

Barbara Husar | At the Horizon

Barbara Husar (b. 1975) studied at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam; she received the Austrian State Scholarship and is a recipient of the Hubert Berchtold Prize. In her work, the horizon is of central importance as a line of connection. As a goat herder in the Sinai Desert, she spent many years learning from the Bedouins, particularly from the women who carry on the millennia-old nomadic culture. Infinity and interconnectedness, along with the search for lines of connection, define her core themes. Barbara Husar’s work is difficult to categorize, and she views her practice as an exchange of information between cultures, fields of knowledge, and artistic media.

Interview, Vienna, 2026

Thomas Redl: *Your work has to do with Mother Earth. In 2007, you bought a herd of goats in the Sinai Desert. How did that come about?*

Barbara Husar: The starting point was my

drawing practice in the desert in the mid-1990s. Over an extended period, I recorded everything I encountered there—not out of documentary interest, but as a form of communication with the nomads and to sharpen my perception. On my fourth trip to the desert, I was captivated by fragments of shoes: objects that had served their purpose, left behind in the sand and rocks despite repeated attempts at repair, and marked by the sun and the passage of time. I began drawing shoe buckles, without knowing that they would later develop into my thesis, **SCHNALLEN BRAUCHT ZEIT**, and the **BIG BUCKLING BOOK**. My aim was to break free from the static element and move toward the process of connection. I understood “buckling” as comprehension and as a principle of transmission—a locking into place at a junction, comparable to a synapse where information is passed on.

At that time, I was studying in Amsterdam. There, they told me, *“You’re boring us,”* and that I could only continue my studies if I changed my medium. As a result, I presented my portfolio in New York, where I was immediately awarded a scholarship. At that moment, I became acutely aware of the relativity of art and have remained true to my impulses ever since. After the buckle phase, my focus shifted from the individual connecting link to the network as a structure. This gave rise to an extensive series of works featuring deep-fryer nets, which I transformed into *METEORITE TRAPS*. After the deep-fryer phase, I became preoccupied with the flow of information. Away from the individual click, away from the network, toward a continuous movement. This led me to the umbilical cord as the first stream of information flowing into this world.

It was clear to me that the umbilical cords had to come from the silence of the desert, from an untouched, archaic haven of peace that permeates the intensifying digital noise of our present. That’s how I came up with the idea of asking the Bedouin women if I could buy the umbilical cords of their sheep. At first, I simply wanted

to establish a new commodity in order to support women who have few other opportunities to earn money. For me, that would actually make the intervention

. But the Bedouin women refused, since the seat of the soul is said to be located in the umbilical cord. I find it fascinating that in Arabic, the umbilical cord (*al-ḡabl* / “cord” *as-surr*, belonging to the navel) and the word for “secret” (*sirr*) are so closely related, both phonetically and in meaning. For me, the umbilical cord definitely became the mysterious cord.

Since two Bedouins had known me for over ten years and wanted to help me, they made a suggestion: I should acquire a flock, for which they would find a shepherdess to care for it when I wasn’t there. In this way, I could gain access to the umbilical cords. However, they said, I would also have to clarify with Allah whether I was permitted to incorporate umbilical cords into my art. A remarkable situation arose in which I realized that Allah had given his consent to this project, and so I set out to buy sheep. That wasn’t possible, however, since sheep are traditionally passed down from grandmothers to their granddaughters. Instead, I was able to buy six goats. The wolf snatched one of the goats on the very first night.

T.R.: *How much time did you invest in this?*

B.H.: Over the course of seven years, I spent one month at a time with my herd at regular intervals. In between, the Bedouin tend the herd, and I paid them for it. If it was too dry for an extended period, I had to buy hay as well.

T.R.: *I can imagine that out there—far away from Western civilization—you have very archaic experiences.*

B.H.: If someone asked me where my real learning took place, I’d say: in the desert, with the Bedouins. For me, university was less crucial to my artistic development than this experience of simplicity and



Barbara Husar, Documents of Data Exchange, 2012, Photo: Elvira Häusler

being there. My new film, titled *NOMADIC MOVES*, depicts that time in the desert.

