

Indoology

LUKAS DUWENHÖGGER

The Clay Hen

Ahmet, I love you. I think about you all the time. If the clay hen were still alive, she would tell the story in a different way, or a different story altogether. But she is not. On the other hand, there is no death. So listen to this.

Magdalena M., a short, barrel-shaped woman of 95 looked like a female impersonator, a Zeki Müren with short hair and without a shadow of frou-frou. Zeki means wise, and that she was as well. She had grown up a true city child and retained to her end certain urbane habits, like sprinkling her days with leisurely drinks and cigarettes. Her city had been Munich, the capital of Bavaria, a kingdom before her birth and the nemesis of Prussia.

Children knew their neighbourhoods up and down back then. They had the great privilege of being left alone. When they did not work, they swarmed out for endless explorations of the voluminous and often voluptuous places that they felt entitled to invade and use. They played amongst the Rubenses and Titians of the Pinakothek and the frightening sculptures in the churches and parks.

She outlived all of her family and the three men who counted most in her life. Theo, her husband; Mr. Jacob, her benefactor and gentleman-friend; and Erhardt, the architect, her last love. These men had all died in her arms, even though her husband had betrayed her for years with a girl and breathed his last breath on her bosom in icy silence, and

Erhardt called her an impostor while she nursed him in her own house. Mr. Jacob's Jewish identity she kept to herself, or maybe even away from herself. She had buried her affiliations with the Nazis as well; and, at the rarer than rare occasions when she let something come to the surface, she said that after all, a woman was more secure under the reign of Adolf Hitler.

She adored men of distinction to the point of servitude and yet she possessed a fiercely independent spirit. Her childlessness was never touched upon, as if motherhood could not have been part of her nature. She appreciated the delicacies of life in a comfortable interior as much as the depravations of the great life outdoors. Like Liesl Karlstadt, her beloved comedian, she was an accomplished mountain climber, finding solace in the world high above the corrupted plains. Mr. Jacob had shared this passion with her, and, to be closer to those peaks of purity, bought a modest plot of land at their very feet, on which he built a small, delightful house in the traditional style of the valley.

Given the history, Mr. Jacob may have had no living relatives, or he may have lived always on his own, or to show his gratitude: in any case, he bequeathed his house to her, so that she could continue to enjoy what they had enjoyed so many times together and to not have to worry any longer. From then on, she became the increasingly totalitarian ruler of this small paradise.

The place combined the qualities of a village, a holiday resort and a small town in a kaleidoscopic way. As soon as one impression started to prevail it got replaced by another one, with a little shake so to speak. The no-go zone was the kiosk next to the train station, the hang out of the dropouts and open dissenters. It was the last stop of the Oberbayrische Landesbahn – in short the OLB – the train line coming from the city. Soon after you leave the Siemens factories behind, you begin to enter the luscious valley, and as the mountains grow higher and higher, ain't no mountain high enough, the vision gets wider, the engines relax, and by the time the train rattles past Magdalena's garden, where you could see her tending her flowers or her fat cat lulling under a zucchini leaf, the slow-down of the train is already so complete you just could jump out and call it a day.

But the murder of the clay hen happened in winter. Then you could see Magdalena through the window of her sitting room, a glass of wine next to her, reading a book in a golden circle of lamplight. Her table was always covered with crisp, rustic linen worked in broderie anglaise. In winter the snow builds up high and heavy, staying white and pure

without melting for long periods. Since centuries, everything has been meticulously planned to get through these times of seasonal confinement and isolation, brought on by the cold and the mass and weight of the snow. This is why there is a characteristic shape to their roofs, which is called a saddleback. From a spine it slopes down on the two sides not steeply, which would cause avalanches to tear the snow-blanket apart, but gentle and broad, like a square umbrella, over hanging the walls by two metres. We tend to see only the cold side of snow and to forget that it is also a natural insulation. The gentle slope allows the snow to become a fur coat, or a duvet, keeping the warmth underneath while directing the pressure of the load downwards. And the waters, released by the heat of the building or the thaw, can trickle away. The overhang creates dry storage room especially for firewood. Sometimes you only see walls of stacked logs, except for the showy front, where the rococo window decorations have pride of place even in winter, long before the geraniums, fuchsias and petunias will join them in the Catholic pageant of summer. Of course, that goes only for the rich farmers, who mostly converted their upper floors into pensions. Anyhow, never did I see a pauper over there. Even the servants of the hotels, after the floors are scraped and the lust-stained sheets are washed, disappear after work into the mountains in their Suzuki pick-ups. How often a heart of those whose mess they cleaned up, trapped in illusion and decadence, watched their departure with secret ache I cannot tell. But there are the beautiful cows, long lashed sources of warmth, and of resounding contentment, and now delighted girls from the city promenade with defiant and irritable llamas, a novelty in the region, leading them by sky-blue silk ribbons, so docile, just like me, always craving for the tenderness of the most defiant. The beauty and the beast. Ach, had we only the calm composure and resilience of these creatures!

