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Maschinenhaus M2

# Michaela Melián

**Red Threads**

**27.3.22 –  
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Curators:  
Kathrin Becker, Ingrid Wagner

# Imprint

27 March – 24 July 2022

*Michaela Melián. Red Threads*

Maschinenhaus M2

## Curators

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Ingrid Wagner**

## Editors

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## Introduction

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In the solo exhibition *Red Threads*, the artist Michaela Melián (\* 1956 in Munich) updates important works from recent years with the new series *TANIA*, which was developed specifically for the exhibition.

Melián's visual and acoustic collages reflect her research interest in sociopolitical developments and the associated aesthetics. Her multimedia exhibitions, audio works, and publications revolve around cultural-historical and topographic aspects of places, spaces, and architectures as well as the history of the reception of individual biographies. Visitors are invited to follow the many "red threads" that Melián lays out and links with the individual works in the exhibition using stories, images, and sounds.

Using methods of artistic research and processes of duplication and montage, Michaela Melián approaches social phenomena in an unmistakably intensive and condensed form. Instead of a declared research aim, Melián's works open our perspective to larger contexts: by associating, dissecting, processing, overwriting, and reformulating various image, text, and sound sources, unforeseen, sometimes surprising constellations emerge, which give space for our own interpretations and points of reference. These large-scale installations, image and sound collages, objects, drawings, and murals have an explicitly political and educational aim. They address power relations and processes of canonisation: Who and what is perceived, and in which form? Who is visible and who is not? What stories and whose narratives are contained in everyday phenomena such as design, architecture, and popular culture?

Melián's first retrospective in Berlin covers the entire range of her work as an artist. The updated works, including the sound sculpture *Mannheim Chair*, the multimedia installation *Heimweh (Else Lasker-Schüler)*, *Mossberg Model Bullpup*—a soft sculpture in the shape of a rifle on which visitors can sit—and the tapestry from the installation *Girl-Kultur*, present a wide range of contexts.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is the installation *TANIA*, which was developed specifically for the KINDL, on the multilayered myths surrounding the guerrilla Tamara Bunke (alias Tania), whose biography has been interpreted in a variety of ways in the East and West, including North and South America. While Tamara Bunke / Tania played a major role in the public consciousness in East Germany, in present-day Germany she has practically disappeared from public memory. The artist follows these various traces and condenses them into a multilayered complex in a mural designed for the exhibition spaces and a multi-channel sound work.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a discursive and educational programme that deepens and expands Melián's approach to artistic research and her aesthetic processes.

An exhibition catalogue with essays by authors including Nadja Abt, Hanne Loreck and a conversation between Joanna Warsza and the artist will be published by spectator books in Leipzig in September 2022.

A vinyl record in an edition of 100 (12-inch EP, hand-stamped, signed, and numbered) has been produced to accompany the exhibition, featuring the nine-and-a-half-minute piece from the newly developed installation *TANIA*.

Kathrin Becker, Ingrid Wagner

# Mossberg Model Bullpup

1992, Multiple; various materials, filling

1993, Velvet, filling

# Briefmarke

1988, Tempera on cardboard

Michaela Melián began making use of weapons in her artworks against the background of the Gulf Wars and the Yugoslav Wars. In her research she came across the Mossberg Bullpup, an unusually shaped shotgun with a short barrel and plastic grip. The firearm was marketed as a “self-defence weapon,” but was also used by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), among others. Since the late 1980s, the gun has appeared in various forms in Melián’s work: in drawings, as multiples made of velvet, silk, terry cloth, cotton, and wool in different colours, and as a soft velvet sculpture on which visitors can sit. In these works, Melián breaks with the cliché of a fascination with weapons, or turns it around with soft shapes, the feel of different materials, a paintbox, and an inviting red sofa in the exhibition space.

