

# Old War, New War, Cold War: The Art of Sabine Moritz

Essay by Christine Mehring

## Old War

The painting [5] *Digger*, originally made in 2004 but recently reworked, counts as one of German artist Sabine Moritz's first to explicitly address war, the subject of a substantial body of work she has created over the past nine years. Yet against all expectations one might have for such a series, there is no violence or aggression here, no pain or suffering, no fighters or perpetrators per se, and even civilians or victims are rare. In *Digger*, for example, there is just a single soldier, dressed in telltale army-green, carrying a rifle and wearing a helmet, his back turned, squatting in front of some ruin or another, facing its dark undefined inside, digging. It is a scene ripe with uncertainty—did something bad just happen, and if so what? Is something bad about to happen, and if so what? Is he searching, and if so for what? Will he find something, and if so what?

We readily ask such questions when confronted with the mere image of a soldier, conditioned as we are by media coverage, movies, and the art-historical iconography of war as a series of dramatic and often tragic events. In fact, aside from religious iconography, there is hardly a more conventional, predictable, and commonplace subject in art through the ages than war. The history of art is easily told as one of representations and contemplations of war and its attendant subjects—battles, victories, defeats, heroism, violence, and suffering. Highlights range from such dynamic prehistorical compositions as the Akkadian Victory Stele of Naram Sin (c. 2200 BCE) to the Renaissance's development of linear perspective in Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (c. 1438–40) to modernism's abstracting distortions and fragmentations in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

In the modern age, artists increasingly turned a critical eye to the senseless, unspeakable cruelties of war, especially as inflicted on innocent civilians. Before *Guernica* came Jacques Callot's *Great Miseries of War* (1633), Francisco de Goya's *Disasters of War* (created 1810–20, published 1863), and Otto Dix's *The War* (1924)—all three of them series of prints circulated in editions to reach a wide audience and bring an end to war. Many artists in the twentieth century created anti-war propaganda and memorials, most prominently in the context of National Socialism's instigation of World War II (think of John Heartfield's montages for the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* [Workers illustrated newspaper] in the 1930s) and of the controversial war waged by the United States in Vietnam (which informed, for

example, Edward Kienholz's *Portable War Memorial* [1968] and Nancy Spero's *War Series* [1966–70]).

Goya in particular perfected the dramatic rendering of instants or effects of violence—cruel executions, humiliations of corpses, starving women and children—that shock to this day. Mining the graphic potential of the etching medium, with its strong contrasts and expressive lines, Goya recorded and informed his contemporaries of atrocities committed during the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. His equally indicting captions are as suggestive of the need to bear witness (“I saw this”) as of the limits of representation (“one cannot look at this”), of calls for action (“this is too much!”) as of sighs of resignation (“truth has died”).<sup>1</sup>

Moritz's war work boldly breaks from this imposing history. Violence is never featured although it may loom, and if there is danger it is inconspicuous. That is especially the case in a core group of paintings dating from 2010 and 2011. In [13] *Fluss (Frau im Wasser) River (Woman in the Water)*, a woman wades into water fully dressed; the water seems shallow and the land a bit far away; her silhouette appears duplicated in reflection and her shadows ominous as if anticipating her disappearance. The soldier in the two versions of [3 and 4] *Schlafender Sleeper* seems peacefully asleep but a bit too close to an arsenal of rockets. In [17] *Mantel Coat*, a trio is on the move, but we do not know to where and from where or what, and we wonder who or what has been left behind, who or what drops out at the lower right of the picture, and who or what awaits in the far distance. Another group of three, in [16] *Handschuhe (Zigarette) Gloves (Cigarette)*, is casually engaged in conversation, perhaps, but someone stands just a touch too close to someone else who is kneeling.<sup>2</sup>

We could not be further from Picasso's *Guernica*, with its fragmented bodies of men, women, and children, of



*Handschuhe (Zigarette) Gloves (Cigarette)*, 2010  
[16, detail]

bulls and horses, twisting and turning in impossible directions; tellingly, in this stylized, overdetermined rendering of violence, it is the light bulb marginalized at the top of the painting that holds interest for Moritz. Although she admires Goya's *Disasters of War*, Moritz considers painted representations of violence "absurd" in this day and age. Photography, which Moritz mines as source material drawn from books and newspapers, does a better job in her mind; violence, she insists, "exceeds comprehension (*Fassungsvermögen*), and painting achieves something else: it condenses, elevates, withdraws."<sup>3</sup>

### Suspension of Hostilities

Furthering the impressions of looming violence and inconspicuous danger and the state of ambiguity these impressions produce, Moritz plays with different registers of readability, especially in *Handschuhe (Zigarette)*. On the one hand, there is the crisp, glaringly white end of a cigarette popping out from an ochre-colored, yellow-accented glove, which is in turn popping out from a bed of complementary blues. On the other hand, there are the virtually effaced heads of the three figures—particularly the kneeling one—their faces slipping away the more we look for expressive clues. Our attention orbits accordingly: from jarring inexplicable details like the kneeling soldier; to the artist's reassuringly ordinary titles; to those titles' unassuming points of reference; to the sumptuous array of olive, lime, pine, Irish, and so many other greens eluding nomenclature; to the luscious textures of the moist streaks of oil and their dry speckled pattern counterparts; and then, always back again, to the details, those discomforting details that won't quite fit. Moritz ingeniously plays with our conceptual, tactile, and visual attentions—which are here in harmony, there in contrast. Developing the uncertainty produced by the paintings' iconography, and lacing hints of danger with elements of tactile and visual attraction, she propels our attention into a state of limbo. Consistent with the Latin root "limbus," meaning an ornamental border or fringe, we focus only to have our point of focus fall back into oblivion and onto the sidelines while our attention moves on.<sup>4</sup>

The same is true for Moritz's protagonists. Hostilities are suspended in all of her war paintings, sometimes—as in *Mantel* and *Handschuhe (Zigarette)*—for what might only be a brief moment, sometimes (more commonly) for longer. To that end, Moritz paints what is often considered



*Digger*, 2004/2013  
[5, detail]

tangential to war but is in fact integral to it: the time before, in between, or after combat actions. But despite the putatively peripheral nature of these moments, they may be ones of great concentration. Returning to [5] *Digger*, our initial questions concerning the motif's dramatic context remain unanswered and prove beside the point. The painting conveys no pure or easy suspense but rather an oddly calm and potent elusiveness, not a vivid but a slowed-down narrative, no fleeting instant but intense focus. The soldier's hunched-down body, coupled with his jacket's tight embrace and his helmet's blocking of peripheral vision, suggests just such a state of utter concentration.

That state of concentration is eloquently inscribed formally in the painting's concentric composition, with the protagonist framed by a pentagon made from mostly diagonally oriented axes (the pentagon consists of, running clockwise, the white bar of a broken window frame at top, a cropped wall parallel to the right edge of the picture, its bottom edge, the soldier's rifle, and a bent rod of some sort crossing the upper left corner). Especially seen up close, Moritz's painterly treatment further absorbs the figure into his surrounds, collapsing investigator and investigated. The pastose handling of whatever the soldier is digging in (it is amorphous and impenetrable and there is lots of it) spills over onto the uniform's fabric, along with the carefully measured white-, pink-, and mustard-colored accents emerging from the stuff.

Moritz's favored moments—prior to, in between, and following armed confrontations—further include pauses and moments of slowing down and transition: soldiers sleeping, resting, or waiting; soldiers observing or guarding, talking or writing, investigating or searching; soldiers loading or unloading, moving to or from; buildings ruined or smoking; helicopters landing or hovering; vehicles



*Limbo*, 2005  
Oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm, 31 ½ × 47 ¼ in



*Sunday*, 2005  
Oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm, 31 ½ × 47 ¼ in

stopped. In *Limbo*, 2005, for example, a massive convoy of military trucks stretches across a flat terrain almost to the horizon line. On the one hand, the slight angle from which we behold the convoy, along with the strong cropping of the far left and right trucks, suggests movement, however slow; on the other, the scattered figures standing in front of and amidst the convoy, along with the blurring of some trucks' bottoms with the ground, suggest it has stopped, however briefly. Moritz intertwined these contradictory components to paint "being stopped"—stopping not as an instant but as duration, not as an action but a condition, not the end of something but a situation full of potential. The notion of limbo here is both spatial and temporal, a sense of suspension between spaces and within time, and it has been central to Moritz's conception of painting war ever since.<sup>5</sup>

*Sunday*, like *Limbo*, dates from 2005 and is a formative early painting in the series. Unlike *Limbo*, everything has already happened in *Sunday*, which is unusually readable as a scene of destruction. If unidentifiable flattened

matter defines our entry into the picture and if the state of the car on the left is unclear—it is perhaps intact, perhaps damaged—the prominent pile of mashed, twisted metal on the far right indicates that a forceful explosion of several vehicles has taken place. Moritz modified the source photograph by moving the damaged car on the far right and the pile in front of it onto the same plane, using the latter to formally enhance the halted movement of the former; to the same end, the downward angle of the collapsed car's base was steepened.<sup>6</sup> Arrested figures and stopped cars in the back, facing and echoing our surveying gaze, join us as witnesses to the violence inflicted just prior. *Sunday* captures how destruction, like pain, has a way of stopping time.