Instead, our dubious gift of language turns us into insatiable gossips when the long, dark immobility of winter leaves us smothered in boredom. Rather than gratify the desire for lively entertainment by opening the doors to the lonesome stranger, the doors become ever more tightly shut, and the hatred and suspicion of all things foreign increases. Thus, in front of the leafless, shadow-less backdrop of ever expanding, gleaming white snow you become an erratic, unwelcome intruder, a living target for a lethal insipidity and accumulated resentment.

Independent spirits are not immune to veneration. Magdalena's system was a strategically distributed generosity, one that she had in common with Erhardt. I wonder whether they ever had to swallow the

bitter pill of realising that what you consider your altruism might be taken as a milder form of colonisation.

I do not believe Erhardt was ever even slightly in love with Magdalena. He had even disliked the mountains for as long as I can tell. But he came to enjoy her unquestioning devotion, more than her company. His wife Anne had left him after thirty years of soul-destroying strife and six children, and a subsequent affair with a wealthy lady ended after she died dispossessed by her daughters for lavishing her money on him. A disgraced gigolo, largely forgotten in his profession, stifled with fear and by now 84, he sat on the same cursed chair whence he had dreamed to overlook a breed of geniuses with admiration in their eyes, admiration for his achievements, the achievements which made the qualities of his paternity unquestionable. The house was of his own design, and so was the table. Finances and death he kept out of sight but that he would die in his chosen, or ill-conceived, or fated cul-de-sac nobody had any doubt about. The incredulity he met when he announced his decision to sell it and to move in with Magdalena for the time being was therefore considerable. The temporality of his co-habitation with Magdalena was taken for granted. He intended to rent a flat in his beloved hometown Freiburg.

How boundless her love for him was became clear when she couldn't stop crying for weeks after his death, and then only with the help of a medic. When her love for him started only God knows.

In the years Erhardt ran his architectural office, they shared the sixth floor of an exceptional, sombre building, reminiscent of the Glasgow School. They were both still married. Magdalena with Theo, Erhardt with Anne, all of them at a loss of how to confront a disappearance of passion and the dismal possible reasons for a marriage in the first place. Was there ever any passion? And when you found it, and got used to the caresses, and became comfortable and in the end there was no one who could make you feel like that, but you became old and boring, and you were replaced with someone else, with the same old lies... Words of reconciliation and the re-establishment of an old tenderness and trust are forever shattered. The high-flung gentlemen agreements of libertinage – not everyone can feed on them. Who is left behind in sorrow – the man – the woman? Erhardt had not lost his ambitions yet, albeit feeling more and more alienated by the import of postmodernism and its vulgar promulgation in West Germany. He was still presiding over a *staff* all-male world of urban planning and engineering. He cooked the lunches for his staff, and the delicious wines of his native Baden were

never in short supply. It was also a heaven of billowing smoke emanating from smoldering Roth-Händles and Gitanes, between rulers and lots of other things only the initiated know how to use. The swagger of them! Their reassurance to play a hand in the making of a new, better place, to change destiny itself! All the while looking snide, so self-absorbed and self-unconscious in their grey flannel of prime quality, yet dishevelled by tasks too demanding to go home and have a rest.

For Magdalena who brought an apple cake over once in a while, this teaming scenario could have been a relief from her loveless enclosure. For her, everything Erhardt represented was in superlatives. He was the most elegant of men, the most knowledgeable, the best looking, the most talented, unjustly treated by the march of history she hardly knew – and exhausted by the grinding mill of municipal politics, the most, most, most, the upper most. He never mountain climbed as she did, never danced, as she did, was ever adamant to eliminate any trace of kitsch, as she did not. He always was unflinching and unfailing in his judgments even on the breakfast egg. He estranged his dinner guests by taking the endlesst of times to prepare the most frugal of dishes, lentils with speck for example or lecturing them about anything under the moon, while they were getting drunk on their empty stomachs. She took it as a personal sacrifice to his ideals, a superior stoicism that no one could match. Embarrassed by that breach of etiquette, she nevertheless, in the end, would rush to his defence.

