
Monika Oechsler

Interview with **Monika Oechsler** by **Hannelore Paflik-Huber**

OUR MINDS NEVER STOP WORKING

Hannelore Paflik-Huber: The titles of your works, such as *At the Far and Farthest Point*, prompt questions. Even here you employ a claviature of confusion. Before we see or hear the works, our curiosity is piqued by your subtly formulated legends and we find ourselves already right in the middle of your system of thought. We haven't even had the chance to begin perceiving things in our own way: we're already expecting something from a work that has formulated a question itself. We find this method of working at every point – in the content, the form, and media with which you work. In other words, it's up to the viewers to define and develop their own view of your works. I would call this a relationship based on mutual respect. You don't point your finger at the viewers and try to teach them a lesson. The titles should therefore not be viewed as »legends« that have been placed there later, but are literally headings to the works, after which viewers can add their own questions in parentheses.

What kept you from using images - in other words, videos - for *At the Far and Farthest Point* (2004) and even for the earlier work *Solar Plexus* (2003)? What made you rely on images that we produce in our own heads, images that develop in our minds while we listen to the sounds in your voice installations?

Monika Oechsler: Actually, the multi-screen video installation *Schauspiel* (Play) created in 2002-2003 is what prompted me to create my first voice installation *Solar Plexus*. It's unusual for me to not work with performance elements, or at least to allude to narrative elements. I stuck to a strict concept for *Schauspiel*, one in which the traditional definition of a performance is replaced by the performance elements involved in the semiautomatic process of setting up stage scenery. As a result, I focused solely on a work of film. Later, I wanted to complement that work with another one, one that distorted the general expectation placed on the medium of film, namely, that it be a narrative composed of images and sound - a unity. *Schauspiel* mainly consists of moving pictures that follow a system of intrinsic logic.

Solar Plexus, on the other hand, presents an ambient space in which visitors can assemble fragments of narrating voices themselves. When I showed both works at the Site Gallery, it was important that visitors first enter a space filled with voices before they moved into a room filled mainly with images. At first, I thought the voice installation would just be a preamble to *Schauspiel* - that it would be both a supplement and contrast to it. Now I've discovered that sound, both alone and in conjunction with a specific kind of architectural design, can draw attention to the inner mental processes of the visitors more powerfully. I employed this notion particularly in my new work, whose text fragments taken from films can really speak to people's feelings without visitors even having to see images. One could almost say that the narrator's voice, the content, and the sound of the words create a pattern similar to that of an image. I'm very interested in using this method of abstractly transforming narrative elements in the new voice installations.

HPH: I'd like to come back to the titles. They speak of a playful interaction between transitions, about temporal and spatial distances, about parallel universes, about the far and farthest point. We can only understand your works by

continually moving to a new position in the space, a position predetermined by the architecture itself. It seems to me you'd like to keep our minds in motion with these definitions of space and time.

MO: At the Far and Farthest Point consists of dialogues from particular films that address contemporary issues about technology and the power of the media. The space and sound are designed so that visitors can immerse themselves in an intense atmosphere. Visitors are surrounded by disembodied voices that seem to appear out of nowhere. The architecture of the space helps to keep all external elements at a distance, so that visitors can completely concentrate on what they're hearing in their heads. If one concentrates hard enough, one can experience the near and the far at the same time. It's possible to hear one voice clearly while others only murmur in the background. The brain functions in such a way that we first decide what we want to hear and then concentrate on it. Current brain research has proved that our minds never stop working. Even when we sleep, our minds are at work, developing new ways of thinking and creating new neural connections. That knowledge indirectly inspired me to create this new work.

HPH: We are not confronted with the individual fate of a contemporary person in your works. Instead, you apply the principle of generalization: you present or confront us with groups of people as protagonists. Do you use this method to prevent viewers from identifying with the protagonists?

MO: These works are designed to address group identity; they don't rely on individual experiences. I would like viewers to be able to see themselves theoretically as part of a group, but they remain external observers at the same time. My aim is not that viewers identify with particular protagonists, but that there is a balance in the area inbetween. As a subjective being, a viewer should experience the works as someone affected by them, but still be strong enough to maintain a critical self-confidence.