# TANIA

2022, Mural and 16-channel sound installation; rubber stamp, stamp ink; pressure chamber loudspeaker, audio tracks

Music: Michaela Melián; production: Michaela Melián, Felix Raeithel, Jürgen Galli

# Fahne TANIA

1994 / 2022, Printed fabric

# Tania

1990, 1992, Drawings

Tania is the nom de guerre of Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider. Bunke was born in Buenos Aires in 1937 into a communist German-Jewish family in exile. After the war, she moved to East Germany with her parents, joined the Free German Youth, and later studied at the Humboldt University in Berlin. In the 1960s she left East Germany for Cuba and then joined the guerrilla group led by Che Guevara in Bolivia, where she was ambushed and shot in 1967.

For the *TANIA* series, Michaela Melián researched reports, events, and places from Tamara Bunke's / Tania's life. The great themes of the 20th century intersect in her life story: Nazism, war, socialist modernism, emancipation, and liberation. However, her biography can only be pieced together from unreliable narrations, forged documents, cover identities, projections, and suggestive documentation, and constantly eludes understanding.

Melián does not censor the representations of Tania, and instead collects as much material as possible in order

to channel it into an artistic and intellectual process that makes it possible to also address the political and media conditions of these representations. The models for the 250 drawings that Melián made as the basis for the new mural *TANIA* are excerpts from documentaries, views of La Paz (where Tamara Bunke lived as an agent of the Cuban secret service amid the political elite of Bolivia), images of indigenous sculptures that she researched in her cover identity as ethnologist Laura Gutiérrez Bauer, current Google Street View images of the places where she lived, including socialist modernist Berlin, postcards from Western European capitals that Bunke travelled to during her training as a spy or agent, photographs of oil derricks in Cuba, the Bolivian Andes, and Bunke's funeral in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany with Anna Seghers as a speaker. Melián digitally assembled the drawings into a dense network, which, in pixelated form, was stamped onto the wall in repetitive, collective manual labour with little rubber stamps and paint. In this way, both thematically and formally, Melián creates a work that shifts between image and design, archival document and vision of the future, information and noise.

Central processes and themes from Melián's work as well as from this exhibition are distilled in the *TANIA* series. This includes potentially endless research, which enables a broad and incomplete view of history and biographies. It also includes the sequential processes of duplication and translation into other media, from film to drawing to Photoshop or from photo to description to drawing. In this way, and independently of the "artist's stroke of genius", Melián can address the conditions under which identities and spaces are created and represented. Traditional artistic forms of representation of identity and space include portraits and cityscapes or *vedute*, many of which can be found in the mural *TANIA*. How is identity formed? How do we want to live? What is the space that is granted, that is fought for? These are the central questions of this work and other works in the exhibition, such as the tapestry *Girl-Kultur*.

The site-specific nature of the work is intended as an examination of the history and social reality of the city of Berlin and its artistic genres. In its form, the mural not only echoes South American murals, but also socialist mosaics, the best-known of which include *Aus dem Leben der Völker der Sowjetunion* (*From the Life of the Peoples of the Soviet Union*) on Karl-Marx-Allee, where Bunke's parents lived.

The work developed out of the mural created in 2004 for the Werkleitz Biennale in Halle on the same thematic com-

plex. In this updated version, the views form a dense thick-  
et that is impenetrable in places. The mural does not offer  
a sovereign, possessive, urban view of the threads that run  
through the world. Instead, identities, places, and stories  
repeatedly dissolve into unknown figures, forms, and indis-  
tinct flickering.

The second part of the installation *TANIA* and a central  
part of the series in this exhibition is the newly developed  
sound installation *TANIA*, which deals with Tamara Bunke's  
musical canon. For this work, Melián assembled snippets  
of sound from protest songs that she recorded herself  
ranging from 10 to 20 seconds in length: *The Internation-  
ale*, *Peat Bog Soldiers*, *Bella Ciao*, and the *Anthem of the  
26th of July*, also known as the *Cuban Revolutionary March*.  
There are also pieces from musical cultures that Tania  
researched in her cover identity as an anthropologist. The  
Inca flutes refer to the recordings found in the backpack  
that Tania was carrying when she was shot. The recordings  
are played throughout the exhibition space on a dozen  
pressure chamber loudspeakers like those often found in  
public transport.