There are people who love to move house, to push furniture around, to change the wallpaper, the curtains, the kitchens. For Erhardt, who, a long time ago had settled for a certain brand of ballpoints, and whose fags were lined up in his favourite ashtray in neat, soldierly rows, such cravings for domestic renewal and experimentation were not only incomprehensible, they were disruptive of his ideal of well ordered self-sufficiency. Anything superfluous and capricious he connected with femininity and homosexuality. How could you possibly wish for something else, when everything around you confirmed to the highest possible standard of beauty stripped to its essentials: scale, proportion, placement, function, the knowledgeable use of materials? The course of time, the work to keep those things clean and functioning were secondary: even when covered in dust and grime, the importance was that they are still your comrades long after everything else has gone to smithereens in a world of despicable consumption and ever growing ignorance. Correspondingly, his career as an architect was marked by an unusual reluctance to be international, or even mobile in his own nation. Calls

to Berlin remained unheeded, he never learned a foreign language, and the fact that all his most admired masters had not only been involved in projects around the globe, but also forced into emigration by the Nazis, did never seem to gain any significance for him. There are masters and masters, they say: the local ones, who enquire about their servants' health and family, and the global ones who entice multitudes, whose minds are so wide-set that they don't even realise who shines their shoes. He was a bon vivant with a sacerdotal side, a herald of frugality who revered elegance. He never exceeded his budgets – even then an almost unheard of way to conduct your business. To what extent he could imagine that his astounding decision to sell his house would entail precisely the upheaval and fracas he loathed most, I cannot say. For sure it was not a choice but born from bitter necessity. He was in a paralysis of toleration. He was going to be in the world most of us know, for better or worse. Maybe it could bring a sudden rejuvenation, even renewed activity?

Especially Magdalena was adamant to preserve the house as a cultural monument. No one should have the right to alter the masterpiece of her beloved genius. In his shadow she had begun to puff herself up more and more, and the increasing frailty of Erhardt reinforced a seemingly unfulfilled strive to present herself as a patroness of Architecture. She took the house, impervious to its obvious flaws, to be a Villa Savoye, but if you had asked her what that was she would have just changed the topic. This preposterous fake expertise has certainly unnerved helpless Erhardt to a point where it may have even hastened his death.

Erhardt had graduated from Munich Technical University as a qualified engineer, a Dipl. Ing., with a portfolio that deserves to be described in detail. Just one glance at it speaks volumes about the extent to which our once able hand has been withdrawn from the creation of a building, an ecological understanding curtailed, playfulness and pleasure purged, and the pursuit of beauty itself brought to naught. It is exemplary both in its self-confidence and in its humility, a pristine reflection of a certain school of thought within the Wiederaufbau, driven by an almost missionary zeal to eschew all boastfulness, and to reconstruct a Catholic spirituality in the service of a common good. It is a product of the scarcity of materials and other restrictions of those times, yet it seems to thrive on those limitations. The works therein are represented through black and white photographs except for one ink drawing. All of them are mounted on eleven sheets of gray cardboard slightly bigger than A4, which are held together with four curtain rings. There is no text whatsoever, only

the dates, which run from 1951 through 1957. The earliest is the ink drawing. It stands out in everyway, a riddle, and bears the signature of someone else.

Then there are two clay statuettes of a sitting hen and an erect rooster, models of a church, a school, of a building which may be a farm, all done in clay, paper, and scraps of wood, and an unfurled spool of wire, throwing elliptical shadows across a white plane, like the kind of futuristic vision fashionable at the times but unusual for his restraint. Maybe he was soliciting a future commission here, possibly for a public sculpture, or was he just entranced by the play of light and shadow, the elevation of the most humble material into something riveting through stress, gravity – and your attention.

Schools, churches, and the family – represented through hen and rooster – were the post-Auschwitz remedies; but Auschwitz was never to be mentioned. Imported jazz records allowed you to show that you had left the tainted heritage of Richard Wagner behind, but were cleansed of all blackness. The fatal compromise in between the Church and the Nazis was unmentionable as well, and the voracious onslaught of competitive consumerism was viewed with condescension. In the new unstuffedness the carpets, if there were any, were made of straw, but still you could brush all that stuff underneath them. It was only a matter of time, in the complete absence of any significant, political engagement, that a new class of nouveaux riches were going to have their final say in urban development.

And a new family was not just simply any family – and certainly not the extended rural family of old – the ties with the country were already cut. The thing was to produce a nuclear family with lots of children. Then, ideally, they would form a community of likeminded spirits, enlivened by the same drive to distinguish themselves from the common man by contributing to the nascent democratic society through their careers in art, science, religion, even politics, as long as those were not “radical” and achieved in an undisruptive way recognition and respect. Decency was the key. To take in the sister of your wife, who walked barefoot from the Russian sector to Munich, and who was given a benevolent footbath and a pair of outworn shoes, was out of the question. The low descent of your wife must be reneged, and above all she wishes to do so herself not only because it does not fit in with the new style, but also because she wants to forget the coal cellar, wherein her father inflicted unspeakable punishments on his children.

The pictures are laid out like a song, with an introduction, a variety

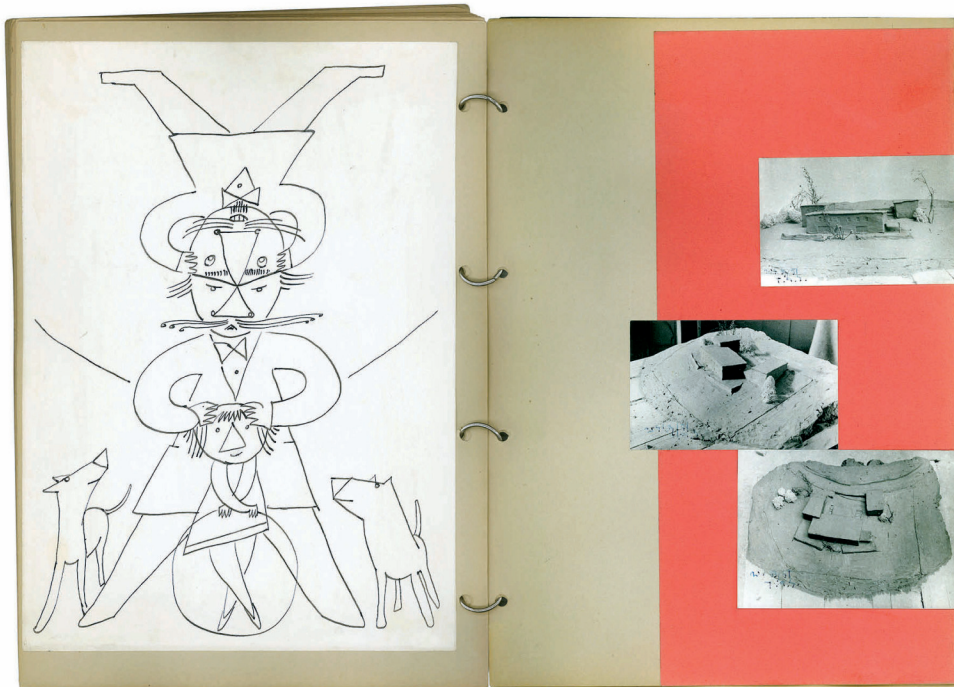
of recurring themes, a climax and ebb towards conclusion. The hen, all apprehensive placidity, comes first, followed by a series of buildings; then a sudden break: the adjacent pages 8 and 9 with the ink drawing on the left, and the sole appearance of a colour outside the white-grey-black scale – red; again buildings, the spool of wire, and finally the triumphant rooster, like the shriek of a trumpet.

The eggs upon which the hen is sitting are symbolised through a cluster of irregular circles, incised with carefree vigour, let's say with a toothpick. But instead of being located at the bottom, where her almost egg-shaped body rests on the ground, Erhardt decided to place them precisely where her folded wings would normally be, as if you were looking into her with Roentgen eyes and witnessed her eggs taking shape. The rooster as well lacks any suggestion of feathers. He is encircled by lines reminiscent of the veins and the folds of a retracting foreskin in an erection. You can see his admiration for the Japanese woodcuts, Picasso and Moore. This pair of statuettes met such high approval by his professor of sculpture that he was encouraged to burn and glaze them, as prototypes maybe for a future edition to be sold on the market for home ornaments. However, only the rooster was given that treatment: he went into a kiln and came out in a deep, Ottoman turquoise, while the hen remained as she was, without further refinement, raw earth without gloss.

