



## **Press information**

(short version below)

### **Voices from Ravensbrück**

Poems and artistic testimonies from the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück and its annex camps

<https://universes.art/en/voices-from-ravensbrueck>

**Who were the women who wrote poetry and made drawings under the most difficult conditions of imprisonment in Ravensbrück and its annex camps? What drove them to do this, even by putting their lives in danger?**

**The online art/memorial/educational project by Pat Binder (in German and English) offers a virtual space of encounter to perceive the voices of those women from all over Europe who sought strength, comfort and spiritual survival in art.**

As far as is known, at least 1200 poems were written in Ravensbrück.

Ravensbrück, located 90 km north of Berlin, was the largest concentration camp for women on German territory. From 1939 to 1945, the National Socialists imprisoned about 120,000 women from over 30 nations there - for political and racist reasons. An inconceivable number of women from Ravensbrück and its satellite camps were executed or died of hunger, disease, and exhaustion from hard labor or the consequences of medical experiments.

The brutal life in the camp, the helplessness in the face of suffering and death of comrades, loneliness, homesickness, and concern for relatives were all reasons to put feelings into rhymed words, for themselves or for those close to them.

In addition, there was also the distraction from everyday life in the concentration camps, and not least the need to leave a testimony for posterity.

In the course of the war, the National Socialists deported camp prisoners by the thousands to perform forced labor for the German armaments industry. Only to Neubrandenburg's aviation industry the SS lucratively "rented out" at least 7,000 women and girls. The company Mechanische Werkstätten there achieved considerable profit increases via this slave labor. To these satellite camps of Ravensbrück located in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Brandenburg and elsewhere, the women also took their poems with them: learned by heart, translated into the respective mother tongue or secretly written down with pencil stubs and hidden on the body - the poetic verses expressed what many felt, being invaluable in their struggle for survival.

The women suffered terribly from the idea that they were feeding death in their homeland with their own hands in the weapon factories. They engaged in sabotage at the risk of their lives. They fought against the program of "extermination through labor" intended for them by the National Socialists. Time and again they secretly created poems and drawings: as last signs of their existence and their rebellion.

## **Thematic Approach**

In ten thematic core areas, Argentine-born artist Pat Binder threads together forty clearly conceived "stations of perception": poems with drawings by prisoners, as well as historical and current photos, videos, animations, and sound sequences, all complemented with contextual knowledge about the artists, the documents, the artifacts, the themes.

[Arrival](#) – [Roll Call](#) – [Daily Life](#) – [Forced Labor](#) – [Arrest](#) – [Longing](#) – [Resistance](#) – [Suffering](#) – [Death](#) – [Hope](#)

Poems about **Arrival** confront us with the degrading entry into the camp system, marked by beatings, denudation, head shaving, wearing uniforms, and the replacement of one's own name with a number - „that is the goal, that is hell,“ as Micheline Maurel foreshadows. Lyrical testimonies visualize the **Roll Call**, an ordeal that took place several times a day, often lasting for hours - „...the 18,000 numbers stood for a full 36 hours,“ as Maria Günzl writes. Many poems were written against this background or passed on during this time. The fact that the horrors of **Daily Life** in the concentration camps could be better endured with gallows humor is shown by Maria Kociubaska, who „urgently needs a louse,“ as well as by Mary Vaders in her „Ode to the Bed,“ or by an unknown author who pokes fun at her comrade who was appointed *shithouse commander*.

The prisoners had to perform **Forced Labor** on a daily basis in order to keep the camp running or to generate profits in the SS's own industrial yard, and in the

factory halls of Siemens & Halske. In mid-1942, the women started to be used for work in the armaments industry, for which they were increasingly housed in subcamps. Many of their poems allow us to understand the inhuman working conditions of the women, or their moral torment, as in the case of Maria Rutkowska's poem „To the Son,“ dedicated to the mothers working in armaments production.

„Five paces forth, five paces back“ by an unknown prisoner, or Teresa Bromowicz's poem „Three-Dimensional“ portray the loneliness during **Arrest** and the unbearable tightness of a detention cell in the "bunker", as the camp prison was called. The world outside the camp is often longed for in poems as a general space of freedom, as a paradisiacal place. For many, the **Longing** was nourished by the perception of nature in the surroundings of the camp.

The women laboriously struggled for **Resistance** and to rebel against the torments of camp life. In this attempt, writing and reciting poems, praying or singing together, telling stories, exchanging cooking recipes, organizing clandestine school lessons, the recording of camp life in drawings, or the making of small gifts, e.g. carved from toothbrush handles, played a crucial role.