A vinyl record in an edition of 100 (12-inch EP, signed and  
numbered) will be available during the exhibition.

The artist's engagement with Tania, and with the genre  
of the portrait, conventions of the creation of identity and  
identifiability, and their limits began with *Briefmarken-  
sets* (1989–1992). Melián had reconstructions of Tamara  
Bunke's likeness made on a computer system used by the  
state criminal police in Munich. A photo of Tania served  
as a model, which Melián verbally described to an officer.  
What are typical characteristics of a person? What features  
make them identifiable? Only "male" facial features based  
on racist stereotypes were available in the police database.  
The resulting image, which is featured in the mural, the  
drawings, and on the muslin flag at the entrance, is also  
reminiscent of the iconic likeness of Che Guevara and thus  
alludes to the missing (female) counterpart.



# Girl-Kultur

2019, Tapestry, woven out of wool and cotton

Part of a larger installation

Michaela Melián's works include numerous references to female biographies and their ambivalent perception. Stereotypical roles and gender hierarchies are also themes in the carpet from the installation *Girl-Kultur*. Here Melián questions the image of the New Woman in the context of gender-associated spaces and efforts for liberation in the modern era.

In the spirit of the Neues Bauen movement in architecture, the "functional design" of the kitchen was meant to save time, energy, and materials, with everything within reach in just a few steps. It aimed to rationalise space and movement and to optimise housekeeping. Did this result in an improved standard of living or the measurement of female economic output? Was the modern kitchen a relief or a prison?

The densely tangled lines that cover the tapestry visualise the ideal (meaning short) paths of a housewife in a demonstration kitchen. Melián assembled drawings and photographs of kitchen designs from the 1920s and combined them with movement diagrams by Erna Meyer and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, among others. While the carpet unmistakably echoes the discipline of weaving, which was reserved for women at the Bauhaus, the title refers to Fritz Giese's book *Girlkultur* (1925) about the modern, self-determined woman.

Staatsgalerie  
Stuttgart, transfer  
of the Ministry  
of Science,  
Research and  
the Arts Baden-  
Württemberg,  
2019

# In a Mist

2014 / 2015, Paintings on glass; glass, steel

*In a Mist* is the title of a well-known jazz piece from 1927. Michaela Melián's paintings on glass of the same title, four of which are on view in this exhibition, deal with early artistic utopias and avant-garde movements from this period. The works translate not only the subject matter and motifs, but also various artistic processes such as textile printing, weaving, architecture, and stage design.

The two colourful paintings are adaptations of avant-garde textile works. One is a textile print by the Constructivist painter, designer, and theorist Varvara Stepanova. The design refers to the electrification of Russia, which was implemented according to Lenin's slogan "Communism equals Soviet power plus electrification" and was influential in visual art, architecture, and music at the time. The second painting interprets a weaving by the Bauhaus artist Anni Albers. The pattern recalls modernist building facades and thus addresses issues related to living and building like those that are dealt with in *Girl-Kultur* and the mural *TANIA*.

Two other glass works are made of etched one-way glass. The first shows a utopian urban landscape based on a photograph of Melián's installation *Lunapark*. A variation of this installation, *Heimweh (Else Lasker-Schüler)*, is also featured in this exhibition. The second is an adaptation of the stage design for Bertolt Brecht's didactic play *The Mother*, which premiered in Berlin in 1932, based on the novel of the same title by Maxim Gorki.