All that happened after Anne had come into his life, at the beginning of his studies. If rumours are to be believed, they met in a streetcar. Both were past their prime, their youth an exodus from a world in flames. Both had been spared through the protection of the Church. Erhardt was helped to desert from the air defence and hidden in the depths of the Black Forest in a log cabin with another man. They were fed by peasants and, for the first time, saw Africans: soldiers serving in the French army, who came to be called *Pieds-Noirs*, moving down silently amongst the firs and across the moss, with real daggers held between their lips. Anne who wanted to take the vow had been shipped to Peru as a promising acolyte of the faith. She became a teacher in a school run by Ursulines in Lima, where oil-tycoons and Bavarian princesses polished the door handles. Who knows why she repudiated her calling?

Until their streetcar-encounter neither Erhardt nor Anne were ever recorded to have displayed any interest in the opposite sex. Anne was shrouded in mystery. She had come back as a *gouvernante* in the House of Wittelsbach. But Erhardt had been in love with a man, and the man in love with Erhardt. Their love was reciprocal and dangerous.

I certainly share Susan Sontag's stance against interpretation, yet the unusual inclusion and even the centrality given to his lover's drawing, the mischievous composition of intertwined triangles and the appearance of red, the colour of passion, harbour the possibility that far from being a mere whimsy, it is an allegory of a *ménage à trois*, with Anne represented by the girl with the hoop. Not only is this drawing a reference to something personal and autonomous, outside of any conventional academic evaluation – it tells you as well something about the experimental largesse of the relevant authorities of the time.



Maybe because the outlawed pervert circles, in which he moved before he met her, were so blue-blooded and influential, and also in the public eye, when they got imprisoned or beaten up, or even killed, that you could not make all that disappear so easily. It made him also loose-lipped, clandestinely boastful sometimes, whereas Anne's lips remained sealed tight, in a desperate attempt to hide what she herself thought to be a lowly and ugly provenance.

Erhardt was still a sought-after beauty in his circles, reminiscent of Wilhelm von Gloeden's Sicilian boys. Crowns of orange blossoms, cypress trees in the back, the allure of the South and the dream of a permissive antiquity. Anne, big eyed, bird-nosed, wiry, even tanned, with

a demeanour that you only get through living abroad. She had become fluent in Spanish to the point where the language just involuntarily dotted her talk and made her exotically attractive. She was not a beauty, but strong and proficient. They judged themselves to be above the usual misery and flotsam of war. Like pioneers, they had the strength and obstinacy to remodel themselves in a place which by birth was theirs, unlike pioneers, but rendered foreign to them through irreversible destruction and extermination, and to build a settlement on the scorched earth, a fixity against the volatility, which was to become a family, THEIR FAMILY. How short-lived it turned out to be!

It is war that brings peace, never the other way around. If that is so, a peace founded on war can never last, because everything stays with us in the world forever. How few are the ones amongst us strong enough to forgive and to remain undaunted in their pursuit of beatitude and generosity!

Peace brings prosperity, and prosperity the urge to defend it against those who have been excluded. A locked house behind walls, a May Day with 25,000 policemen. Surveillance is the natural outcome of the family protectorate. The cold-privacy-war postulated by Ingmar Bergman in his bourgie-bourgie soap opera called *Scenes of a Marriage*. So many things crash, disintegrate, disappear once that the dream of security has replaced love.

The clay hen disappeared as well. It is possible that Erhardt destroyed her after Anne ceased to be his ideal spouse. But the portfolio survived.

On the ominous morning, when Erhardt had to hand over the keys of his house, that experiment which had gone so terribly wrong, the portfolio was amongst the last things hastily gathered and stuffed into his already overstuffed car, as if he escaped from a fire. The handshake with the new owners, wealthy producers of sausages with a single, deadly-pale daughter, prescient of an unknown future in a strange place, was but an icy formality. Then his car silently rolled down the hill, away from it all, a glorious autumn sun above and all the birds singing their last jubilation, a symphonic goodbye to the Good Times.

Erhardt drove to Magdalena-of-the-valley, of course with so many premonitions, since there was no good charcuterie. As the car got unloaded, she must have taken hold of the portfolio and come, maybe not in a sudden epiphany, but by slowly calculating her new importance in his life, to the fatal conclusion that a replica of the clay hen would be the perfect surprise for his upcoming birthday. She could see the scene clearly before her: it was going to be placed amongst flowers in

the middle of the table, and when he came down from the bedroom with his crutch, step by painful step, he would in his advance realise with increasing clarity that the vanished symbol of fecundity had rematerialised. And not only that: he would see in it the power of her love – the last and final one in their lives. It would be an orgy of *Bésame Mucho*, her favorite song. But no such orgy happened. Instead a punitive silence descended, and no word was henceforth uttered about the hideous object. Surely the provincial ceramicist who got the commission was not to blame. Her hand must have been stiffened by the fear to fail. How could she feel the pioneering spirit, the carefree vigour of the circles? She inscribed them with a jittery carefulness of a schoolgirl fishing for the compliments of her teacher. After all, she lived in a complacent time, a decorative sideshow of history, light-years removed from the terrible things she only knew through hearsay. That was bad enough as far as the art was concerned, but the real offence was Magdalena's blind, wishful thinking, her ruthlessness, her impertinent usurpation of the place Anne had left so tragically vacant.