T.R.: *So what did you do with the umbilical cords?*

B.H.: I was asked that a lot during that time, and I always replied that I was solely concerned with the process of establishing a new commodity. But then suddenly I had this flash of inspiration: it’s going to be a hammock. It wasn’t until I reflected on it that I realized the significance of this project. In many cultures, people are born and buried in hammocks—they mark transitions, and the placenta is often associated with a tree. In my mind’s eye, I saw a hammock suspended between my synapses. Seven years later, this idea became a reality.

T.R.: *So, the hammock is the final result, but the essence of this work is the process?*

B.H.: Yes, over the years I’ve produced numerous works: books, editions, several films, and “goat pills” (husar.solar/goatpills). The series is titled *DOCUMENTS OF DATA EXCHANGE*. My new film brings these works together for the first time in a



Barbara Husar, Documents of Data Exchange, 2012, Photo: Elvira Häusler



Barbara Husar, Connecting the Cords, Zuckerfabrik, Vienna, 2014, Photos: Geoffrey Wirth, Elmar Bertsch

form; it is the distillation of that.

T.R.: *That’s like the polar opposite of the Western art world. There, it’s all about marketable products that are in line with current trends. With your hammock*

a gallery owner can’t really do much with it. Nor can the project’s long duration be intended to produce art objects for the market. That can’t have been your original intention, can it?

B.H.: My intention was to make art independent of the market. I think it’s reductive to define art primarily by its marketability. I consistently followed what I had to do as an artist. While I was collecting umbilical cords in the desert, others were establishing themselves on the market. I followed my intention. The hammock was never intended as an object for exhibitions or sale, but rather as a “courtesy of Mother Earth.” For me, it’s an instrument, a connecting body with which I’m privileged to work. What matters is the relationship that emerges from it and from which new bodies of work develop. I financed ninety percent of the project myself. It follows a different logic than that of the market.

T.R.: *The inspiration comes from nature and archaic forms of life. There’s currently a trend among artists to connect with natural elements—keyword: Pachamama.*

B.H.: The most intense experience I took away from the desert is the sense of space that expands in the silence. I’ve never slept in a tent. Being bounded only by the sky for weeks on end opens up a new relationship with the earth. The perception of the elements becomes immediate. Thanks to the herd of goats, I was able to meet Bedouin women by the fire or at the watering hole—women who otherwise have hardly any contact with Western culture. In a sense, I hacked my way into their living space through the umbilical cords. It was all very special, which is why I filmed it.

T.R.: *The element of the horizon also appears in your writing. The horizon as a connection between sky and earth.*

B.H.: The horizon is a central point of reference and orientation in the desert and, at the same time, its



boundary. On desert nights, female herders are separated from their goats by nothing more than a few sewn-together flour sacks. Next to a small fire pit, I slept on the sandy ground, just like the goats. In total, I spent over a year of my life in the desert. I was often asked if I wouldn’t like to set out a day or two earlier and drive to the sea, but for me, every day in the silence of the desert was precious. I wanted to be in the primeval rock, to move within it, to sleep in it, and to learn within it what it means to be human between heaven and earth. That is what I was seeking: to be bounded by the horizon—a boundary that opens up. When you don’t enter an enclosed space for days on end, space begins to open up. After a month, everything is vast.

T.R.: *Yes, that’s certainly an enormous contrast and a clash of civilizations.*

B.H.: And it’s precisely this clash that fascinated me. It’s not as if I simply veered toward the archaic. The common thread between these worlds has crystallized over time. In 1997, I was initially traveling through the Egyptian desert and then, together with a friend, bought a bus with which we drove across the U.S. New York left the deepest impression on me during that journey. Amid the tensions of that metropolis, the desert took on a new layer of meaning for me. For the first time, I was able to position myself in this balancing act between the focal point of our present and the archaic. Back in Vienna, I lived in a small room with an air mattress. On the opposite walls hung a map of New York and one of Sinai. In between, I had myself photographed doing split jumps. This gave rise to the work *BRIDGING*. To this day, I see myself as a practice that operates between these states—as a bridge between archaic primal forms and the present.

