

ISA OBERLÄNDER



ISA VON BERNUS

In her time Isa Oberländer was a well established actress and voice artist. When Isa married the famous poet and practicing alchemist Alexander von Bernus in 1930 she took on his name and ended her own career to support his.

Her Wikipedia entry slices her long life into three periods: early life, own career and finally wife and muse to Alexander von Bernus. That word: *muse*. It's a sneaky word. Disarmingly vague, it glosses over and simultaneously wipes out the wealth of detail of an entire life. A muse is not a subject position, a muse exists only for and in the gaze of the other. The label comes in the disguise of an honour, but at the end of the day it is just another way to mute a woman.

It is tempting to read Isa's biography that way.

Her voice must have been remarkable. The story goes that she got her first radio job by telling off a stranger on the phone for having dialled the wrong number. That man happened to be one of the founders of Vox-Haus, the very first radio station in Berlin. He hired her on the spot. Henceforth Isa recited poetry both on air and on stage and was soon touring Germany. It was the era of the voice. Radio was a new medium that transmitted not only words and rhetorics, but intonation, rhythm, timbre. Berthold Brecht published his famous radio theory in 1930. Radio, he claimed, is a unidirectional medium that lends itself to indoctrination. And he was right, the radio voice is structured like an address, but so is any voice. The voice presupposes and other, and, by the same token, a position to speak from.

Did Isa give up that position when she stopped speaking in public? It's so easy to retro-actively read a life through the social categories of the present. Is the label 'forgotten talent' any better than the label 'wife', the label 'muse'? Are we not denying her exactly that position by pigeonholing and victimising her?

Isa didn't leave much of an oeuvre to measure her by. In her time radio was mostly a live art, no recordings exist of her recitations. Like so much of female oral culture of the past, her work is lost to the present. That's the beauty and the drama of the voice, it lingers only a moment before it's irretrievably gone.