# Mannheim Chair

2015/2016, Sound sculpture (in three editions); wood, fabric, steel, sound system

In the sound sculpture *Mannheim Chair* hanging from the cross-beam, which was originally developed for a sound installation in the old library at the Kunsthalle Mannheim, the chair becomes a multimedia exhibition display. Michaela Melián adds a sonic functionality to the chair with an integrated sound system: Visitors who sit in the chair can immerse themselves in the musical atmospheres of the pieces while gently rocking and enjoying a view of the skyline with the TV tower through the window in the exhibition space. Thus, the traces in the exhibition connect with the real place of Berlin, with its history and the receiver, who now appears as part of the coordinate system. The object that causes the body to rock is also a protected resonant space in which sound—including pieces from the projects *Speicher* (2008) and *Music from a Frontier Town* (2018)—can be experienced.

# Studio (1–11)

2011, Inkjet and thread on paper

# Frequency Hopping

2013, Inkjet and thread on paper

The series *Studio* and *Frequency Hopping* refer to the historic Siemens Studio for Electronic Music, which was one of the leading recording studios in Germany when it opened in Munich in 1956. Due to its unique equipment—one-of-a-kind devices that were developed out of military technology—it is considered an important site for the development of electronic music as an early form of digital culture. In 1966 the studio was handed over to the film department headed by Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, and it was used as a set for Kluge's science fiction movies due to its futuristic-looking devices. When funding for the studio ran out, the equipment was put in storage in 1968, and it was only rediscovered in 1992 by Josef Anton Riedel. The recording studio has been kept in functional condition at the Deutsches Museum in Munich since 1993.

In the works on paper in these two series, the artist depicts the historical, electroacoustic devices from the recording studio. The detail shots of mixing consoles, synthesisers, and recording equipment look like digital landscapes. By sewing threads onto the photographs and piercing the paper with a sewing machine, Melián creates a kind of punch card in mechanical *écriture automatique*, which adds a shimmering, flickering vibration to the studio landscapes.

The ambivalence of the instruments developed out of military technology is particularly evident in the title *Frequency Hopping*. The title refers to a groundbreaking invention from 1941 by the actress and scientist Hedy Lamarr, which made it possible to obscure radio signals from torpedoes by rapidly changing frequencies so that the source could

not be located and the signal could not be interfered with. 11  
The threads cover the picture of the studio landscape like  
a veil and interweave topography, music tracks, memory,  
and different temporal layers.

# Heimweh (Else Lasker-Schüler)

2012, Installation with sound, 11:28 min.; glass objects, slide projector, motor, prism, screen, music track

Voice: Juno Meinecke; music: Michaela Melián

The installation *Heimweh (Else Lasker-Schüler)* is a variation of the light and sound installation *Lunapark* (2012). Michaela Melián assembles transparent everyday objects on a round table. Cups, bottles, and plastic CD cases as well as precious glasses, carafes, and cut prisms form a varied, transparent table landscape. A slide projector with a rotating prism projects the still life as flowing silhouettes onto the wall of the circular installation. The changing constellations recall the silhouettes of a city that is constantly changing in fleeting, fragile, cinematic movement.

László Moholy Nagy's *Licht-Raum-Modulator* from 1930 and his ideas from the Neues Sehen (New Vision) movement also appear in Melián's installation, as do the visions of the Gläserne Kette group of avant-garde architects and artists who saw the utopia of the "glass city" as the engine for a more humane society. A composition recorded with a glass harmonium can be heard, in which a recitation of Else Lasker-Schüler's poem *Heimweh* (1917) is embedded. Set to music in German as well as in phonetically memorised Arabic and Hebrew, aspects of being a foreigner and the experience of exile are processed.

# Speicher

2008, Video installation with soundtrack, 53 min.

Voices: Peter Brombacher, Christos Davidopoulos, Chris Dercon, Hans Kremer, Stefan Merki, Laura Maire; Music: Michaela Melián, Carl Oesterhelt; Sound technicians: Susanne Herzig, Wilfried Hauer; Camera: Michaela Melián and Surface Frankfurt; Editing: Margarete Hentze, Michael Hiebel; Director: Michaela Melián; Production: Michaela Melián, Ulmer Museum, Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, Cubitt Gallery (London), Bayerischer Rundfunk, German Federal Cultural Foundation; Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus and Kunstbau München

„Up and away, over and past. Put distance between, leave the crap behind.“ [...] „Walking tour through the Harz mountains with a map of London.“ [...]

