

"Please don't let me be misunderstood" narrative excess and loss of meaning.

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"[...] and do you hear it now, and now, the way they knock inside the walls? [...] Don't you hear it; I hear it all day long. All the time. [...]"  
Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck* (Paralimpomena)

Admittedly, things are not easy for architects. The form that they give to spaces is supposed to allow for and facilitate a multitude of uses. Yet how should the architect know how the space will be used in the future, especially if the range of modes of use is supposed to be open? Although the spectrum of usage in exhibition spaces is not as unlimited as for example that of a stage, which by definition should be able to represent a wide variety of places and situations, but with the success of contemporary installation art - specifically in media art – one tries as far as possible to come close to the open-ended use of the space of the stage. Meanwhile Michael Friedman's accusation of theatricality in minimal art has changed into an affirmative stance. We are surrounded by acts of 'staging'. The newer museum spaces are trying to accommodate a stage-like usage and appearance of their exhibition spaces. As I said, things are not easy for architects. The same is true for artists, though. They have to work with the given specifications of an exhibition space. And of course it is not always possible for architects to predict the intentions of artistic utilization. Otherwise architects would have to be clairvoyants, and what is 'new' again and again in art would not really be new.

That the stage is also an acoustic space is noticeable already with the Greek Amphitheatre. In contrast to its funnel-like sound amplification, film studios are stages of cinematic production, geared towards noise isolation. No external sound should penetrate the cinematic illusion. Quite often the soundtrack conducts the action of the images without giving away its function. Sound in conventional narrative cinema is other than natural, yet it serves first and foremost to create the visual appearance of naturalness.

How - seemingly external or from within the walls emanating - sound fragments distort our psychical perception of a space of colour and light into a perception, is the theme of Monika Oechsler's installation *At the Far and Farthest Point* (2004). The black box, the 'no-light' projection space of video installation and the white cube of the classic modern exhibition space are recurrent themes and a vanishing point of artistic self-reflection. In one respect they form the conditions, but also the complicated heritage of a broken tradition, from which multi-various aesthetic and critical points are referenced.

*At The Far and Farthest Point* is a sound environment that Monika Oechsler has designed for the upper gallery of the Edith Ruß Site for Media Art, which breaks through its clearly defined architecture. Yet this work also seeks to break through our structures of perception and thus simulate a kind of psychotic shift. At the same time, the installation itself is highly architectonic, although the main elements consist of sound, colour and light. A space that is closed to the outside and to the inside, which can be entered through a door and is set up behind a white separating wall. All that can be perceived from the outside is a strange murmur of voices. The set-up hardly appears inviting. One enters through a white Formica door with a black plastic door handle into a sharp-cornered interior space full of nooks and crannies. The intensity of the interior's colours is disturbing, not only at first glance.

Two colours, red and blue dominate the installation. The colours are coordinated to result in maximum tension between them. This tension between optical proximity and distance, between cold and warmth, between very short and very long light waves – at nearly the same degree of brightness – can make the field of vision oscillate, produce visual vibrations. This is not a pulsation, but the inability of the apparatus of perception to adapt to both stimulations at once and alternate smoothly between them. This over-stimulation of perception is augmented by occasional flashes of light through the gauze-covered ceiling, which further dissect the visual space. The strobe lights achieve this effect through carefully measured retraction. Instead of covering the field of vision with a radiant glare, they settle on the edge of already over-stimulated perception, throwing it completely off balance with a slight irritation that is not itself

immediately noticeable. The irritated gaze wanders upward, finally discovering the flashing lights behind the gauze, where they are not really hidden, but silently perform their subversive service. The blinding aura of flashing lights reverses our perception into a 'negative' vision. Two other non-colours join this tense alternation between red and blue, as different in their brightness as it is possible to be. The entrance area of the shattered outline is painted entirely black on the inside, and the translucent gauze covering on the ceiling is white. *"Open the door! Open the door!"* Under the white fabric sky, the black entrance area opens up into two dead ends that taper off into the primary colours of red and blue like fragments of an irregular and broken star.

In this space of colour and light with its sporadically flashing lights, we are surrounded by a muted babble of voices. *"Death is not the end."* Male and female voices that overlap. *"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."* They all speak at once, but their diction is articulated and they sound accordingly insistent. *"They use our language. They use our ideas."* The sentences are addressed to no one in particular, and yet they are as obtrusive as they can be. *"Time... to go on to the next stage."* We are so familiar with this structure of address from the media that we no longer perceive it as such, similar to the way one no longer hears department store music. *"What are you missing? - Shopping!"* Specifically where we are allegedly most spoken to as recipients, it is hardest for us to feel spoken to at all, and naturally this is especially the case in the half-worlds of media, advertising and consumerism. Like cliché and reality, these two levels of being spoken to and not feeling addressed pass one another by, even though they overlap in large sections. One results more from the negative form of the other. Similar to the thoughts and phrases that we unintentionally pick up, these expressions swarm around in the space. They are not even really original. *"Television is reality."* There is no cheap or even somehow sophisticated media critique hidden behind this. *"Please turn your attention to the television before you."* There has been more than enough of that in the last fifteen years. *"Reality is less than television."*