The motif of the warship is key to Moritz's suspension of hostilities. The slow speed of ships compared to other vehicles limits their usefulness in war and Moritz has frequently chosen or shaped motifs to enhance this slowness, painting them in ice and icy waters, as well as in expansive or isolated settings, as in [2] *Heimkehr II Return Home II*, 2010. Compared to the first version of this motif dating from a year prior in *Heimkehr*, the later painting shows small but significant changes. Moritz enhanced the scale of the surrounding by reducing the size of the ship while maintaining the same format and large size of canvas (at 120 × 170 centimeters, both paintings count among the artist's larger canvases). *Heimkehr II* also repositions the ship further away from the left edge, which, together with the thick blue strokes quasi-obstructing its path, slows it down and eliminates the impression, found in *Heimkehr Return Home*, 2009, of both suspense and speed created by the ship's imminent disappearance from the picture. In both versions, the inertia of the massive vessel is weighed against the agility of a small helicopter; the tip of one of its blades ever so slightly touches the right edge of the painting, highlighting the ship's distance from the left edge in *Heimkehr II*. Although likely recognizable only to military enthusiasts, the vessel pictured in *Heimkehr* and *Heimkehr II* is a frigate, used to protect or supply other ships engaged in war or trade but not meant to engage in battle itself—a fact that is entirely consistent with Moritz's fascination with the suspension of active or direct hostilities.

Moritz's painterly treatment slows and sometimes arrests the movement—and even the possibility for movement—of people and vehicles. With the exception of the area around the helicopter, the air in *Heimkehr II* is heavily worked—dense, impenetrable, still—and almost indistinguishable from the sea. The differing uses



*Heimkehr II Return Home II*, 2010  
[2, detail]



*Heimkehr Return Home*, 2009  
Oil on canvas, 120 × 170 cm, 31 ½ × 66 in

of white—which appears as reserved canvas around the helicopter and as pigment mixed into the blues and purples elsewhere—contrast an open pocket of moving air with the overall scene’s thickening fog or dusk. Closely related, the simultaneous lateral and in-depth compressions that freeze *Digger’s* soldier into place reappear in subsequent war paintings. White streaks applied as finishing touches press figures like the trios in *Handschuhe (Zigarette)* and *Mantel* against the flickering white dots of untouched canvas located behind them [16 and 17].

In [18] *Rast (Im Wald) Rest (In the Forest)*, 2011, three female soldiers—only identifiable as soldiers by the pilot goggles on the one leaning down and writing—rest in tight formation amid dense underbrush, meshes of twigs-cum-strokes scattered all over. Placed in the background, these twig-strokes close off our sightline, especially in the far right. In the foreground, they virtually pierce the soldiers’ bodies (as with the white stroke across the left figure’s face, for example, which stops at the right side of her face and then reemerges in the front slightly lower

down) or transform into bodily definition (in the case of the figure on the left side, the white stroke splits at a certain point, turning into a definition of the figure’s nose); either way, the twig-strokes anchor the bodies firmly in place, rendering them almost immobile. What is more, a diagonal axis of bright color—extending from the red-laced boot in the lower right to the bright yellow uppermost point of what appears to be a blanket partially covering two of the figures—weighs the soldiers down, presses them into place. The later version, [19] *Im Wald In the Forest*, 2012, compresses the trio concentrically, as does *Digger*. However, its branches, more clearly defined than those in *Rast (Im Wald)* and coupled with thick white strokes entering from above, close off the foreground more forcefully, echoing the rifle of one of the two standing soldiers. The rendering of this pair, particularly their obscured faces, leaves unclear whether we are witnessing the guarding of prisoners or parts of a troop resting while others keep watch.

#### New War

The first version of *Digger* was painted in 2004, one year into the Iraq War. In fact, Moritz’s early war paintings are all based on media photographs from that war, subsequent works also on ones from the war in Afghanistan, the Chechen wars, and other conflicts. To be sure, short of certain giveaway titles like “Kandahar” and “Kinshasa,” particular locations are not identifiable to the viewer; by extension, Moritz’s use of both English-language titles and German ones further serves to neutralize particular settings. However, if only because of soldiers’ uniforms, gear, or weaponry, Moritz’s scenes are usually identifiable as those of recent wars, and it is this that matters. They belong to the era of what political scientists call “low-intensity conflict,” “unconventional warfare,” or “new war.”<sup>7</sup>

Ways of understanding these terms and their pertinence differ—especially what exact aspects of recent wars, if any, distinguish them from prior ones. Generally speaking, however, the terms concern the goals of these wars and their methods of warfare. New wars—such as the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the Bosnian War, the Kosovo War, and the two Chechen wars—have ostensibly or actually been concerned less with territorial expansion or military might and more with matters of identity (ethnic, cultural, and religious) and protection (peacekeeping, security missions, prevention of human-rights abuses). By extension, some were not even full-fledged wars, and

others were presented as wars of choice or necessity. The methods of new wars have been less likely to involve traditional battles and more likely to feature “surgical” military operations derived from guerilla and terrorist fighting, psychological warfare, intelligence gathering, information technology, and the like.

The goals and methods of the new wars have resulted in levels of strategic and moral complexity that are perhaps unprecedented and, for lay observers, have inspired deep conceptual hesitation. In many contexts, it has become difficult to take sides or distinguish good from bad; violence has often been necessary to stop violence, and it has largely been surreptitious and come at a remove—all this, to be sure, from a Western perspective of safety and distance. Given Germans’ historically imposed suspicion of militarism (which manifested itself during the run-up to the Iraq War in the form of acute ambivalence about and vigorous debate concerning the role the country should play in that conflict), they have been particularly, if by no means exclusively, attuned to this complexity and uncertainty (note that the frigate in *Heimkehr II* is a German vessel returning from the 2006 Lebanon War).<sup>8</sup> For that reason, it may be that it took a German painter like Sabine Moritz to first take up the subject of “new wars,” and, what is more, to summon their limbo-like qualities, with violence being absent or merely looming; the viewer’s attention being suspended between multiple points of focus and oblivion; and temporal deferral and in-between spaces dominating.<sup>9</sup> To speak of limbo in Moritz’s art is to hone in on its profound uncertainty concerning violence, attention, space, and time.

For that reason, and by extension, Moritz’s limbo also implies a certain moral undecidability. In Moritz’s paintings, we can rarely discern good from bad, right from wrong, necessary from arbitrary, perpetrator from victim. That entwinement of good and bad resonates with the religious origin of limbo. This origin has been very much on Moritz’s mind, certainly since 2004, when she created *Limbo*, although she was not brought up religiously and describes her relation to belief in a double negation: she does not not believe.<sup>10</sup> Like Moritz’s paintings, that double negation inscribes uncertainty in the sense of a deferral of certainty for ongoing reflection. While the term “limbo” does not appear in biblical scripture and was never made official theological doctrine, it has, since the thirteenth century, referred to a place located on the edge of hell, separate from it as from heaven, and been most commonly thought of as populated by unbaptized infants who died before being able

to embrace God.<sup>11</sup> As Dante—who liberally included in his limbo Ancient Greek philosophers and poets and other “virtuous” non-Christian adults—writes in the *Inferno*: “they did not sin; and yet, though they have merits, / that’s not enough, because they lacked baptism, / the portal of the faith that you embrace.”<sup>12</sup>

The lack of assurance regarding violence and morality underlying Moritz’s art stands in decided contrast to the media imagery of these new wars. If the Iraq War made headlines for reporters embedded within combat units in action, the earlier Gulf War did so for the broadcast spectacle of aerial light flares that were barely recognizable as computer-programmed rocket attacks. That spectacle, particularly the absence of any representations on a human scale or on the ground, led French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to pronounce that “the Gulf War did not take place;” in the general public’s eye, the media images had become simulations, equal to or even more real than the reality of war.<sup>13</sup>

Moritz’s war paintings stand in contrast to the media’s treatment of the new wars, for one because of their different takes on violence: with her, violence looms or is suspended; with the media, it is either willfully elided (the light flares) or directly represented (one thinks of the Abu Ghraib photographs). They further stand in contrast to the manipulative coverage many outlets were criticized for with respect to the Gulf and Iraq Wars (although media in Germany were less subject to such criticism than media in the US), and above all in contrast to the media’s claims to veracity and omniscience. Moritz never succumbs to the naive ambition to tell the truth of what actually happened; instead, she “want[s] to see a different truth.”<sup>14</sup> And so her war paintings return part of the messy, unwieldy reality that Baudrillard had declared lost. In the scenes Moritz chooses to paint, and in the way she paints them, we cannot tell good from bad. After all, as she notes, “often and unexpectedly something bad can yield something good, and something good something bad.”<sup>15</sup> And so Moritz’s paintings defer: their only truth is uncertainty.