*Speicher* pays homage to the lost multimedia artwork *Variation: Unendliche Fahrt* (1965) by Alexander Kluge (texts), Josef Anton Riedel (music), and Edgar Reitz (film). The installation on the theme of travel offered a new form of simultaneous perception of film, music, and language via several synchronous channels.

Based on the iconic work by Kluge, Riedel, and Reitz, Michaela Melián portrays travel and movement in a collage of images, text, and music. The non-linear, narrative elements are based on sources and reports from different times and contexts. The camera moves slowly through the winter night of a drawing made with a sewing machine. “Farewell, distance, cities, from city to city, arrival, landscape, never-ending journey, punctuality, sleep, commuter traffic, safety, freight transport, vacation, seasons, rails, speed, weather.” The subject of travel is explored in the work as a search, as a longing for the foreign between romantic hiking scenes, emigration, and flight. For the soundtrack of the video installation *Speicher*, Michaela Melián brought the Siemens Studio for Electronic Music at the Deutsches Museum in Munich back to life and turned the sounds and noises produced with the historical instruments into a musical composition. The studio itself is present in the specific sound of the one-of-a-kind elec-

troacoustic instruments, as well as in the length of the film, which measures the distance between Munich and Ulm—the distance that the studio has travelled over the years (see text on *Studio* and *Frequency Hopping*, p.10–11).

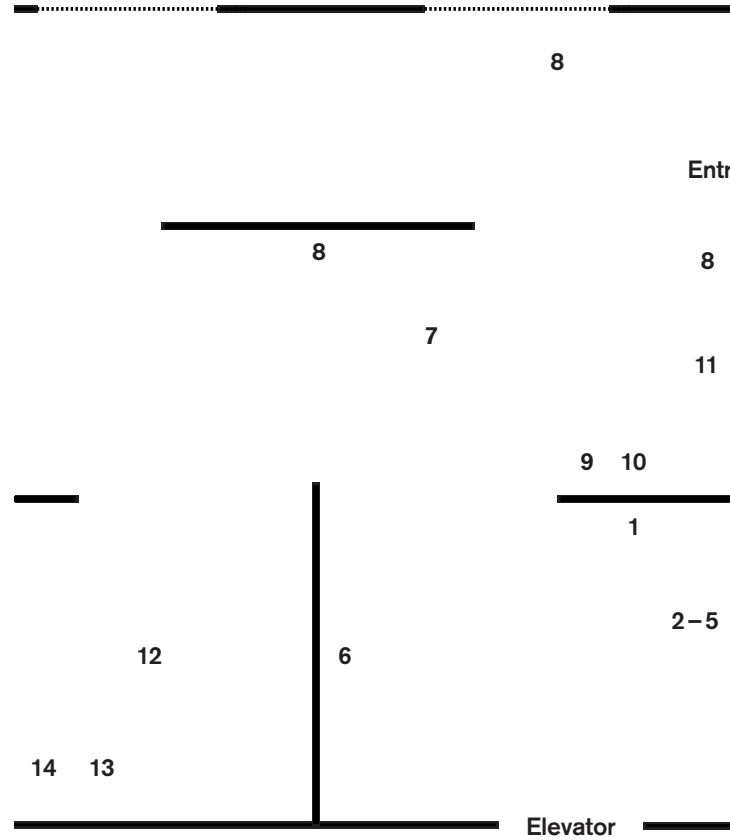
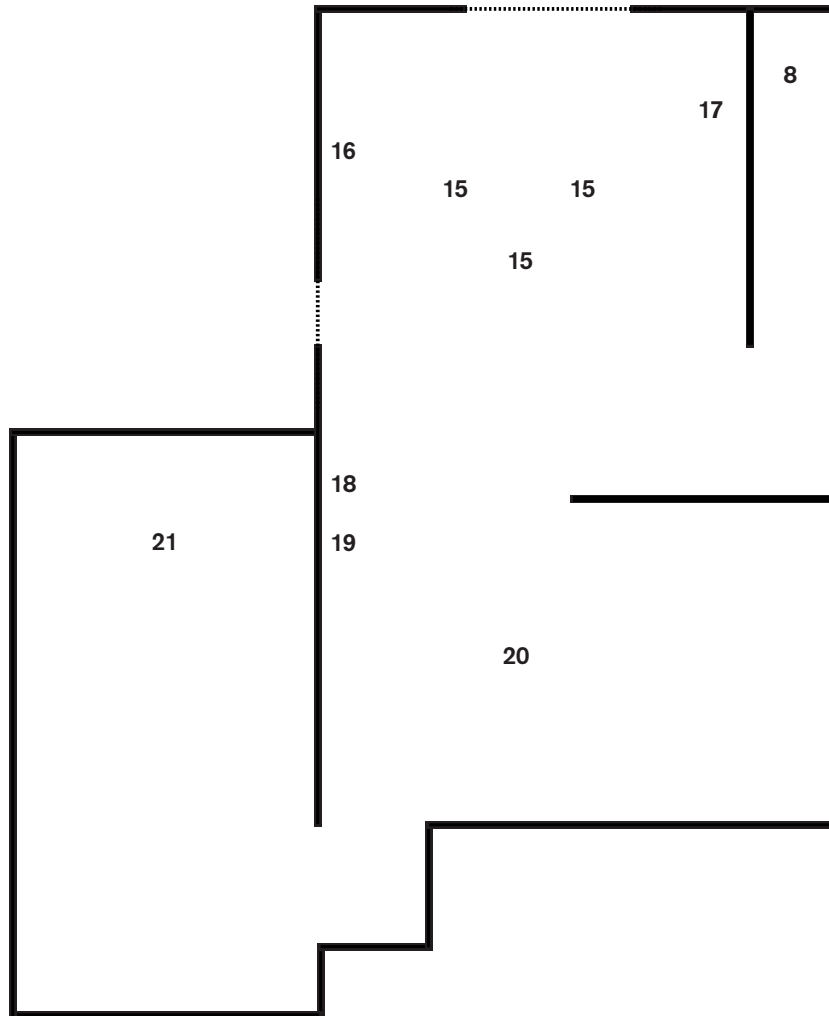