T.R.: *A little later, you connect the archaic with the Western model of food production. The treatment of cows and their exploitation within our system of maximized production and efficiency. This gave rise to your next major project.*

B.H.: In 2007, shortly after herding goats, I visited the OLMA livestock and agriculture fair in Switzerland. There, cows with highly bred



exhibited and awarded prizes for my udders. This confrontation was very direct for me. I came from a context in which a mother’s milk was considered a precious gift and was treated with humility. Suddenly, I found myself confronted with this maximized form of production logic. To process this contradiction, I began drawing udder comics. In them, I sketched the radical transformation of our time—visible in the way we shape animals into production machines and, in doing so, reveal our relationship to nature. <https://husar.solar/udder-drawings>

During an artist residency in Silvretta (Vorarlberg, Austria), I witnessed a cow giving birth, which further intensified my focus on the theme of cows. I began painting cows on sewn-together seed sacks (inspired by nomadic tent improvisations) and was awarded the Hubert Berchtold Prize for Painting in 2009—<https://husar.solar/my-second-flock>. The cows led me back to my roots, as my many trips to the desert had, after all, also alienated me from my own culture.

Then I received an invitation to the Walserherbst Festival in Vorarlberg, which is considered the steepest festival in the mountains. In 2018, its theme was



Barbara Husar, EUTER Survey, 2024, Sulzberg (A), Photo: Petra Jäger



Barbara Husar, *RITUAL FOR EARTH*, udder survey above the triple watershed at the Lunghin Pass | CH, 2022 Photo: Elmar Bertsch

“Human-Cow.” I had already sketched the idea of an udder as a hot-air balloon back in 2007 and wanted to bring it to life there. The curators responded positively right away. Subsequent research showed, however, that the project was financially unfeasible. Nevertheless, they didn’t give up. And then a dynamic developed that I hadn’t expected. Many people reacted immediately to the idea and offered their support. This ultimately made the project possible.

T.R.: *There were flights over Vienna and Berlin, and the triple watershed in Switzerland. Please tell us a little about it.*

B.H.: There are now a number of *FLYING UDDER elevations*. My working method usually does not follow a predetermined concept but arises from a practice of situating myself and letting things unfold. The common thread crystallizes from the situation itself and connects with moments in which things come together with a certain ease. At the same time, this project has shown me the conditions

its very nature: the radical dependence on the weather. The balloon defies precise control; planning becomes an open-ended process. A pivotal moment was the *RITUAL FOR EARTH* above the triple watershed at the Lunghin Pass. Drawing on research into rituals of mountain pass crossings, I developed my own concept: children from the surrounding Alpine region wrote down their wishes for the future of the Earth on dried leaves from trees, which I entrusted to the wind and the watercourses at the moment of crossing. After seventeen(!) months of waiting for the right conditions, I was able to release these 1,001 leaves precisely at the triple watershed. At a place where the flow branches off into three different seas. The *RITUAL FOR EARTH* became a gesture that connects local action with global circulation. The *FLYING UDDER elevation* was driven by collective intention and was also our second crossing of the Alps. We ended up on a soccer field in Sondrio, Italy.

T.R.: *Was there also an installation in Berlin?*



Barbara Husar, *rooftop-conversation*, 2013

B.H.: Anyone familiar with air traffic control regulations in urban areas can appreciate just how complex such a request becomes in a city like Berlin. It was all the more astonishing that the GOLDEN UDDER ASSOCIATION was granted permission to use the area at Bahnhof Zoo for a *FLYING UDDER elevation*. For the first time, the setup phase itself became the focus. The balloon envelope, half-filled with hot air, became the UTERAL CATHEDRAL. In this pink spherical space,

a performative situation unfolded: a spinning dancer moved with warm beeswax, drawing on Beuys’ concept of *emotional heat fields*. This was followed by a rope-suspension installation above Bahnhof Zoo.

T.R.: *And was there a performance in Vienna on National Day 2020?*

B.H.: Starting with a strictly regulated takeoff permit at Schönbrunn Palace, parallel to the military air show at Heldenplatz, an unexpected change in wind conditions occurred during the flight over Ottakring. The pilot was able to take advantage of a current that carried us in no time at all over Vienna’s historic center. This is low-altitude airspace where air traffic is practically prohibited under normal conditions. Since the planned military air show was canceled due to weather, the *FLYING UDDER* balloon was the only movement in the sky above the city. This situation offered a different perspective on the day—a shift from military presence to a caring force, which is reflected in the social

media posts under the hashtag #euterstatteurofighter, which stood in deliberate contrast to the Austrian Armed Forces’ traditional military parade. Subsequently, the project was fined €22,000 by Austro Control. However, thanks to the intervention of Austria’s First Lady, the penalty was significantly reduced. A circumstance that once again highlighted the tension between artistic practice and institutional frameworks.

