

Monika Oechsler *High Anxieties (Brennende Sorgen) 1998*

Hannelore Paflik-Huber

“In a room the exact size of which we cannot determine precisely, five adolescent girls sit on chairs around a conference table. There would seem to be no other items of furniture. The only partly visible objects are a black picture and a door. The furnishing is kept to a minimum. Concentration is focused entirely on the people in the room.

At the head of the table sits the main character of the piece, the only person whom the dialog identifies by name: Ashley. The other four girls aged somewhere between twelve to fourteen sit on black chairs. They bombard Ashley with a barrage of humbling utterances. Sometimes as questions which judge the personality of the ‘victim’ in a devastating manner, sometimes as assertions intended to erode Ashley’s self-confidence. All the comments contain reproaches, and do not respect any borders.

The camera shows us the respective speaker. In three projections the group is presented to us from various angles. The person under attack is alternately visible on one of the projection screens. Monika Oechsler selects the different positions in order to discourage us from identifying with the victim. Ashley seldom responds to the accusations, and when she does her voice sounds meek, her words barely comprehensible. As in the other video pieces Monika Oechsler has produced to date, the topic of her meticulously choreographed works is human relationships. Ashley wants to become an actress; this can be inferred from the dialogs, and each reference to this allows interaction between the constructed world and real conflicts. The rhetoric the five girls deliver is perfect, and indicates that they are all well-educated. Further, the well-considered gestures underscore the impression that we are dealing with elite pupils rather than actors. Neither the girls’ bearing (restricted to their upper bodies) nor their gestures reveals the slightest hint of insecurity, or anything amateurish.

A characteristic, stylistic instrument Oechsler uses is to plunge head-long into the sequence of actions, without a dramaturgically fixed point or prologue. The exit is equally abrupt, in the midst of the action, the end unexpected. Monika Oechsler focuses her video camera direct on the subjects, so that the use of the work ‘high’ in the title not only refers to the incredibly harsh accusations and Ashley’s responses to them, but also to the heightened intensity produced by the close-ups.

While the accusations go ‘below the belt’, the view we are offered nevertheless remains above the table, concentrates on the upper bodies and faces. One wonders why the girls do not sit opposite each to her in a circle, a setting familiar in therapeutic encounter groups. In this situation, a tale occupies the space between the people. In formal terms, this wooden surface acts as a link between the comments and is akin to a network, which does not, though, exist clearly in terms of subject, since none of the accusers responds directly to the accusations of the others. Yet the mutual provocations do result in greater intensity. Depending on the camera’s standpoint the table top is a surface shown in a larger or smaller section, on which there are no props. It serves as a platform for what is said. The black backrests of the chairs used by the comparison to Ashley. Visually speaking, her white backrest does not serve her as a support in the sense of providing protection.

The main focus is on the facial gestures and the gesticulating hands. For most of the time, Ashley’s hands are hidden below the table, which further restricts her physical scope for action. Leaving aside the language, Monika Oechsler provides numerous visual references to a clear hierarchy amongst the girls at the table. Ashley holds her head slightly to one side, giving rise to a childish, naive impression. Her lips are narrow, her eyes wide open, she has an extremely uncertain, slightly absent, far away look, in order to establish a physical impression of distance. Sometimes an insecure smile flits across her face. The behaviour of her four interlocutors is the exact opposite, not betraying any sign of uncertainty, but self-confident, and obviously totally convinced of what they are saying. Generally, the

camera presents Monika Oechsler as an additional participant in the discussion. Consequently, the observer is anchored in the work itself, adopts a position which allows them, indeed obliges them to become directly involved in events.

But in the final analysis, what kind of a discussion are we witnessing? Are the girls members of a school class or a clique? Are we observing a particularly tough test to which Ashley's friends are submitting her? Or is this some kind of group meeting aimed at analysing the psyche of each person in turn or of strengthening it through negation? Where is this room located which looks like a conference room? In a therapy centre or a drama school? Is the camera the counsellor or the school director?

None of these questions are resolved. They are left as empty spaces, which results in a heightening of the observer's awareness and curiosity. The title "High Anxieties" contains a double intensification of what is described. Firstly, through the adjective 'high', and secondly through the use of the noun's plural form. And one can also ask, who does the state of anxiety refer to? Ashley, the observer or the accusers?

At school, in cliques, or at work the principle of one person being excluded is created through the close connection that exists between the others. Is the message here perhaps: isolation is preferable to adaptation? Independence, even if it means loss of identity? One knows how easily situations of exclusion evolve, whether from the view of the victim or the perpetrator. Monika Oechsler reveals the extent to which moderate tones of conversation and modes of behaviour disappear, or are negated. Since girls favour verbal attacks over physical ones, the sequence of 3 minutes and 14 seconds contains 'only' one physical attack, when one of the girls pulls Ashley's hair band from her head.

In her videos, Monika Oechsler creates several sources of irritation for the viewer which remain as such and act as a visual instrument for the production of concentration and emotional participation. The psychological turns of phrase, which do not correspond to this age group constitute an ambivalent aspect. The girls selected the form of their 'game' and their words themselves. They were not specified by the artist, or, as might seem credible by a psychologist. The way this is handled illustrates the subtle means Oechsler employs to insert irritations in a relatively short scene. Such aspects manifestly classify the work as artistic even though the artist concedes: "The works "High Anxieties and "High Achievers", which I produced with a group of school girls, evolved during the production into something like a group therapy session, but that was not my intention. I have no desire to be a psychoanalyst."¹

It appears as if the four girls had overcome the problems of puberty, accepted the role woman plays in society, or rather one suspects they are simply programmed to do so. Ashley, thought same age as they are, still stands at the threshold between girlhood and womanhood. And at this unfinished stage of development the girls' devastating comments or negating questions are all the more painful. The accusers are representatives of another age group and another world of experience. This is why in a paradoxical manner their humiliations contain a general validity. Who is characterised here? The protagonists have varying appearances, their origin is international. But while we are told the name of the victim, the others remain anonymous; we experience them only as a group not as individuals.

The dialogues often commence with 'You', which further underscores their interrogatory nature. The negation of the 'You' implicitly also contains the idea of 'We' as an opposing position, as the other, self-confidence per se. However, this constellation is not only restricted to membership of the group. Visually, in the majority of sequences the polarity is reduced to a group of two, as the camera places in confrontational pose Ashley and the person who humiliates her. Why did Monika Oechsler employ three projections? In reality, the observer is only a passive participant, but thanks to the ingenious choreography, he is called upon to also follow the interlocutors physically. A large part of the interaction involves the observer, whose perceptual process is defined like a script by Monika Oechsler.

This is also the case when Ashley says with what is actually a great deal of self-confidence: "I know what I want to be." and responds to the assertion: "You've got no talents." with: "I have." This is a clear reference to the fact that Ashley is searching for her own identity. But her responses reveal nothing about how strong her inner determination is, nor to what extent she can break free from the image the others project onto her. And ultimately the observer cannot form a picture of her which corresponds to reality via the descriptions of the others, even if Ashley is the only one individual we perceive as a person. Monika Oechsler herself says: "My true fascination lies with state of being that cannot be defined in the social realm and through language. I made the work to draw attention to the aspect of inter-personal competition which defines and constitutes our cultural identity within the social fabric." 2 (Monika Oechsler)

1) Monika Oechsler quoted from an interview with Iris Kadel: "gamecode", munitionsfabrik 06,2001, pp.18/19

2) Kadel, p. 18

Translation: Jeremy Gaines

Published in the exhibition catalogue: The Inner State, Das Innere Befinden , Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz Liechtenstein,2001