Michaela Melián (\*1956 in Munich), artist and musician, lives in Munich and Hamburg. She is a cofounder of the band F.S.K. (since 1980) and has taught at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg since 2010.

Melián's work has received numerous awards, including the Edwin Scharff Prize (2018), the Roland Prize for Public Art (2018), the Grimme Online Award (2011), the Art Prize of the City of Nordhorn (2011), and the Art Prize of the City of Munich (2010).

Solo exhibitions (selection): Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (2020); Kölnischer Kunstverein, reiheM (concert series for contemporary music, electronics, and new media), Cologne (2019); Schulterblatt 73, Hamburg (2018); Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (2016); Kunsthalle Mannheim (2015); Store, Dresden (2014); Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe (2014); Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz (2009); Ludlow, New York (2009); Ulmer Museum (2008); Cubitt Gallery, London (2008).

Group exhibitions (selection): Museum of Modern Art Olomouc, Czech Republic (2022); Gwangju Museum of Art, Gwangju / South Korea (2021); Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (2019); Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (2019); Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (2019); Hamburger Kunsthalle (2018); Museum Villa Stuck, Munich (2015); Muzeum Współczesne, Wrocław (2015); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2015); Münchner Kammer-spiele (2014); Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2013); Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz (2013); Neues Museum Nürnberg (2012); Sprengel Museum Hannover (2012); Kunsthaus Bregenz (2011); Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem (2010); MAK – Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna (2008).



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Unless otherwise noted: Courtesy Michaela Melián, Barbara Gross Galerie (Munich), and Karin Guenther Galerie (Hamburg)



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