HPH: You've expressed interest in the architecture of an exhibition institution. A work shown at a new location or arranged in a new space implies a new presentation. In other words, it truly leads to a new way of seeing a particular work. When somebody has viewed one of your works in different contexts, he or she is familiar with the subtle force that emanates from it. You have staged your works in a particular sequence of spaces up to now. You design a course which visitors are to follow. To what extent did your work at the Schauspielhaus in Stuttgart as part of your grant at Schloß Solitude influence your work? Or did working at the theater wake an interest that was already growing inside of you?

MO: I was very surprised that what I originally considered to be limiting turned out to be rewarding. With that I mean creating Schauspiel at the Schauspielhaus. We were not allowed to intervene in any of the plays, and were only permitted to move about the theater in a predetermined way. The time there had a big impact on me, and the way I had already started integrating architectural design and interacting with viewers in my installations was increased. I like it that you chose the word »stage« very much. To a certain extent, I want to stage the visitors themselves in my works. Generally, I am very open to adapting an existing installation to a new space as long as it benefits the work. Like you said, even the slightest changes to a space can add a new dimension to an installation - that in and of itself causes me to experience the work in a new way. When creating new works, I am influenced by the exhibition space from the very beginning. That became very evident when I saw the unique architectural design of the Edith Russ Site for Media Art. From the start I felt challenged to change the space as much as possible with my installation.

HPH: Since we're already talking about the institution of the Schauspielhaus, I'd like to extract the word »Spiel« (>game« or »play«) from it. During a theater performance or an opera, actors act something out for us. If we want, we can accept what has been presented to us and later, after leaving this space of illusions, we can make connections to reality, or not. The fundamental element here is the subjunctive mood. These connections or interfaces are the same as in your installations: the force of the scene, the expressive power of the images, and the momentary mental state of the individual viewers.

MO: A lot of the things in my work have to do with playing games. You can see that in Johari's Window (2000), in which eight women are playing poker. My approach stresses how we all play games to a certain extent in our social lives. It is thus not only about a theatrical performance within a representation of culture. Unspoken rules and guidelines also exist. We know when and how we are supposed to behave. Knowledge about our social roles and behavior and their conventions are what inspired me to address the idea of the Spiel in my earlier works. For instance, most people are familiar with the game of people presenting themselves on stage in reality TV shows. But what I'm more interested in is playing around with the act of observation within the context of artistic installations.

In many ways, multi-screen video installations within art are a strategic manipulation of traditional cinema. There, viewers see and hear things all at once, at a glance. To a certain extent in the new voice installations I try to lure visitors into a more interactive process, not just mentally, but also physically and spatially.

HPH: Let's substitute the ambiguous word »Spiel« with the terms »mimicry and reenactment«. In your 1998 work *High Anxieties*, female pupils attending an elite school imitate a conversation typical of an American form of therapeutic treatment called Empirically Supported Treatment (EST). The protagonist, Ashley, would like to become an actress, but her fellow classmates express their doubts about her decision by saying things that go below the belt. You use the method of duplication which, in this case, sheds light in various ways on the subject of acting. This principle of repeating a question regarding content appears in your work again and again, sometimes more subtly, sometimes more directly.

MO: I wonder if it's a question of duplication, or more a matter of viewing something from two different sides or perspectives. Not necessarily in the sense of a binary opposition, but nonetheless as contrasting views. What I'm essentially interested in is portraying a situation that is not easily understood as well as conveying mental processes without neutralizing them.

HPH: The questions you address concern identity and individuality, and conflict situations and patterns of social behavior often serve as transmitters in the process.