### Hovering, Waiting

Before the war paintings, there were planes and helicopters. Over the first decade or so of her twenty-year career as an artist, Moritz developed several substantial bodies of work that prepared and informed the convergence of the limbo layers in the war paintings. The



*Kandahar*, 2004  
Oil on canvas, 52 × 57 cm, 20½ × 22½ in

helicopters, which she started in the same year as *Digger* but prior to it, provided Moritz with a natural transition into the theme of war. In fact, given their agility, speed, and small size, helicopters have practically defined the image of surgical and clandestine warfare that is central to new wars, from the 1993 Black Hawk Down episode during the UN mission in Somalia to the 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden's house in Pakistan. To be sure, in the United States, the image of the military helicopter is inextricably linked to the Vietnam War. The tandem-rotor helicopters popularly known as "flying bananas" were the first substantial military support the United States provided to the Republic of Vietnam, in late 1961, and from that point on helicopters played a critical role in troop transport, aerial attacks, and even large-scale evacuations.<sup>16</sup> The iconic status of the helicopter in the Vietnam War led American artist Nancy Spero, for one, to make it an important motif in her impassioned *War Series*, which consisted of vulgar atrocities drawn in ink and gouache on paper.

This association of helicopters with the Vietnam War is far less common, if it occurs at all, among Europeans of Moritz's generation. In any event, her helicopters reveal no such critical fervor. As such, they anticipate her suspension of judgment and certainty in the war paintings. Some of Moritz's helicopters are based on new-war settings, as in the case of [8] *Mother*, 2010, which depicts a helicopter in the process of receiving soldiers returning home from Afghanistan (a location that remains unidentifiable in the painting), and *Kinshasa*, 2004, which consists of a scene from the peacekeeping mission in Congo

(unusually legible given the marked UN helicopter). However, others—like *Flut Flood*, 2004, [10] *North Pole*, 2005, and [11] *Eiswand Ice Wall*, 2011—either are or could be scientific explorations or rescue missions. Likewise, while some of her planes are warplanes (bombers in [25] *Bomber*, 2012, and drones in [27] *Drohne Drone*, 2010), most are civilian commercial machines (like the one in [12] *Waiting*, 2009).

What is more, many of Moritz's helicopters, especially those featured in a substantial body of drawings on the subject, appear in no discernable context, and thus they too seem ripe with potent uncertainty. From a focused and abstract perspective, these works reflect on a suspension of space and (in particular) time, a suspension that would subsequently inform, and transform into, one of the limbo-like qualities of the war paintings. After all, there is a sense in which the experience of flying takes one out of and defers the particulars of time and space—not only when helicopters and planes actually move with immense speed, but, perhaps most powerfully, when they do not, when they move no longer or are about to. Accordingly, some of Moritz's planes and helicopters fly, but mostly they linger. Her helicopters hover and her planes wait, activities defined dialectically by varying degrees of inactivity, full of uncertainty but also potency, as already discussed in relation to the painting *Limbo*.

*Flugzeug (Tag) Airplane (Day)*, 2003, was one of Moritz's first engagements with the airplane and the motif of aeronautic inactivity. That the plane is stationary, on the ground, is visualized in its almost-centered placement on the paper and in the parallelism of the horizon line and the upper delineation of the fuselage; that its weight and bulk are not yet defying gravity is underlined by a large, deep black shadow. This is an airplane waiting but also awaiting. The redrawn, shifted outline of the vertical stabilizer intimates movement, as does the orientation of the plane on the sheet, at least for Western audiences accustomed to reading from left to right and thus intuitively expecting movement to be signified in that direction.<sup>17</sup>

[12] *Waiting* translates the intertwinement of waiting and awaiting into painting. On the one hand, the plane's fuselage is still tied to its present surroundings, as both are rendered in the same long lateral strokes. On the other, the strokes at the tail—short, flowing, colorful—assert their independence. By extension, a glaring white stroke right off the center of the painting and a bright red mark at its upper right edge echo the plane's palette and anticipate, as it were, its taking off. Suiting the subject of waiting,



*Flugzeug (Tag) Airplane (Day), 2003*  
Charcoal, oil crayon, and pastel on paper,  
30 × 40 cm, 11 ¼ × 15 ¾ in



*Übergabe I Transfer I, 2004*  
Charcoal, oil crayon, and pastel on paper,  
42 × 56 cm, 16 ½ × 22 in



*Flugzeug (Nacht) Airplane (Night), 2004*  
Charcoal, oil crayon, and pastel on paper,  
30 × 40 cm, 11 ¼ × 15 ¾ in



*Übergabe Transfer, 2004*  
Oil on canvas, 92 × 132 cm, 36 ½ × 52 in

*Flugzeug (Tag)*'s companion piece, *Flugzeug (Nacht) Airplane (Night)*, 2004, implies a full day's time span and came with a delay of several weeks.<sup>18</sup> *Waiting*, also clearly related to *Flugzeug (Tag)*, came with a delay of six years. Moritz's waiting is ripe with potential, not only with respect to her subjects' outcomes but also in terms of her own creative process. The drawing duo places in sharp relief the former's being an analogy for the latter.

Even taken on its own, however, *Flugzeug (Tag)* is impressed with delay: drawn in November 2003, it was inspired by Moritz's aborted flight to New York City over two years prior, on September 11, 2001. Once the United States government had closed the airspace over the country, her plane was redirected to Halifax, Canada, where she spent several days waiting before returning to Germany. At a base level, Moritz's waiting was only an extension or exaggeration of the experience of waiting

while flying—the feeling of expectation coupled with a hyperawareness of time given the experience of confinement and restrained activity. Nevertheless, this biographical episode inscribes all of Moritz's airplanes with an implicit relationship to the "new wars" in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even though that relationship does not manifest itself iconographically save for the bomber drawings, new wars and the roles of violence and morality more specifically haunt another set of Moritz's waiting airplanes. The drawings *Übergabe I Transfer I* and *Übergabe II Transfer II*, both 2004, along with the two paintings *Übergabe*, 2004, and *White Angel*, 2005, draw on news coverage of an exchange between Hezbollah and Israel at Cologne-Bonn airport of twenty-three Lebanese prisoners for an Israeli businessman and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers. The exchange of the living for the dead struck Moritz as strange and morally complicated.<sup>19</sup>



Like airplanes, helicopters fly. Unlike them, helicopters hover. The stunning way in which they combine moving with not moving and mix the fast motion of their propelling blades with the utter stillness of their body makes the act of hovering difficult to capture in media that are not time-based. Moritz does so by drawing air. Her air oscillates and vibrates in jittery, jerky coal and crayon marks in [38] *Blau Blue*, 2010, and in minute stuttering dots in [37] *Weiss White*, 2009; it whirls and spins in circles in the stream of arched lines in [34] *Rosa Pink*, 2010; it streams and surges in long sweeping lines and streaks in *Waldhubschrauber VI Forest Helicopter VI*, 2011, and in [33] *Gelände III Terrain III*, 2009; it pulls away in strong, unrestrained gusts in the finger rubs in *N.Y.*, 2007; it carries and lifts in dense beds of textured colored paper in both the latter and *Blau*. Sometimes Moritz's air seems to remain transparent and invisible, as in the pockets opening up between off-white support and bright-white strokes and smears in *Marine*, 2009, and, in almost every single one of her drawings, in the spaces crisply defined, animated, and structured by assured lines rendering blades. Sometimes the air is still: an expanse of paper turned air, born from elegant but extreme croppings, as in [46] *Überwachung I Surveillance I*, 2003, or from the activation of an almost bare ground by tiny tentative markings, as in the two versions of [49 and 50] *Schöner Helikopter Beautiful Helicopter*, 2009.