In trying to recognize the prefabricated stories behind the voices, we are uncertain of having heard this or that or having thought it ourselves. Sometimes the conversations of other visitors intermingle with the tapestry of sound, but this does not disrupt the impression of the installation – on the contrary. *"I would like to be in the show, because I want to become famous."* Like the measure of the light flashes, the volume of the voices is retracted to exactly the right degree. *"Why should they pick me? - Because I am a team player."* Almost tritely formulaic and commonplace as it is, that which we seek to understand in the cited situations eludes us. *"Are you ready?"*

The babble of voices simulates the presence of statements and thoughts that we cannot control. Not 'I think', but 'it thinks'. There is thinking inside us, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said in allusion to Lichtenberg. Thoughts come and go as they please, not as we please. *"We must shut down his higher brain functions!"* According to Wittgenstein, the logical grammar of the expression 'it thinks' is closer to the form of 'it flashes' (lightening). In our consciousness we tend to watch this activity take place inside us more than we cause it. *"Don't be afraid."* The activity of these mental and verbal processes is what first constitutes the subject, which therefore cannot make it their author before it is constituted. This does not mean, though, that we cannot have any control at all over our thinking and speaking. *"I NEVER, NEVER, NEVER lose!"* But – according to one of Freud's most famous dictums – the ego is indeed no longer master in its own house. However, the subject in Oechsler's sound installation is not psychologised in this sense. Neither fastidiousness nor moralizing admonishment confronts us here. Between the cognitive psychological irritations and the rubbish of media language, there is a strange echo effect that causes the visitor to involuntarily seek self-assurance. *"Are you ready? Yes! ARE YOU READY? YES!"*

The overwhelming effect of the colours, in contrast to the inflated set pieces of language, creates a dislocation in both dimensions – the acoustic dimension and the spatial-visual dimension – that seems not to be due to our incapacity for coherent integration. *"Laxness ruins us."* Somehow this will all fit together, so it seems at least. As though in a "psychosis", an illness due to a disturbance of mental functions, we experience that it is not us, but rather our environment that is strange and thus altered. *"Weakness seduces us."* We only react to the changed environment. In psychosis, misinterpretations of reality caused by dementia, hallucination and severe disfunction of memory and affect, lead to seemingly unmotivated behavioural changes. *"We have two healthy embryos for you to choose from. You want the best starting conditions for your child ... (no) illnesses, ... like myopia, premature balding, alcoholism ...."*

The casting of young people who want to become famous in a television show, the advantages of genetically engineered children, the motivational speech of an executive training his team to be competitive, all these set pieces are from existing film scripts. Yet the continuously speaking sentences have the effect of a distorted mirror, because of the implicitly ideological shadows they cast on our inner life. They are not so much statements as verbal 'ready-mades', and in retrospect their isolation and montage makes everyday life and its media garb look like a farce. One does not invent verbal blotches like this, you have to stumble across them, collect them or have them thrust upon you. It is the promises and explanations provided by the snatches of conversations that first produce the loss of the authenticity that they claim to provide. Their counter-movement and dialectic could roughly be described with an inversion reminiscent of Adorno. "*Soon everyone will have a special name.*" In this installation there is actually nothing that is unclear - except ourselves. "*Charly, just simply Charly.*"

As it is generally the case with art that it is supposed to enable the comprehension of forces and forms that influence the individual recipient from the outside – through the work – here too there is a strange correspondence to the psychological level. In art, the taking in and tracing that is involved in reception enables new – primarily aesthetic – experiences. "*There's a storm brewing here.*" Yet psychosis is also expressed in a similar kind of now distorted comprehension, in which the world suddenly seems different, which can be due, depending on the particular type of psychosis, to exogenous or endogenous causes. "*Simply to learn more about myself.*" Unlike viewing art, though, we cannot simply seek out or leave this plane of experience willingly or voluntarily. "*I know not everything is right with me. But soon everything will be completely ... right ... again.*" Similar to mental disturbance, in this dimension art is something incomprehensible. In art, however, we have the possibility of a reflexive experience of this non-understanding. "*Take a deep breath!*" In contrast, psychosis does not usually lead to an insight into the mental disorder and distortedness of its own state. This recognition would already be a sign of healing. Instead, everything appears thoroughly present and graphic, like the colour and light quality of *At The Far and Farthest Point* in its spatial extravagance.

The most obvious style correspondence that this space evinces is found perhaps in Constructivism and its futuristic or cubist forms. However, Russian Constructivism – as the formal patron – had clear ideas of utopia of a historical or social nature. The purpose of this vision was to destroy the present and to change society. However, the worlds of sense and imagination as fictionalized in the voices with their parallel optical over-stimulation only celebrate themselves in the form of an alleged "utopian fulfillment". Thus they become literally non-places or un-places. Unlike the utopia that still held a promise for the future, this unfulfilled place removes itself, along with the person who seeks to occupy it, from the world. In its purportedly present form, the coherency of meaning disintegrates along with sensory perception. This does not mean, though, that the high aesthetic quality of this irritation, precisely balanced in terms of cognitive psychology, loses its charm; on the contrary.