T.R.: *The topic in our next issue of fair magazine is “The Art of Survival.” You once spoke of an evolutionary leap. Where do you see possibilities for alternative developments in our society?*

B.H.: Do you mean in relation to the art market, or in general?

T.R.: *Both.*

B.H.: In relation to the art market, I’d say: What’s crucial is a clear inner orientation. Those who work from an inner stance remain capable of acting even during unstable phases, regardless of external dynamics. The question of a possible evolutionary leap has occupied my thoughts for a long time. I’m not exploring the path from egg to udder biologically, but rather on the level of perception. I’m interested in the transition we’re currently in—a transition in which the way we grasp reality is changing, and how I can make this transformation tangible through my art. For me, this has to do with consciousness, not in an abstract sense, but in a practical one: the ability to step outside familiar patterns of perception, recognize new connections, and engage with processes that cannot be fully controlled. In this sense, an evolutionary leap would not be a rupture, but rather an expansion toward a more open form of action.

T.R.: *Do you also see your works—especially the FLYING UDDER elevations—as aligning with*



Barbara Husar, *CARGO & INTERFACE*, EUTER project on Lake Constance, A| D| CH 2026, Photo: Michael Häfner

“social sculpture” by Joseph Beuys?

B.H.: Yes, I see these works as social organisms whose details cannot be fully planned. There are individual parameters such as location, wind, and the pilot, but the essential part emerges from the interaction among the participants. This moment of collaboration forms the core of my art. Every *FLYING UDDER elevation* becomes a performative expedition that opens up new coordinates of our perception.

T.R.: *Does this interaction and working with all parameters—including the visitors—all play an essential role?*

B.H.: Yes. It’s this free, unpredictable interaction between people, forces of nature, and materials. In the process, I increasingly detach myself from the visitors’ expectations. I’m interested in situations where people become an immediate part of my art. A week ago, I landed with the *FLYING UDDER balloon* right in the middle of an intersection in Bregenz. It’s precisely these threshold moments that lead to pure presence. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMHL0YXT1Go>

T.R.: *One could say that pure presence lies in the action, in the performance. That brings us to Marina Abramović—the confrontation between the other and the body or the gaze—that is pure presence.*

B.H.: If you place my work within the field of performance art, I’m perfectly fine with that. I want to break new ground with my art; the genre is secondary. I am present.

T.R.: *What are your next projects?*

B.H.: My current project, *CARGO & INTERFACE*, took place just recently on Lake Constance: three countries, three sculptural protagonists. A temporary constellation was formed from a gold-plated gravel barge, a sextant, and the *FLYING UDDER balloon*. On the golden contact surface, the sextant aligned itself with the North Star. Its analog form of orientation simultaneously pointed to the Earth’s axis of rotation. Rising above it, the *FLYING UDDER* combined orientation with care. <https://husar.solar/cargo-interface-elevation>

My film **NOMADIC MOVES**, shot over the course of fifteen years in the Egyptian desert, is currently making its way to international festivals—a documentary poem about connection and the nomadic way of life. I’m also working on the album *FLUX FULGUR*. Together with an instrument maker, a musician, and a producer, we’re developing flutes made of fulgurite—a mineral formed by lightning—to translate this natural phenomenon into sound. As part of Vienna Art Week in November, two of these instruments will be presented for the first time at the Natural History Museum in Vienna.

And I have been painting a wolf pack for the past five years. Each wolf is created on its own emergency blanket. Together, they will be brought together in the near future to form the first WOLVES’ NIGHT.

Barbara Husar describes her international work in the exchange of information between cultures, fields of knowledge, and artistic media as follows: “I am a part, an intermediate part, and a particle accelerator.”



Barbara Husar, *data sheet, Storyboard*, 2008

QR Code for the film
NOMADIC MOVES
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Password: nomad
Barbara Husar’s
Living Field of Art:

