

FRÄULEIN



ALICJA
KWADE

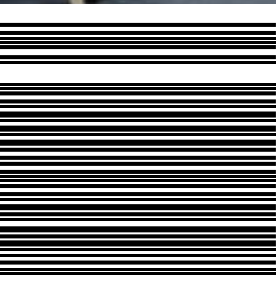


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DESIRE



“ART IS, IN A WAY, AN ADDICTION.”

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ART



ANN-KATHRIN RIEDL: What kind of suppressed desires did you sense in your parents or in the people around you as a child?

ALICJA KWADE: My mother was a professor at the university, specializing in Slavic studies and cultural theory, and my father ran one of the few privately owned art galleries in socialist Poland.

I don't remember much consciously because I was a child, living in my own world with my cousins. I didn't feel like anything was missing. But I *did* know that America and Australia were these big dreams. At my grandmother's place – she had

the only TV in our old apartment block – we watched *Dynasty*. My mother was in love with David Chamberlain from *The Thorn Birds*. At our neighbor Eva's place, Cherry, "Cherry Lady" by Modern Talking played on repeat. I always had this image in my head of a glossy red cherry that smelled like plastic. And when my Aunt Margot came to visit from West Germany, everyone was ecstatic. When she drove through the streets in her West German car, it felt like another world was pulling up.

There was this kind of promise: that somewhere out there, people were beautiful and happy. I don't know if I truly believed it, but the allure was there, the temptation of a life soaked in sunlight and coconut oil.

Later, your family fled to the Federal Republic

of Germany and started over from nothing. What did that teach you about the power of desire?

I'm not sure it was desire, really. It was more necessity. My parents knew full well that under those conditions, in that regime, in that country, there was no future. No freedom. No autonomy. We grew up in Katowice, then one of the most polluted cities in Europe due to the heavy coal and steel industry. There was certainly a longing to get out of the filth and breathe clean air.

What I've learned is this: At any point in life, it's possible to attempt the impossible. My parents were in their 40s when they left the country with only what you'd take for a three-day vacation, with two children – 8 and 11 – no language, no job, no documents. Nothing.

That experience is shared by refugees across the globe, and I believe it's essential to remember what tremendous courage and strength that takes. Especially in contrast to the passive comfort in which so many live – those who so easily judge others who've risked everything.

Artist: Alicja
Kwade

in conversation with ANN-KATHRIN RIEDL

Alicja Kwade is one of the most relevant artists of our time, whose work stands at the intersection of philosophy, science, and poetry. Her installations are not merely sculptural objects – they are profound inquiries into the nature of reality, time, and perception. In this rare, in-depth conversation with *Fräulein*, Kwade opens the doors to her studio in Berlin and reflects on the forces that shaped her: the longings of a generation trapped behind borders, the transformative power of overcoming the self, and the relentless hunger that still drives her to push beyond the limits of what can be known. This is a portrait of an artist who is not seeking answers – but insisting on the questions, no matter how impossible they may be to resolve.



Let's talk about the here and now. How do you preserve your integrity as an artist while also being a citizen within a political and societal system? Where do you engage – and where do you step back?

Well, I'm an artist, not a politician, though I can imagine that path in another life. Sometimes the injustice and absurdity of the world tear me apart. My art isn't overtly political, but I am. Deeply.

Right now, I'm keeping my distance. That might change. Who knows – maybe I *will* go into politics one day. Because this absurd theater of power and delusion is unbearable. The inequality, especially toward women, in a highly developed country like Germany, is infuriating.

Still, I remain an artist. And I try, at times, to make reality visible through my work.

Which of your works engages most directly with the idea of desire – and how?

There aren't really direct themes in my work, and certainly not desire as such. It's more that longing is always the *engine* behind the work. It drives everything.

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In an earlier interview, you once said that each of our daily decisions is the constant creation of a new world. To what

extent do you believe we shape our own circumstances?

I believe we only have partial control over our lives. It’s all part of a vast chain of cause and effect and random events. But yes, every choice we make – going somewhere or not, saying yes or no, meeting someone – leads us down a different path. A different branch of fate.

What was the

most important decision of your life – both as a person and as an artist?

That’s too intimate a question, and I’m not sure I can answer it. But I do know what it feels like to make the right decision: I have to be afraid. I have to tremble – and do it anyway. Then I know it was right.

It always involves risk. I have to be willing to give everything. Otherwise, I’ll always feel I didn’t try hard enough.

For me, it’s essential to keep leaving my comfort zone. The worst decisions were the “reasonable” ones made out of fear. The right ones feel right *immediately*. Even if that’s irrational.

Desire often comes with the risk of getting stuck in the past or future. As someone whose work often explores time, how do you see this danger?



Can longing pull us away from the present moment?

Longing is a kind of addiction – and addiction, as we know, can block us from many things.

What collective longing do you sense in society right now – and how does your art resonate with it?

Longing always has an element of the unfulfilled, which can be dangerous. I fear that society longs for identity, for “home,” for “roots” – concepts I find highly problematic and even dangerous. That’s something I try to address in my work, to interrupt in some way.

I believe in the equality of all people—in the 99.9% of our DNA that we all share. If I have a longing, it’s that people might finally realize how similar we all are. That the idea of superiority based on origin or appearance is ridiculous.

You already appeared on the cover of *Fräulein* back in 2015. From that story comes the quote: “I can’t help but explore existential questions – questions I know I’ll never be able to answer.” Nearly a decade later, have you found answers? Or at least come closer?

Not even a little bit.

What do you think is the most important question of human existence?

“Everyone wants to live – but no one knows why.” (Heidegger)

In the ten years since your first *Fräulein* cover, which moments or works have been particularly meaningful in your artistic journey?

That’s a hard one. I don’t really see my path as a “career,” and my works seem to follow their own trajectory. But yes, the Venice Biennale in 2017 was important. 2019 was a milestone when I exhibited on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum.

Another key work was the DNA piece shown in an Italian gallery in 2021 – though I actually conceived it in 2019. That work crystallizes what my practice is often about: the search for information, for total knowledge – a search that always ends in a void.

And now, in 2025, my recent show at Pace Gallery marked another significant step for me.

Back in 2015, you were already a big name but still considered a newcomer. Maintaining your place at the top of

the art world – and even rising higher – what has that required from you, especially as a woman?

I wouldn’t call it a sacrifice. I wanted this – and I want more. I can’t stop. I’m addicted to it. I want to make art at all costs. Working in the studio, being alone with my ideas – that actually makes me happy. But yes, it can be frustrating. As a woman, you’re still seen as weaker, less capable.

I’ve learned to laugh at it. I still get comments like, “You’re such a small, delicate woman – how do you make such large works?” It reveals so much about the clichés that are so deeply ingrained. As if male artists carry their sculptures on their backs and do everything by hand. It’s absurd.

And I still get asked how I manage everything – with my kid, the travel, the shows. I don’t think male artists get those questions.

How hard are you on yourself? Has it been difficult to treat yourself with patience and compassion? And has that changed over time?

I’ve always been very hard on myself – and still am. Maybe it’s pathological. But I’ve always believed that to be truthful, you have to give everything. For years, I worked 16 hours a day, seven days a week. I barely ate. I worked nights. But that was what I *wanted*.

Recently, I’ve become gentler. I give myself time – for me, for my family. But I’m still driven, still impatient – especially with myself.

I’m working on it. Trying not to drive everyone around me insane. Life is too short to constantly run after something. And yet I keep trying to be fast, to squeeze as many lives as possible into this one, which already feels too short.

You once said that being an artist includes the potential to explore yourself and express

inner feelings. How essential do you think that ability is for human existence? And how could people experience it even if they don’t work in the arts?

It’s not like you *choose* to explore yourself through art. In fact, often you want to avoid yourself, to forget yourself, to disappear.

Art becomes a filter, a distillate, a kind of medium for everything that crashes in. Sometimes it channels the feelings of others more than your own.

But no – art is not therapy. It’s not self-help. It’s not a path to happiness. If anything, it can destroy you. It can devastate. It’s not a choice. It’s something that’s there. It can be a disease – or pure bliss.

I do think honesty is essential. Honesty with yourself and with others. And as an artist, that honesty must be absolute. Even if what’s honest is the refusal to feel anything at all.



“I do know what it feels like to make the right decision: I have to be afraid. I have to tremble – and do it anyway. Then I know it was right.”