Another work by Monika Oechsler demonstrates the collision with everyday intelligibility just as exemplarily as *At the Far and Farthest Point*, but from an outside perspective. Here too, everything is before us, but intelligibility does not emerge unless we are able to add meaning to it. In the documentary-style, single-channel video work *In the Shadow of the Dog* from 1999, a series of visual chapters tells of the shooting of several men in a Finnish gun club, but without sinking into the depths of sensationalism. During a session of gun practice, a female member of the club shot several male members. The more we learn about the facts and circumstances of the case through statements from various witnesses, however, the less comprehensible the cruel deed appears. She had become increasingly isolated and had separated from her boyfriend, or he had left her. Yet it is not the desperation and hatred of a tormented individual or a humiliated woman that emerges here. There is no mental or psychological disturbance that mitigates the guilt. What would be considered a lack or insufficiency of perspective in a documentary film forms the unique quality of this video work. In the stories of the witnesses the deed increasingly eludes us, although nothing is hidden or kept secret, nor is anything glorified. All those questioned compassionately and insistently attempt to get to the bottom of the incident. The landscape and partly intimate mood even result in a strange kind of familiarity that has an eerie and odd effect in light of the unresolved questions. Why do people even join a gun club? And can one really ever be content and assured because one does not have a great ambition to tamper with firearms on a regular basis? These kinds of questions are explored neither in this work nor in the events it recounts.

In the single-channel video work *Strip* (1997), from two years earlier, we are similarly confounded by the obviousness of events, which is a special quality here again. These things happen, day-by-day. Sometimes even children are already members of a gun club, including girls. In this video we see under-aged girls professionally taking pistols apart. Naturally these images have a social and gender-specific charge. Yet they cannot be reduced to that, even if conventional clichés would have it that way: "Actually boys like to play with pistols much more. But girls can do it just as well. Etc." In *Strip*, a haunting video sequence of four minutes and forty seconds, girls' hands take seemingly over-sized pistols apart and reassemble them. Their adroitness is astonishing, and it is not that the pistols are larger than normal; just the hands are still very young. With what is virtually a material analysis, there is no need to ask whether the guns are real. Toys look different. What makes the task even more difficult imbues it with a "pedagogical purpose", is the fact that the girls are blindfolded – although this does not really become visible. They sit in front of a blackboard and at a table, each with a weapon in front of her. Every detail of the gun is to be memorized. Looking is not allowed. The upper half of their faces is cut off by the screen's edge, creating a degree of anonymity, which draws our attention all the more to their manual dexterity rather than being distracted by facial expressions.

A dissolve shows another girl going through the same routine. This kind of montage annotates moments of repetition and intensifies our perception of the flow of time.

The girls' dexterity is amazing and is not at all hampered by the fact that parts of the sequence play backwards, strangely distorting the dynamic of the movements. Yet even the process of dismantling and subsequently reassembling already implies this reversibility. In fact the whole sequence plays backwards and in slow motion. Thus, disassembly 'reverses into assembly and vice versus. Despite the fascinating choreography of the montaged movements of hands the process depicted in the video does not offer a single moment of playfulness, which would make it more bearable. Unlike the mechanical process, the thematic focus of the work is formally not reversible. These girls aged eight to fourteen are practicing and learning the mechanics and composition of these handguns "blind" and with all due seriousness. Concentration and discipline are evident in the course of movements, but also an astonishing choreography. Answers to this process, to its "Why?" and to the question of the age of these very young girls, are something we have to come up with ourselves.

The dismantling of firearms, the literal 'mechanical analysis' of a weapon, as revealed in *Strip* does not readily supply an explanation at the level of meaning. Perhaps we must first learn to do the same thing as the girls' hands and analyse what these works give us to see and understand accordingly. Take it apart and put it back together, again and again until we can do it with closed eyes. Yet perhaps then we might also start to ask other questions, different from the truly childish question of "Why?" For in this analysis we will not be able to limit ourselves solely to the aesthetic dimensions of the work. The peculiar advantage of art seems to be found in this: not seeking, like the architects mentioned earlier, to know beforehand and predetermine what can be done with and inside exhibition spaces and with the art works within them, but rather to return this question to the recipient, to ourselves. To return it so to speak to the 'open stage of interpretation' on which according to a famous quote by Roland Barthes, the artist is nothing but a guest or in the wider sense, a voice amongst a multitude of voices. In the spirit of this we too should try to make something of this, just like artists do with pre-defined exhibition spaces.

Note: The quotations scattered, not entirely unrelated, throughout the text are taken from Monika Oechsler's sound/voice installation *At the Far and Farthest Point* (2004).

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