Moritz paints air too—air turned stirred-up dirt, as in *Kandahar*, 2004, where white paint effaces almost the entire painting; air turned impenetrable, as in [9] *Dust*, 2008, where ground gradually becomes sky absent any horizon line; air turned even more impenetrable, as in [7] *Smoke*, 2007, where a smooth sheen repelling our gaze replaces Moritz's typically textured oil surface. The artist renders the clear crisp air of the cold by painting the helicopter's body bright red and orange and thus making it pop out against the white and turquoise glacial wall in [11] *Eiswand*; and she renders the thick white air of snow by deploying layers of shades of white and pastels, thinned-out paints, and canvas texture in [10] *North Pole*. The artist often mobilizes reserved canvas (or paper) to embody immaterial air. There are scattered small pockets, like those surrounding the helicopter in [2] *Heimkehr II*, noted above; and there are the alternating white and gray lines imprinted by underlying cardboard in *Übergabe I*. Most frequently, there are reserved grooves in the warp and weft of the canvas, like those lacing through the helicopter in *North Pole*, suggesting its immersion in and penetration by air.

Moritz deeply admires the art of Paul Cézanne for "its unresolved left-overs, what one cannot make out, what is not quite clear, what one cannot comprehend," but also for "his color, how it whirs and shimmers [*wie es flirrt*]."20 Cézanne used independent staggered patches of color to paint the hot still air of Southern France—an effect captured in Moritz's choice of the German verb *flirren*, which describes a kind of inner movement of that air—but he too used the reserves of canvas and paper to masterfully make air palpable.<sup>21</sup>

### *Frühromantik*

Helicopter technology is firmly rooted in the postwar era even though its invention has a long history—hints of helicopters first appeared as far back as the late-fifteenth century with Leonardo da Vinci's aerial screw, illustrated in his Paris manuscripts. Paradoxically and jarringly, though, Moritz's helicopters and the air they hover in are deeply informed by the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and not just through her admiration for Cézanne. Most obviously, Moritz's helicopter painting [1] *Abendphantasie Evening Fantasy*, 2010, draws its title from a poem by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin, "Abendphantasie," in which a colorful night sky and moving clouds inspire a longing to leave this world: "O there now take me, / Crimson-edged clouds."<sup>22</sup>

*Abendphantasie's* companion piece of the same year, *Morgen (Des Morgens) Morning (In the Morning)*, refers to another Hölderlin poem, "Des Morgens," in which massively gathered clouds are laced with red flames,



*Morgen (Des Morgens) Morning (In the Morning)*, 2010  
Oil on canvas, 70 × 90 cm, 27 ½ × 35 ½ in

heralding and bearing the potential for change: "...and round the / Grey cloud-banks there a flicker of reddish flames, / Prophetic ones, flares up and in silence plays; / Like breakers by the shore they billow / Higher and higher, the ever changing."<sup>23</sup> These lines are echoed in the two paintings by Moritz's colorful, quivering dusk and dawn, respectively, their pastel palette recalling Impressionism, their staccato brushwork of short vertical parallel strokes Cézanne. Hölderlin's passages also reverberate in each painting's pair of helicopters—one thicker below, weighed down and expectantly waiting in the foreground, the other lighter above and already dissolving into the picture plane—which together gesture onward and upward, full of prospect.<sup>24</sup>

Deeply Romantic leanings drive Moritz's art beyond her passion for Hölderlin, leanings not consciously informed by, but generally related to, the so-called *Frühromantik* (Early Romanticism) of the Jena circle that would become foundational for Romantic theory.<sup>25</sup> Formed in the German city of Jena, on the outskirts of which Moritz, coincidentally, grew up, the group's core included Novalis, a poet and philosopher, and the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, the former a poet and critic, the latter a philosopher, who together founded the important (if short-lived) journal *Athenaeum*.

If the suspension of time has proven a central force in Moritz's art in general, and in her helicopters and airplanes in particular, there are three aspects to that suspension that are illuminated by early Romantic tenets. First, the element of uncertainty in Moritz's art, insisted upon throughout this essay, relates to the *Frühromantik's* rejection of the absolute and of universal first principles. If Moritz's uncertainty is one of latent possibilities—especially in *Limbo*, in *Waiting* and other airplane renderings, and in the Hölderlin helicopters—this is consistent with Novalis's call to "romanticize the world," with romanticizing conceived as "qualitative potentialization" (*qualitative Potentialisierung*), in which "the lower self becomes identified with the higher self" and "a higher meaning" is perceived in what is "ordinary."<sup>26</sup>

Second, Moritz's temporal suspension articulates itself in ways that resonate with the Jena circle's understanding of the fragment. Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis made the fragment a central genre for their philosophical, scientific, and literary writings. Their choice stemmed from the belief that the subject, contrary to Enlightenment tenets, could no longer be conceived as whole or fully understood; knowledge and meaning would always remain incomplete. Temporality in Moritz's art has a deeply

fragmentary thrust: sometimes it plays our conceptual, tactile, and visual attentions against one another, as noted above, thus deferring perceptual arrest, wholeness, and full comprehension; sometimes an individual painting such as *Digger* is reworked over longer periods of time, a process that frequently stops only when a painting leaves Moritz's studio; and sometimes a motif is redrawn or repainted in varying configurations, sizes, or formats. This happens frequently in Moritz's art, as in *Rast (Im Wald)* and *Im Wald*, or *Flugzeug (Tag)* and *Flugzeug (Nacht)*. "On the one hand, the variations stem from the pleasure of making; on the other, from the aim to show more, to bring to the fore another meaning. That relativizes..." Moritz explained to curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. "It is as if nothing final could be said."<sup>27</sup>

Third, through the lens of the Jena thinkers' discussion of Romantic poetry as a simultaneous reflection of its own production and time, the temporal deferral in Moritz's art opens up to a similar entwinement of self-reflexive and historically-reflective modernism. For Moritz's art is deeply self-reflexive. As we have seen, the artist suspends time not just iconographically but also formally, resorting to the inherent ingredients of painting and drawing—compositional compression, a mobilization of the support, the full catalogue of mark-making, etc. More importantly in this context, the suspension of time and its production of a potent uncertainty serve as reflections on art making. Moritz's waiting planes are analogies for a creative process that grows and gathers over time, as noted above; her [5] *Digger*, digging as much in raw paint as in stuff, figures the vigorous and concentrated searching that defines the creative process as well as the hermeneutic process of unpacking meaning, layer after layer.<sup>28</sup>

The very suspension of time must also be understood as self-reflexive, given that it is the quintessential aspect of the aesthetic experience of painting. Real time is deferred for Moritz's characters in the same way as it is for the audience when it views her work and for the artist when she makes it. And, coming full circle, Moritz's gesturing back to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stands as an active engagement with the birth of modern aesthetics and art. While her art is self-reflexive through and through, above all in this gesturing backward, it is, at the same time, equally reflective of its own present, of the new wars of our time, and, as it turns out, of the Cold War, which, from both Moritz's perspective and that of many political scientists, reverberates in the new wars.

## Cold War

The international image of Germany and German art in the postwar period, as well as the discussions surrounding the country and its culture, have long been shaped by the Holocaust and World War II. In light of this, it is often forgotten that, in the Cold War that developed out of that “real” war, Germany was located on the “frontlines,” as much as that war that was never fought had them. To be sure, the Cold War was never likely to bring old-style battles with conventional weapons along traditional fronts; instead, it threatened to escalate into the nuclear annihilation of entire cities, countries, or continents. Yet Moritz’s generation of Germans, including this author, grew up in immediate proximity to the border that divided the postwar world and that made this unreal war palpable and as real as could be.<sup>29</sup>

Moritz was raised east of that border in the German Democratic Republic. Born in 1969 in Quedlinburg (a town known for its well-preserved medieval plan, its vernacular timber-framed buildings, and its collegiate church), she spent the first four years of her childhood in nearby Gatersleben. Her family moved to Lobeda outside of Jena in 1973, then to Jena itself in 1981. There, Moritz lived until their emigration to Darmstadt, West Germany, in 1985, when she was sixteen. Following two years of study at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in nearby Offenbach from September 1989 until June 1991, she continued her art studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from September 1991 and into 1994.