MO: I think that personal identity and individuality can only be expressed through social interaction. Also, our own behavioural patterns stand in relation to other people's, and within specific social contexts. I'd like to make clear that my works only refer to the so-called normal areas of life, that is, those areas with which people can identify. My earlier work in particular addressed situations that had to do with inner psychological conflicts that occur when one's personality, one's desires, and the need for personal authenticity cannot be expressed. Adapting oneself to external, social circumstances requires an inner distance to one's true self. I've been particularly interested in the mental state that evolves from this moment of conflict when one realizes he or she is separate from other people and the outside world. This leads to a break in the theatrical process, something which actors normally try to avoid.

Solar Plexus and *At the Far and Farthest Point* are works that refer to a state of modern day neurosis. I see this as a normal state everybody is confronted with. The external forces of our media-centered society strongly influence the way we think, feel, and express ourselves. That's not a nostalgic view; it's the reality in which we live.

HPH: The complex social environment of our time that everybody is confronted with demands new skills for defining situations and structuring them accordingly. You yourself compare our daily behavior with roles that actors take on and combine this with the wish to make smooth transitions from one role to the next. The threatening element of singular pieces of dialogue involved in particular conversations becomes isolated. You deliberately choose not to use conventional means of film syntax, such as expressivity or symbolic enhancement, to achieve these moments of tension. Your language of images subtly relies on distance. The intensity is enhanced by the grace of the continual loop. This is most evident in *The Chase* from 2000-2001, when the man and woman racing against each other »go around in circles« on the running track. Is an element of hopelessness intrinsic to the race's linear model of time and the starting line?

MO: It's not hopeless. As the title implies, *The Chase* borrows from the psycho-thriller genre. I was primarily interested in inner psychological states, feelings such as power, competition, ambition, and defenselessness, but also stamina and strength - mental, not just physical states. The seemingly continual loop is less a repetition of the same situation than a subtle shift of inner-personal interactions onto various levels. *The Chase* shows a variety of possible interactions and relationships. The sense of being trapped comes more from the actual competitive situation within which the performance takes place. Philosophically speaking, many things repeat themselves in life, in various forms, things which are neither old nor new, but quite simply different.

HPH: You stage psycho-dynamic situations in order to involve viewers in the action. But the interpretation of the situation is left up to the viewers. The recipient is always a part of your works, though the emphasis is placed on his or her role rather than on him or herself as a person. We don't always necessarily identify with the protagonist or the main character, to whom we can always maintain a certain distance; but instead, we often identify with the camera itself, which acts as a partner in dialogue and which we can even substitute with ourselves.

MO: The background to my works is the question of what reality is in contrast to representation and what that means. Since we don't have direct access to reality other than through descriptions and visualisations made in hindsight we first have to construct reality in order to be able to reflect on it. The camera plays a major role, not only in my own works, but also in general. It often makes us believe that we are actually seeing and experiencing reality. I tend to show a certain transparency regarding the complete misrepresentations of truth now so familiar to us from modern media's hyper-realistic style.

HPH: It's become quite popular these days to market people's fears and traumatic experiences in the media. Images play the largest role here, particularly if one recalls the images of recent terrorist attacks. Your language of images cannot in the least be compared to this traumatizing event aesthetic. The dialogues – the spoken word – also play a major role in your works. Sometimes you even let the actors write the dialogues themselves.

MO: In my earlier works, I mainly used improvisation. In other words, there were no scripts. The dialogue for the work *In The Shadow of The Dog* from 1999 came from translations of Finnish newspaper articles. The reports written about that particular event were the real subject of the work, much more so than the actual story. My latest sound works are fragments I have reworked from already existing scripts from, among others things, films and TV dramas. My point of reference here is the construed creation of a representation of reality - an intense mix of what is feasible in the present and what is possible in the future.

HPH: The last, very personal question I'd like to ask is what your role is as a visitor to your completed installation. Like any artist, you are the first viewer of your work. Can you or do you want to slip into the role of a critical or distanced viewer?

MO: I have to admit that it's always an exciting, but also critical moment when I assess my own completed work. Gaining a sense of distance is only possible after a long period of time. The best thing that can happen is when one work motivates the creation of another.

The Interview was conducted in German. Translation: Hannelore Paflik-Huber

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