything anymore. She tosses her phone on the bed and goes to the bathroom. Square tiles everywhere. A little card wishes a pleasant stay. She washes her face and looks at herself in the mirror. The lighting of the bathroom is remorseless, dazzling. *Shame on you!*

The room I live in is eight square metres. I had a rather small room growing up. My mother had a huge room as a child and later an entire house with a garden all to herself. This allowed her to make metal sculptures three to five metres high. I like writing. It allows me to create immaterial spaces of all sizes. While I am writing this, I am sitting on my bed. It takes up four of the eight square metres.

I had to give up the big house. The storage costs for my sculptures are enormous. And you, my dear daughter, I cannot reach. But we have to get together again. It all depends on that. I know how much you need me. You cried when I told you I wouldn't mind if you

left. From time to time I just had to hear your weeping to know that we need each other.

Iris goes back to the room. She opens the curtains, stands at the window and closes the curtains behind her. Its folds curve inwards on her side and outside on the other end.

Epilogue

*“Your story is very absorbing.
Do you ever mean to publish it?”*

*No, I couldn’t possibly. There are
too many other people and too
many truths involved.*

*But there isn’t a word of
truth in it.*

*What do you mean by that? You
mean that none of these things
ever happened to me?*

*Yes, I mean exactly that. You
only think they happened to you.*

*Then, in that case, I wasn’t
there. You mean it was some-
body else?*

Yes, it was somebody else.”¹

¹ K. Sage, ‘Extra (China Eggs)’ in *Voicing Our Visions*, Mara R. Witzling (eds), The Women’s Press, London, 1992, p. 242.

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The Arbor (2010), DVD, Artangel Media, UK: Clio Barnard.

Colophon

Thesis: Theresa Büchner

Design: Till Hormann

Typface: Lars by bold decision

Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 2018