Growing up in East Germany was formative, particularly under the Socialism of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when dramatic economic decline caused widespread hardship and dissatisfaction and increasingly drastic political measures were imposed to quell dissent.<sup>30</sup> Moritz describes her experience of the climate thus: “We lived in a feeling of protest. The political statements in school, in the newspapers, and on television did not correspond to the experience of everyday life. The ideology seemed like an artificial corset that did not fit anywhere. An atmosphere of anxiety, arbitrariness, and diffuse menace permeated everyday life.”<sup>31</sup>

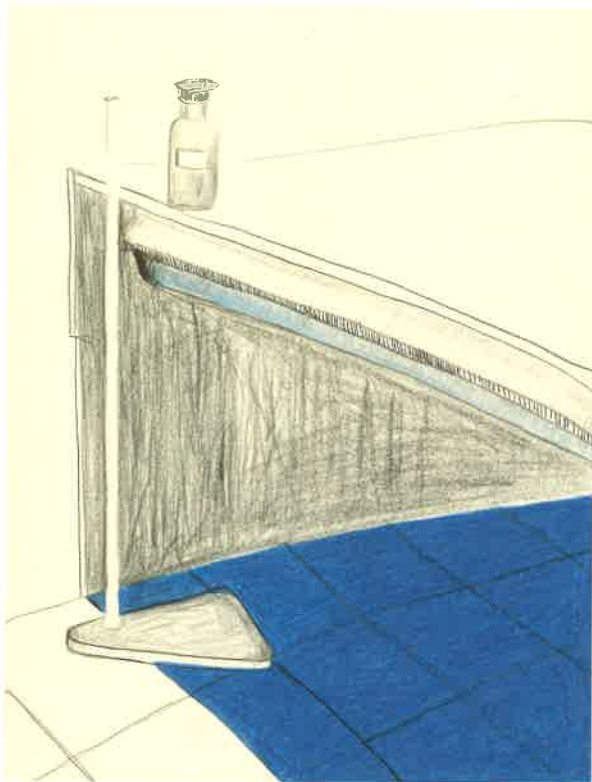
This experience certainly informs the profound if potent uncertainty created by the latent danger and violence in Moritz’s war paintings. Yet their subjects are far from blatant biographical references. Sabine Moritz is not another German Expressionist. Rather, we must understand the artist’s personal experiences in the past as a precondition for her empathetic understanding of



*Zwei Waschbecken* Two Sinks, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, 116 × 89 cm, 45 ¾ × 35 in

new wars in the present. Going yet further, Moritz’s war paintings emerge as considerations not only of new wars but of the intricate intertwinement of these new wars with the Cold War. For one, the end of the Cold War brought about the new wars via the sudden arms surplus and the disappearance of a second superpower that had kept small-scale conflicts as well as ethnic and religious conflicts in check. Moreover, defining aspects of the new wars map onto the Cold War, which featured low-intensity indirect conflict through arms races, psychological warfare, espionage, propaganda, and the manipulation of media and images.<sup>32</sup> Like the new wars, the Cold War brought violence at a remove—threatened or hidden—and like the new wars, too, the Cold War produced an atmosphere of uncertainty on multiple levels, particularly on the Eastern side of its front.

Moritz specifically describes the constant sense of being watched during her time in the GDR. “One almost always felt under surveillance somehow, not just on the telephone. Once we had submitted our petition to emigrate, they even took our ID cards. We were politically finished.”<sup>33</sup> That experience echoes but is also complicated in [46–48] *Überwachung I–III*, 2003, where



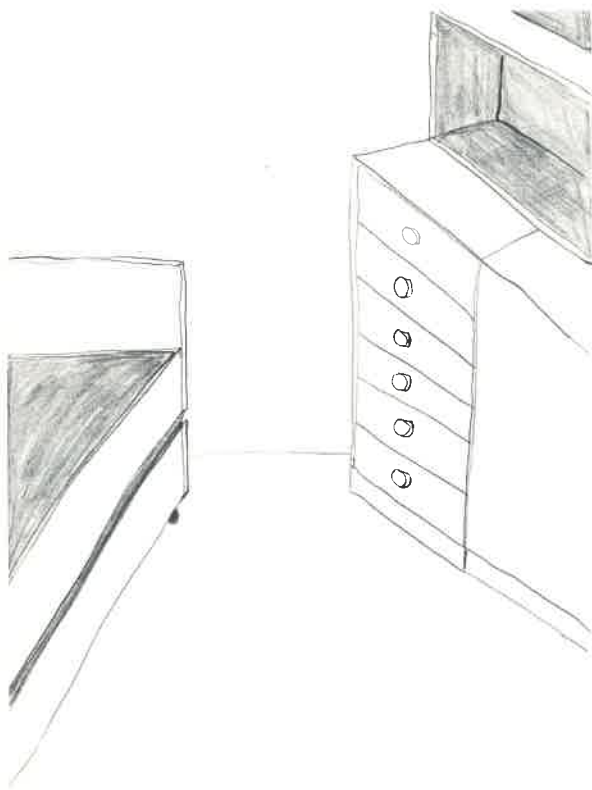
JENA Düsseldorf 130, Labor  
 JENA Düsseldorf 130, Laboratory, 1993  
 Graphite and colored pencil on paper,  
 56 x 42 cm, 22 3/4 x 16 1/2 in

a helicopter is seen honing in on a fenced- and walled-in site that includes a watchtower and, in the third drawing, a domed building that suggests the scene is somewhere in the Islamic world. As the helicopter approaches, the viewer's perspective on the site lowers and increases in detail as well: from *Überwachung I*, where just a light and the edge of a building can be made out; to *Überwachung II*, where other lights, a wall, a fence, and the tower emerge into full but tentatively rendered view; to *Überwachung III*, where we are placed in front of a gate next to the tower and where deep black resolute lines join the searching, provisional charcoal treatment familiar from the second version. But certainty does not actually increase in this quasi-cinematic sequence. On the contrary, uncertainty pervades and builds. We see more but do not know more. The gate is closed, the wall impenetrable. The helicopter hovers still, perhaps guarding, perhaps rescuing. And suddenly it has become unclear whether we are placed in the position of someone locked up or of someone who is free, are looking from inside a secured area or from outside, are placed under surveillance or are ourselves actively monitoring others.

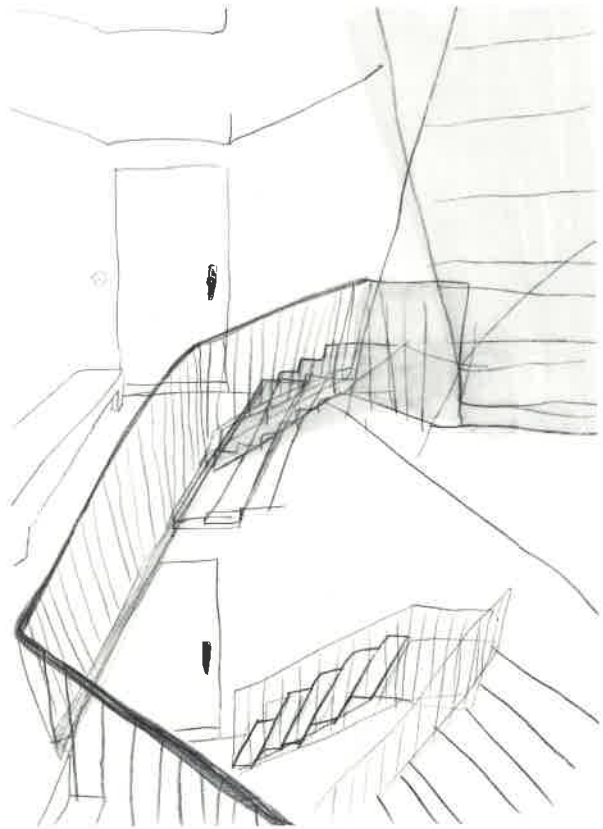
Reflecting on her childhood in East Germany, Moritz recalls a ubiquitous if undefined feeling of captivity and a desperate desire to leave. However, even the visual and physical certainty of effective imprisonment was denied because, as is well known, the border on the East German side was a no man's land, and, as Moritz remembers vividly, towns proximate to it were accessible only with special permission.<sup>34</sup> That very discrepancy between not knowing yet knowing one is a prisoner reverberates in the drawing [63] *Gefangene Prisoner*, 2013. Following the title, the work depicts a female prisoner. One therefore speculates that the woman's hands might be tied, but the charcoal's capability for detail collapses in that critical area. Absent rope, handcuffs, guards, fences, and the like, there is no certitude beyond the title and, more importantly in this context, beyond the convincingly rendered all-consuming experience of being caught: the character's legs, feet, and hands are pressed tightly together; her clothing is compressed at the waist; lines converge from varying directions and constrict movement; trees condense the otherwise seemingly open space; and the woman has an almost blank dispirited gaze. It is cast slightly downward and fixated on something minor outside of the picture, betraying perhaps a hint of boredom in her facial expression, a state of mind that one imagines often accompanies captivity. Her placement within and against a largely empty ground of paper only underlines that impression.