Their voices let us guess the inconceivably painful experiences of **Suffering** and **Death** in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, whether as „Endless tears spent, endless bloodshed..." by an unknown author, or in the poem „Rabbit“ which expresses the agony of the women on whom medical experiments were performed. Through drawings by Lily Uden, Violette Lecoq, France Audoul and Aat Breur we gaze upon Gratiana Pichler-Pemberger's „Children behind the corpse cart,“ or through superimposed images of the crematorium ovens in Ravensbrück, Alexandra Sokowa's „fireplace,“ which used to burn day and night in the camp.

And yet, there was also **Hope** in Ravensbrück as a strength-giving orientation towards the future: Hope of being able to leave the camp alive, hope of an end to the torments, hope of seeing home and the beloved again, hope of a better world, as well as hope of being heard and remembered.

At the end, the project offers a **Remembrance** area where a virtual rose for the women of Ravensbrück can be thrown into the Schwedtsee.

## **Art creates spaces for reflection**

The fact that hardly any eyewitnesses, of whose experiences we could learn in personal encounters, are still alive, calls for new forms and formats of remembrance that bring us closer to the stories and fates beyond the rational understanding of the evidences. The artistic elaboration of authentic poetic and visual testimonies from Ravensbrück and its subcamps in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern enables an emotional as well as rational confrontation with different aspects of everyday life in the camps. Their immediacy, their diversity and their messages create touching encounters.

The artistic active prisoners, who risked their lives in the concentration camps, came from all European countries. Remembering their biographies and their testimonies is an important component of a living culture of remembrance. The use of digital media and art in memorial culture and the conveyance of history can build bridges across borders and help to create connections of understanding and encourage empathy.

And even in today's times, when art seems to enjoy little "system relevance" for politicians, the project transmits with great sensitivity the power inherent in creative work and how it can become a means of survival in situations of greatest despair and fear of death.

76 years after the liberation of the concentration camps, the importance of active remembrance, empathy and awareness seems more important than ever, not only in the context of historical understanding and responsibility, but for the status of democracy as such, since political tendencies and groups are gaining strength, which foment exclusion and hatred, and demand an end to remembrance.

„Voices from Ravensbrück“ contributes in a unique way to conveying the individual suffering and resistance of victims of National Socialism to today's generations through the artistic rendering of authentic testimonies.

## **About the history of the online art project**

Pat Binder's online art project „Voices from Ravensbrück“ is considered one of the first examples of the use of digital technologies with media-pedagogical approaches in dealing with realities of life and survival in the German concentration camps, as well as for the creation of a virtual memorial. The first version of „Voices from Ravensbrück“ from the year 2000 was awarded the Marianne-von-Willemer-Prize of the city of Linz (Austria).

The new edition in 2020/21 responds to the new digital requirements and mobile devices, and expands the project's reach with additional poems, drawings, and contextual information, particularly on the topic of forced labor and satellite concentration camps, as well as about the economic benefits of the deportations.

The art, remembrance and education project of Pat Binder is based on the research of the literary scholar Constanze Jaiser, and was again accompanied by her in an advisory capacity and with materials provided by her. In addition, documents come from the archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial, the Neubrandenburg City Archives and Regional Museum, as well as the Auschwitz State Museum and Lundt University. „Voices from Ravensbrück“ was produced by the art portal „Universes in Universe - Worlds of Art,“ which is successfully run by Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt since 1997 (<https://universes.art>). It was created as a reaction to widespread culturally centrist positions and emphasizes the diversity and mutual enrichment of artistic universes from all over the world.

The elaboration of this new extended version of „Voices from Ravensbrück“ was made possible in cooperation with the Regional Office for Education, Integration and Democracy (RAA) Mecklenburg-Vorpommern e. V., and supported by the Brandenburg State Agency for Civic Education as well as by funds of the Freudenberg Foundation within the framework of the project zeitlupe | Stadt.Geschichte & Erinnerung.

Voices from Ravensbrück

<https://universes.art/de/stimmen-aus-ravensbrueck>

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More information and press images

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In ten thematic core areas, Argentine-born artist Pat Binder threads together forty clearly conceived „stations of perception“: Poems with drawings by prisoners as well as historical and current photos, videos, animations and sound sequences cast light on aspects of camp life, such as [Arrival](#) – [Roll Call](#) – [Daily Life](#) – [Forced Labor](#) – [Arrest](#) – [Longing](#) – [Resistance](#) – [Suffering](#) – [Death](#) – [Hope](#), complemented with contextual knowledge about the artists, the documents, the artifacts, the themes.

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