Immediately after Erhardt's death, Magdalena wanted to get rid of everything that reminded her of him as soon as possible. Her last hope was that I at least liked the crime she had committed. Did she see me as second rate, or was it her last attempt to save the monument of her passion for a forgiving posterity? But I despised the miserable trinket as much as Erhardt did. How to make it disappear without hurting her feelings? Even if her love was a form of domination, she still had opened her doors to him, cleaned his excrements, changed her salon into a sick-chamber, listened to his groans of agony, his insults instead of Bruckner's Scottish Symphony?

She forced it upon me, but there was no question I would burden myself with that unforgivable mistake. My train was waiting; there was a deadline, ölüm çizgisi. I put the fake clay hen into a plastic bag, stole out through the backdoor, climbed on the OLB railway track and smashed her to bits. Only at that moment I became aware of my exposure, of the crimson cardigan I was wearing, set off against the glaring snow, the knowing lace-curtains everywhere shuffling. If ever there was a self, I was nothing of the sort anymore. Head up, in a frozen fierceness I marched mechanical to the next municipal waste disposal container and cared little if it was for paper, glass or else. You could say almost a century dumped into the garbage, beaten to a pulp. The snow was only cold now, not warm anymore. That is my story of the clay hen, Ahmet, not hers. Ahmet, dostum, good night. I love you, Ahmet.

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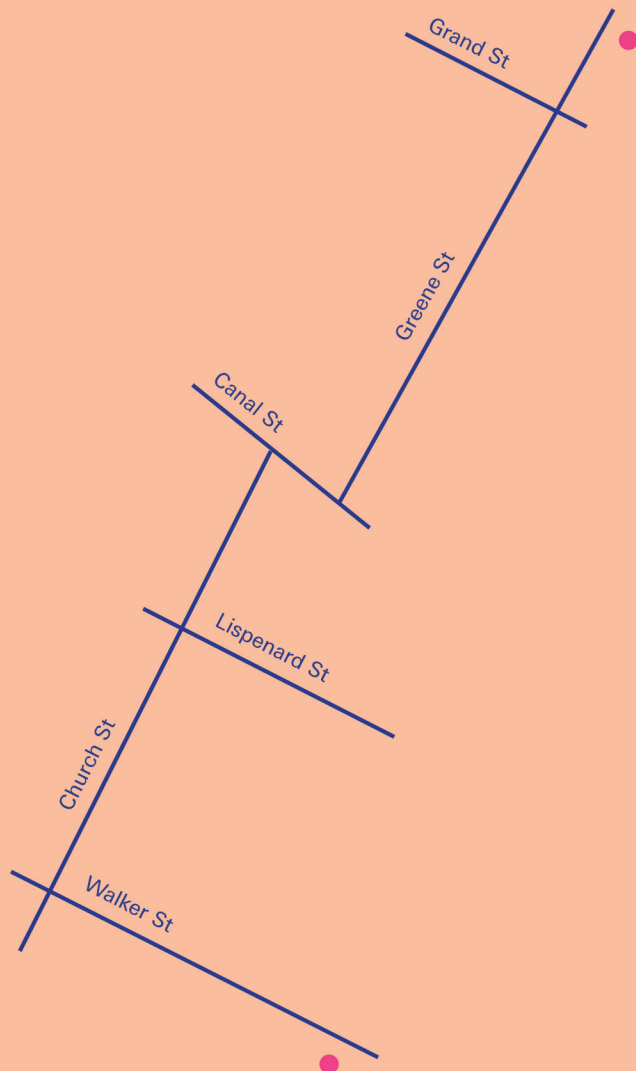
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This booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Undoolay*, and includes the short story "The Clay Hen" (2015) by Lukas Duwenhögger

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A companion exhibition of Lukas Duwenhögger's work will take place at Raven Row in London from June 30 through September 18, 2016