East German life for Moritz, as for her fellow East Germans, was pervaded by an uncertainty that involved latent threat, surveillance, and captivity, but also information control: limited or false information was presented to the public and, unsettlingly, one could not tell what was true and what was false. A mostly intuitive suspicion of being left uninformed or deliberately misinformed certainly defined Moritz's relation to the Cold War, which for her was embodied in the secretive, cordoned-off area in a forest near her home where, rumor had it, SS-20 missiles were stationed.<sup>35</sup> However, in the most formative instance of her East German upbringing, she had a more definite sense that information was being withheld by the totalitarian system.

Moritz's father, a chemist like his wife, was fatally injured at age thirty-one in an accident in his laboratory in the Zentralinstitut für Genetik und Kulturpflanzenforschung in Gatersleben. "My childhood was shaped by my father's lab accident. I was almost four when it happened. At that age one cannot really grasp that. All at once it was as if I had fallen out of a train. The



*Lobeda 9, 1991*  
Graphite on paper, 42 × 30 cm, 16 ½ × 11 ¼ in



*Lobeda 16, 1991*  
Graphite on paper, 42 × 30 cm, 16 ½ × 11 ¼ in

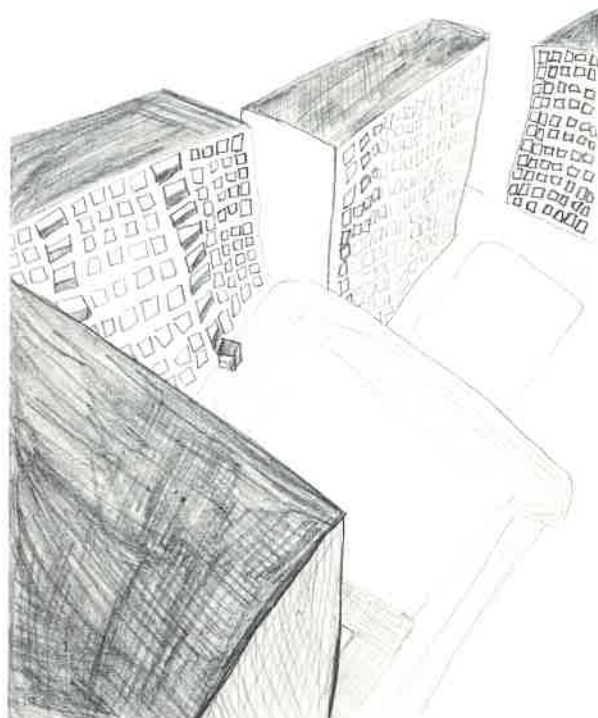
circumstances were murky, there was no occupational safety protection, but that was not admitted officially. The accident was surrounded by an aura of guilt.<sup>36</sup> Losing her father was devastating, but not knowing exactly what had happened—and knowing that information about the accident had been withheld—made that loss all the more difficult and debilitating in the years to come.

*Labor Laboratory*, 1993, is part of a series of early paintings, drawings, and other works on paper made between 1992 and 1994 that imagines her father's lab and institute. The drawings in particular stage a stark contrast between seductive color and bland off-white, minute detail and gaping holes, precision and blankness, zoom and crop, seen and unseen, presence and absence, information and the lack thereof. Tangential objects and spaces—Bunsen burners and test glasses, sinks and showers and tiles, windows and doors—displace the brutality of the accident Moritz knew so little about. In that sense, this body of work decidedly transcends the personal history that inspired it. It reflects the Cold War climate of secrecy bubbling beneath the banality of life as usual, and it bears the seeds of Moritz's

war paintings, their evasion of violence and their attendant relocation of attention to unassuming formal or iconographic details.

#### Lobeda

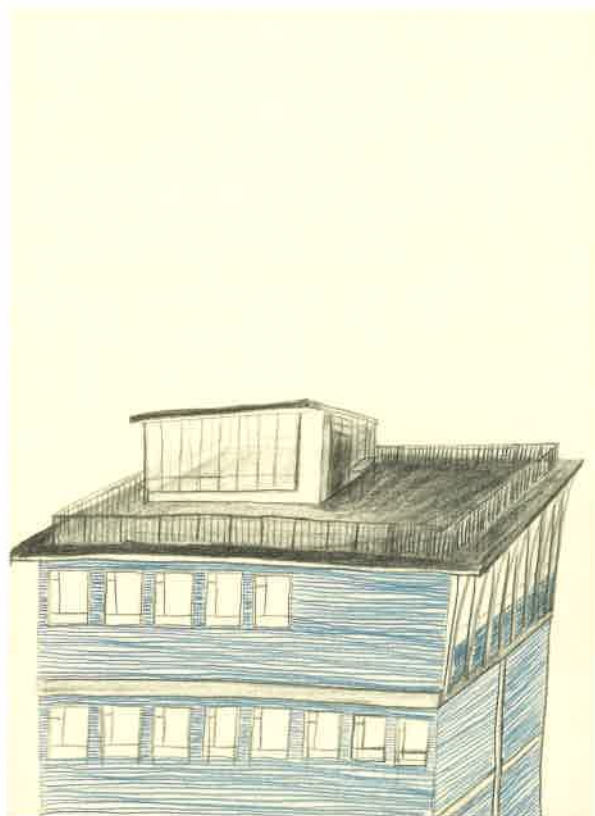
Moritz and her family were allowed to emigrate from the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1985. "I wanted to get away so badly," she recalls, "but it was a shock. Despite the same language, everything was different."<sup>37</sup> And while she did not actually want to go back to East Germany, she somehow missed and yearned for her former life there. When the Berlin Wall fell, she was envious. "I was no longer a part, when they had their upheaval, I was already gone. I did not belong there anymore, but arriving in the West remained difficult. And then I realized that all of that would soon be history. I wanted to hold on to it, before it disappeared."<sup>38</sup> And so Moritz drew from memory where she had grown up. She began in May 1991, during her studies in Offenbach, eighteen months after the fall of



*Lobeda 25*, 1991  
Graphite on paper, 42 × 30 cm, 16 ½ × 11 ¼ in

the Wall, and she continued until 1993, after having transferred to the Düsseldorf academy.

The body of work is named after the satellite city of Lobeda outside of Jena, where Moritz lived with her mother and twin brothers from the ages of four to twelve. Most of the close to 150 drawings are represented in the artist book *Lobeda*, which was created sixteen years after the drawings and published in 2010. The *Lobeda* drawings depict seemingly everything in the artist's former immediate environment: pieces of furniture and specific rooms in the Moritz apartment; the staircases, facades, decorations, window patterns, and volumes of modernist high rises in Lobeda; laundry lines and playgrounds; schools and classrooms; and nearby bridges and highway intersections.<sup>39</sup> This body of work is all about space, and a deeply ambivalent space at that. Here, assuredly crisp, dark, long lines create depth and volume with great ease; there, awkwardly stiffened and tilting lines, misfittingly overdrawn or not quite meeting, create isolated objects and spaces seemingly out of scale and out of proportion and out of perspective compared to their neighbors. Here, painstaking patterns, miniscule



*JENA Düsseldorf 204, Blaues Haus*  
*JENA Düsseldorf 204, Blue House*, 1993–94  
Graphite and colored pencil on paper,  
56 × 42 cm, 22 × 16 ½ in

details, precise outlines; there, hasty fillings in, empty paper expanses, missing outlines. Here, a sudden burst of color; there, none. The viewpoints are almost always slightly raised, the viewer neither quite a part of the picture nor quite outside it, both at a slight distance and somewhat close.<sup>40</sup>

These are the spaces of boredom, the spaces of an empty wandering mind that latches onto a minor visual sensation. Moritz in fact recalls her own boredom growing up in Lobeda, and she recalls that boredom in both temporal and spatial terms.<sup>41</sup> "Back then there was a different sense of time, more elongated, emptier. During seemingly endless bus trips from Jena to Lobeda, the only thing spectacular was the big curve on the thruway. In other ways too, the pathways, particularly by foot, seemed interminable and boring."<sup>42</sup> That said, the boredom in Moritz's *Lobeda* drawings is characteristically ambivalent, both potent (intimately related to a creative process that yields stunning patterns and details) and constraining (narrowing and emptying of our visual horizon in a way not unrelated to the paper reserve and facial expression of the prisoner in [63] *Gefangene*).

