

BERLIN

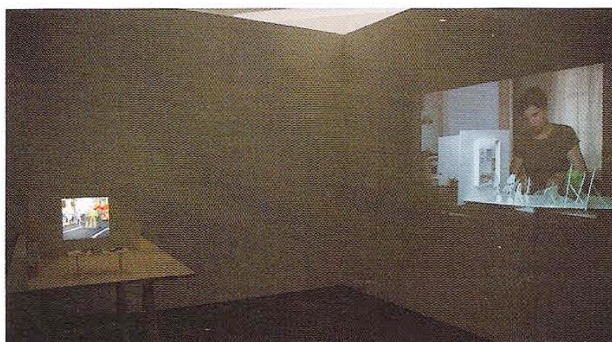
Pia Rönicke

CROY NIELSEN

The private correspondence of Rosa Luxemburg lies at the heart of Pia Rönicke's *Rosa's Letters—Telling a Story*, 2006. Yet telling the story of this complex multimedia installation might prove more challenging than narrating the life of Luxemburg, the Marxist leader who was often imprisoned for her political activities and then murdered by Freikorps militia in Berlin in 1919. While alluding to the official public history, Rönicke restaged her own subjective "appropriation" of letters that Luxemburg wrote to her lovers and friends between 1891 and 1918. Instead of one story, there are two: the past and its transmission to the present.

To bridge these two intimate realms of experience—the act of writing the letters and then of reading them almost a century later—the viewer entered an installation of three stagelike units, enclosed within each other like Russian *matryoshka* dolls. Every stage was illuminated with moving images documenting the past and the present. The first section was a dollhouse-like model of what appears to be the artist's atelier, outfitted with a library of tiny reproductions of books related to Luxemburg; the atelier's window doubles as a screen for a slide projector, which flashes (with an unmistakable mechanical *cherchunk*) historical images of Luxemburg as well as recent photographs of a Berlin demonstration held in her memory and shots of domestic interiors (for example, empty chairs sitting invitingly by a sunny window). Surrounding this model was an L-shaped wall that fit just inside the gallery space (which is, in fact, a private apartment); in lieu of a window there is a DVD projection, which shows an actress playing the artist in her atelier, constructing the dollhouse model and leafing through the books, both life-size and miniature. In voice-over, the actress reads excerpts from Luxemburg's letters. The third and final stage, beyond the L-shaped barrier, was the apartment itself; here stood a lone chair and a monitor, showing scenes from Rönicke's recent travels to sites where Luxemburg lived and to the spot where she died. This viewing station—set up right beside the apartment's generous bay window—looked to the bustling thoroughfare of Schönhauser Allee in contemporary Berlin.

With her plays on scale, Rönicke transforms the viewer into a kind of Gulliver, although the dramatic changes of scale all correspond to the same historical destination. The use of the miniature and the gigantic—as critic Susan Stewart has explained—signals the shift from a private individual history that can be contained to a public collective history that envelops us. But Rönicke's real aim seems to be reviving the craft of the storyteller, albeit in a multimedia setting, so that Luxemburg's words can live on. As Walter Benjamin noted, storytellers begin their tales with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves learned the story; they leave not a fingerprint but a handle for other tellers to grasp in order to pass on the tale. Here, the many "handles" include the uninhabited atelier, the empty chairs, and even the actress who reads Luxemburg's letters and plays the art-



View of "Pia Rönicke, 2007" Left: *The Model*, 2006. Right: *Rosa's Letters*, 2006.

ist—Rönicke thus suggests that these are roles that anyone could play. Benjamin mourned the death of the storyteller; Rönicke has brilliantly revived the craft to tell the story of a political figure whose time should come again. Indeed, after seeing the show, I made a beeline for the bookstore and picked up my own copy of Luxemburg's letters, which have accompanied me ever since.

—Jennifer Allen