Above all, the *Lobeda* drawings are through and through the spaces of memory, at once concrete and evanescent, suspended between reality and fiction, stunningly brought onto paper. As Moritz explained to Obrist,

those were very strong images in my head. I had the feeling I could run around again everywhere there. They were also haptic memories, the feeling of the cold iron of the climbing structures; the funny sand in which you scabbled about as a child; the cold, smooth stone walls in a tunnel; the sounds of the soccer field in the background, when the ball flew against the wire mesh—everything was present again.<sup>43</sup>

Moritz returned in 1992 and took photographs that inspired further drawings and reactivated other memories, but that did not change the overriding impression of Lobeda as a limbo space.<sup>44</sup> In Moritz's drawings and in her artist book, Lobeda is an accumulation of spaces that, as such, exist not in the artist's past or present but rather in that suspension between past and present that is her memory. As such, Moritz's *Lobeda*, laced with ambivalent boredom and wrought memory, has neither the positive sentimentality nor the positivist certainty of *Ostalgie*—a portmanteau that combines the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia) to capture the recent, to many naive, rage for the wistful collection and preservation of East German memorabilia (such as GDR window flags, the Ampelmann traffic light, and the Trabant car) and upbeat treatments of life under East German Socialism (in movies like *Good Bye Lenin!*).<sup>45</sup>

The suspension of space takes on another form in Moritz's subsequent drawings and paintings of her new Western surroundings. Based on buildings and sites in Düsseldorf and elsewhere, Moritz refers to this body of work as *leere Orte*—empty sites.

They are known and unknown houses, in various places, that I saw somewhere—where the sense of "East-West" is fading [*an denen sich der Ost-West Bezug verliert*], for example, the view out of the window at the academy or at home, from the side of the road, on the train or in photos—that had such a strong formal appeal that I wanted to appropriate them through drawing. What interested me was the way that something was built, for instance, the rhythm of the windows.<sup>46</sup>



*Eiskellerstrasse*, 1994  
Oil on canvas, 110 × 80 cm, 43 ¼ × 31 ½ in

It is significant here that Moritz says that the sense of East-West is "fading"—not yet gone completely, but in the process of disappearing.

If the buildings Moritz drew and painted in Düsseldorf are in fact West German reconstruction-era architecture, they are only barely recognizable as Western. The top floors of a flat-roof high rise in the drawing *Blaues Haus Blue House*, ca. 1993–94, and the multilevel block-filling structure across the street from the academy in *Eiskellerstrasse*, 1994, are only slightly less schematic and monotonous than their *Plattenbau* (precast concrete high-rise building) counterparts, which were built all over the GDR, from Lobeda to East Berlin. After all, both German states rapidly rebuilt their bombed-out cities to ease housing shortages and both did so in a watered-down modernist style betraying its origins in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>47</sup> If we further recall Moritz's designation of these motifs as *leere Orte*, as well as the teenager's shock at the simultaneous sameness and difference of life in the West, it is the omnipresence of modernist architecture in the postwar world—a suspension of space as specific location and specific origin that is at once unsettling and

reassuring—that Moritz’s early drawings and paintings of architecture and cities reveal. It is all too fitting in this context that, were it not for the presence of a barely visible palm tree, the sequence of modernist buildings pictured in [7] *Smoke* could be just about anywhere in the world.

If Moritz’s interest in looming violence in the war paintings goes back to her East German formation and to particular early works informed by that formation, the artist’s fascination with the suspension of space and uncertain spatial experiences in her recent work dates back to her own transition from one world to another, and to the related drawings and paintings of Lobeda, Düsseldorf, and so many other “empty sites.” As discussed above, the war paintings feature deferred and indefinite spaces in the form of the stopped trucks in *Limbo*, the unknown interior of a ruin faced by the digger, and the transitional spaces of ships. These spaces remove motifs from the particular war on which they are based, conveying a sense of the new wars as constituting a broader phenomenon with transitional uncertain experiences at its very center. Adding to these are the amorphous space of *Flucht Flight* and the fraught space in *Gelbes Kleid I Yellow Dress I* and *Gelbes Kleid II Yellow Dress II*, all three dating from 2012.

The painting [20] *Flucht*, the title of which Moritz first used for a helicopter drawing in 2006, features a decidedly undefined space that impresses the uncertain and transitional situation of what appears to be a family of three in “flight” but taking a break. Unidentifiable broken or discarded bric-a-brac merging with the ground frames the scene to the right; an expansive area of white in the left foreground seems blank and unreadable; another patch of white seen further back can perhaps be identified as the column of a building. The central space is open like a stage, leaving its protagonists a touch too vulnerable for what they are doing to amount to a true break. They are fleeing indeed: uncomfortably exposed and utterly unmoored, as suggested by the skeptical glance of the squatting man cradling a baby and by the woman resting, despite it all, in a quasi-fetal position on the bare ground. The white that proliferates across the painting—from the blank area to the column, from the baby’s hat spilling down onto the man’s legs to the pillow and the patch that hovers over the woman’s lower back—at once tempers and heightens the tension of the scene. The white both forges a unity that connects and grounds and, as in Moritz’s other war paintings, propels our gaze on and on. Tempting as it may be to

read the motif as an autobiographical reflection, its “empty site” transcends the painting into a broader human experience of flight and its spatial and emotional dislocation.

### *Gelbes Kleid*

Finally, there are the two versions of [21 and 22] *Gelbes Kleid*. A large ruin looms in the back, its fragmented stone structure and freestanding facades betraying a recent bombing. A woman dressed in yellow and carrying a handbag stands with her back just before us. There is the space of the past (the war ruin) and the space of the present (the woman in bright peacetime attire and a group of children). Their distance is mediated and buffered but nevertheless maintained by massive monuments in the form of an obelisk featuring a plaque (extending beyond the picture frame at the top) and a fenced-in planted area with a tombstone (cropped to the right). In the far left background, the clash of past and present is harsher, as a woman dressed in a seemingly elegant red summer dress faces a blank white fence that blocks her gaze onto the ruin.

In [22] *Gelbes Kleid II*, short, vertical, white strokes line up horizontally across the entire picture. Notably, they literally connect these two divergent models of past and present relations. Consequentially, they formally both connect and sever the past (in the background) and the present (in the foreground): they connect by emphasizing the flat picture plane that connects them materially; they sever by creating a dividing line between them. Two very recent drawings, [61 and 62] *Ruinen I Ruins I* and *Ruinen II Ruins II*, both 2013, function similarly: the dark amorphous spaces of the ruins in the background both frame and stand in stark contrast to the bright clear bodies of women and children; as such, the ruins both contain their silhouettes (in the past, in the background) and propel them away towards us (into the foreground, into the present). As in the *Lobeda* series made twenty years prior, Moritz once again suspends space to figure and to question memory.

The three Communist red stars coupled with the stark massive design of the monument they frame seem to locate the scene in the former Soviet Union, references to which surface here and there in Moritz’s work: some of these references are unmistakable, as in the titles for the drawings [26 and 31] *Sibirien Siberia* and *Soviet*, both 2012; others are more subtle, like the





*Gelbes Kleid II Yellow Dress II, 2012*  
[22, detail]

recurring motif of female soldiers, who were distinct fixtures of the Soviet armed forces in World War II and throughout the Cold War, and who feature in *Rast (Im Wald)* and in *Soldatin Female Soldier*, both 2012. At the very least, these references to the Soviet Union attest not only to the country's formative if distanced role in Moritz's East German childhood but also to its towering if ultimately vanquished role in the Cold War. That Moritz never visited but paints snippets of the Soviet Union based on photographs matters here, as this fact suspends the space between its actual and imagined presence, not unlike the spaces of Moritz's *Lobeda* drawings and the memories they capture of the eponymous place.<sup>48</sup>

Both *Gelbes Kleid* paintings are based on a photograph of what today is called the Square of Fallen Heroes, formerly Alexander Square, in Volgograd, Russia, formerly Stalingrad and prior to that Tsaritsyn. The obelisk commemorates the battle for Tsaritsyn during the Civil War, whereas the tombstone marks the grave of Soviet soldiers who fell in one of the deadliest battles of World War II and indeed in the entire history of human warfare: the battle for Stalingrad between German and Soviet forces over the course of more than five months, from August 23, 1942 to February 2, 1943.<sup>49</sup> As is well known, it was a linchpin battle, initiating the Soviet defeat of National Socialist Germany on the Eastern Front and, thereby, laying the groundwork for the subsequent division of Germany and the Cold War. Given that war's connection to the new wars, the two *Gelbes Kleid* paintings figure as bridges between Moritz's early *Lobeda* work and her war paintings of the last nine years.

Moritz appropriated the *Gelbes Kleid* motif from one of the photographs taken by Robert Capa for John Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal* of 1948, an account of their

joint travels through Russia the year prior, just after the end of World War II and on the cusp of the Cold War. Steinbeck reports,

Few people were in the park, but one woman sat on a bench, and a little boy about five or six stood against the fence, looking in at the flowers. He stood so long that we asked Chmarksy [a colonel taking them around town] to speak to him. Chmarksy asked him in Russian, 'What are you doing here?' And the little boy, without sentimentality, in a matter-of-fact voice said, 'I am visiting my father. I come to see him every night.' It was not pathos, it was not sentimentality. It was simply a statement of fact, and the woman on the bench looked up, and nodded to us, and smiled. And after a while she and the little boy walked away through the park, back to the ruined city.<sup>50</sup>

Moritz does not research her motifs like this art historian. To the contrary, her stated desire is to free the motifs from their immediate history and from the words that accompany them.<sup>51</sup> Moritz's war paintings are not about specific incidents, specific people, and specific wars; instead, they reflect broader historical phenomena, such as our era's new wars, and, by extension, the Cold War. Painting "elevates, condenses, withdraws."

And so Moritz's painterly transformation of Capa's photograph lifts it, too, along with Steinbeck's words, from its historical specificity. The lineup of white strokes in *Gelbes Kleid II*, we noted, effects a more general reflection on the relations between past and present, memory and space. By extension, the additions of color (the prominence of the yellow-patterned dress and the dialogue between red stars, red flowers, and red dress) and iconographic details (a child and two children in versions I and II, respectively, pointing, even perhaps playing, in the latter work) relieve some of the gravity of Steinbeck's reporting, a gravity that even Steinbeck felt compelled to soften by twice mentioning the absence of sentimentality in the boy's voice. And so in this case the words do matter, the words Steinbeck chose and the way he used them.<sup>52</sup> For sure, there is something of that involved yet matter-of-fact attitude of Steinbeck and Capa's boy in the fact and in the way that Moritz paints war as limbo—be it the limbo of space, time, attention, violence, or morality; be it in *Gelbes Kleid* or any of her war paintings.

## Notes

I am grateful to Sabine Moritz for inspiring me during my studio visits and conversations with her.

1

Francisco de Goya, *Disasters of War*, essay by Philip Hofer (New York: Dover, 1967 [1863]).

2

*Fluss (Frau im Wasser)* is based on a photograph of a woman forced into a river to test for mines; *Handschuhe (Zigarette)* is based on one where an execution has just taken place and/or is about to. Sabine Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

3

Moritz, conversation with author, January 31, 2013. All conversations were conducted in German; this and all subsequent quotations drawn from these conversations were translated by the author.

4

Compare Yve-Alain Bois's discussion of a related but different mode of perception built into Henri Matisse's paintings. Yve-Alain Bois, "On Matisse: The Blinding," trans. Greg Sims, *October* 68 (Spring 1994), 61–121.

5

The painting *Limbo* featured centrally in, and gave the title to, Moritz's first solo exhibition in 2006. *Sabine Moritz—Limbo*, exh. cat. (London: Andrew Mummery Gallery, 2006).

6

The source photograph is from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 10, 2003, and depicts the aftermath of an Iraqi bombing attack on Kurds during the Iraq War. Archive Sabine Moritz, Cologne.

7

The first substantial discussion was Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007 [1999]).

8

The source photograph is from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 28, 2006. Archive Sabine Moritz, Cologne. The number of nations participating in the post-invasion multinational force in the Iraq War in particular provided ongoing fodder for debates within a recently reunified Germany about the conditions under which that nation's military should once again participate in international military interventions and thus overcome its by now largely self-imposed exceptional status as perpetrator of the Holocaust and principal aggressor in World War II.

9

Other artists have taken up particular new wars: for example, Walid Raad (the wars in Lebanon in *The Atlas Group*, 1989–2004), Gerhard Richter (the Iraq War in *War Cut*, 2004), and Steve McQueen (the Iraq War in *Queen and Country*, 2007–2009).

10

Moritz, conversation with author, January 31, 2013.

11

Some texts also refer to a separate limbo of the patriarchs. Anca Bratu, "Limbo," in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. André Vauchez (online version, 2012). I am grateful to Aden Kumler for her reference help.

12

Dante Alighieri, Canto IV, in *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1988), lines 34–36.

13

Jean Baudrillard, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991). This remains the most important discussion of the problematics of the media coverage of the first war in Iraq and beyond.

14

Moritz, conversation with author, January 11, 2013.

15

Moritz, conversation with author, February 4, 2013.

16

James R. Chiles, *The God Machine, From Boomerangs to Black Hawks: The Story of the Helicopter* (New York: Bantam, 2007), p. 160–1.

17

Compare Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs" (1969), reprinted in Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Visual Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).

18

In 2004, Moritz also made two related helicopter drawings, *Start (Tag) Start (Day)*, and *Start (Nacht) Start (Night)*. Besides the temporal span of day and night, each drawing also captures the temporal process of starting, with one helicopter in the foreground remaining on the ground, and another—or perhaps the same one at a later stage—in the background lifting off.

19

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013. The exchange took place at Cologne-Bonn airport because it was mediated by the German intelligence services. For background, see Ian Fisher and Greg Myre, "Israel and Hezbollah Trade Prisoners and War Dead in Flights to and from Germany," *New York Times*, January 30, 2004.

20

Moritz, conversation with author, January 31, 2013. For artists of interest to Moritz, cf. Sabine Moritz in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, trans. Michael Eldred (Cologne: Walther König, 2011), 73.

21

For a more detailed discussion of Cézanne's rendering of air, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Cézanne: Words and Deeds," *October* 84 (Spring 1998), 38–39.

22

The original German reads: "o dorthin nimmt mich / purpurne Wolken!" For both the German original and the English translation, see Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 90–91.

23

The original German reads: "und um die / Gewölke streifen rötliche Flammen dort, / Verkündende, sie wallen geräuschlos auf; / Wie Fluten am Gestade, wogen / Höher und höher die Wandelbaren." Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, 92–93.

24

The paintings return to the motif of the helicopter taking off in two drawings dating from 2004. Compare note 18.

25

For her use of Hölderlin's poem "Hälfte des Lebens" ("Half of

Life") for a series of four earlier paintings, see Sabine Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 118.

26

Novalis, *Schriften, Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, vol. 2 *Das Philosophische Werk I*, ed. Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), 545.

27

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 75–76, 82–83. For this and all following citations from this interview, the translations are slightly modified by the author.

28

My summaries of the Jena *Frühromantik* draw from Novalis, *Fragmente*, ed. Ernst Kamnitzer (Dresden: Wolfgang Jess, 1929), 27; *Athenaeum, 1798–1800*, (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1960); Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988 [1978]); and *Theorie der Romantik*, ed. Herbert Uerlings (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000).

29

The foundational text on the relationship between art and the Cold War remains Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Guilbaut focuses on American Abstract Expressionism and does not address German art. Leaving aside more general discussions of the relationship between East and West German art, John Curley's book *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War*, forthcoming from Yale University Press this year, will, to the best of my knowledge, be the first substantial consideration of the impact of the Cold War on a German artist.

30

For general histories of the GDR in German and English respectively, see Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR* (Munich: dtv, 1999); Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1990* (New York: Longman, 2000).

31

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 120.

32

Compare, for example, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 2–5.

33

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, p. 122. Moritz's family petitioned for emigration on grounds of *Familienzusammenführung* (family reunion), as the brother of Moritz's father lived in West Germany. Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

34

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

35

Moritz, conversation with author, January 31, 2013.

36

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 107.

37

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 12, 16.

38

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 83, 84.

39

Moritz, *Lobeda* (Cologne: Walther König, 2010).

40

Moritz frequently took walks on a nearby hill with views onto Lobeda. Moritz, conversation with author, January 11, 2013.

41

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

42

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 33, 36.

43

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 20, 21.

44

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

45

*Good Bye Lenin!*, dir. Wolfgang Becker (Berlin: X-Filme Creative Pool, 2003), 121 min.

46

Moritz, *JENA Düsseldorf*, 159. The literature on *Ostalgie* is substantial; see for example Martin Blum, "Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34 (Winter 2000): 229–54.

47

Compare Ralf Lange, *Architektur und Städtebau der sechziger Jahre: Planen und Bauen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der DDR von 1960 bis 1975* (Bonn: Deutsches Nationalkomitee für Denkmalschutz, 2003).

48

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013.

49

I am grateful to Lida Oukaderova and Robert Bird for helping me understand the site depicted in the two versions of *Gelbes Kleid*.

50

John Steinbeck, *A Russian Journal*, pictures by Robert Capa (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 125–26.

51

Moritz, conversation with author, January 10, 2013. Moritz took up the related subject of an orphaned child being held by a soldier in a drawing entitled *Waise Orphan* dating from 2012.

52

Moritz, conversation with author, February 14, 2013.