

At the Far and Farthest Point

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Today's media world aims at getting under your skin and into your private mental space. Film and television go right for the psyche and their special reality aims to mix in with your own thoughts. Whether it be squirming while watching an autopsy on both fictive crime television or television that performs reenactments of real crime and autopsies, such shows play on the viewer's ability to put themselves into someone else's identity and feel pain, empathy or fear. Everywhere you turn, voices – and 'voice has come to be almost synonymous with 'identity - are competing for the attention of your psyche, trying to provoke a stimulus – be it to hold you during a commercial break or motivate you to over-achieve at the task at hand.

Monika Oechsler turns up the volume on this pressure and brings a multitude of voices to the fore, to where the visitor of her installation *At the far and Farthest Point* is curious enough to listen to each voice, but no overwhelmed to the point of wanting to leave.

Upon entering *At the Far and Farthest Point* you are submerged in a voice installation that reflects a situation or state of being rather than a story. A room of colors and angles with a slightly graded floor blocks the white cube that is the Edith Russ Site for Media Art. This creates varying interior spaces, which are loosely demarcated by an illuminated red, light blue or deep black.

Actually, Oechsler designed two spaces for the viewer, The first is the tactile space of colored walls that be entered through a door. This is echoed in a second space, which Oechsler designs as equally distorted: mental space. What the brain looks like is common knowledge. It has been scientifically dissected and diagrammed. Defining the shape of mental space is where art steps in. Within the real, tangible space of the physical installation Monika Oechsler opens the gate to the abstract space of where thoughts are shaped.

Voices can be heard as you pick up bits of dialogue or short monologues. A disembodied voice may say, "open the door, but then one realizes that this is actually part of a disjuncted speech. A second line can be filtered out and heard more clearly by moving deeper into the installation. "I'm sorry, I can't do that," is the answer. But this is as far as any semblance of a narrative goes.

As you become acclimated to the environment the voices become more distinguishable – similar to entering a cinema where the eyes have to adjust to the light, the ears go through the same experience here. Yet Oechsler never allows you any real focus. Voices may fall into the background but they are always present, bidding for ones attention. In addition, every once in a while a flash of white light disrupts your concentration – not that true concentration is possible.

By moving about the space from one architectural and color zone to the next, you locate areas where the voices seem to relate to each other. In one black spot a character tells of the advantages of genetically engineered children, " I have taken the liberty of eradicating any potentially prejudicial conditions." A blue area has a cast of candidates from *My Little Eye*, a film about a big brother type webcam show gone snuff film. In the red, you listen in on a CEO executing his motivational training by shouting questions his staff answers in chorus, "what are we going to do? – rock them! When are we going to do it? – Every day! How are we going to do it? – Every way!" Not unrelated to a military drill, this type of motivation can be found in the workplace as well as in the leisure time spent on sports teams. Anger, motivation, pressure, doubt but also ambition, sympathy and seduction can all be found in the voices of *At the Far and Farthest Point*.

It reaches a point where your inner voice can hardly be separated from the others. When standing in the center of the space, the words "Television is reality" are heard, and you may wonder, "Did I just hear that or has it just popped into my head?" The words haunt the space and find their way into your psyche much in the way that certain lines from a film or a quote might pop into your head when you least expect it.

The superimposition and blending of voices act like folds in perception. This is a strategy one also finds in Oechsler's video installations. In the mid to late-90s video often addressed the circumscription of events and Oechsler pinned this down perfectly in her multi-channel video works. One would see two or three video projections, slightly off in their timing and each showing the same scene from a different perspective. This was employed by

some artists to show disorientation and tell a story from different points of view in a break from conventional narrative, but Oechsler used the technique's potential to intensify an already confusing and critical situation making the work less about narrative than about breaking down a moment so that it can only be described, not told. In *High Anxieties* (1998), for instance a group of pubescent little beasts gang up on a single other girl, ostracizing her in a game of psychological terrorization that is a real-life, school nightmare. Accusations and looks not only fly across the adult-sized conference table they sit at, but also across the screens, repeated intermittently, confused and intensified by the separation and layering of language and images. Oechsler has modified this technique for her voice installation to depict the mêlée of voices ruminating in your head. In so doing, she has put her finger on a bit of modern day, everyday psychosis.

The result of reaching the breaking point is told of in Oechsler's single-channel video *In the Shadow of the Dog* (1999), featured in the Edith Russ Site's mini-cinema – space that traditionally implies narrative. This is the true story of a woman who entered her Helsinki gun club and shot several men. Each sequence in the video is based on excerpts from newspapers, which Oechsler had Finnish actors recite in English in both the quiet landscape of Lapland as well as some sad and lonely locations. The quotations from eyewitnesses and family go into the reasons behind the attack – the killer's psychological profiles and the events leading up to the attack. But a certain distance is kept by the obvious action and the frustrating inability to determine exactly what made the pot boil over. The woman who ran amok has remained silent until today.

A hint at this psychosis can also be found in Oechsler's video *Strip* (1997), in which girls between eight and fourteen years of age strip and reassemble handguns while blindfolded. Their actions are mechanical, automatic, second nature. The fact that the picture is cut off at the shoulders makes their actions seem even colder.

The bar of stimuli in a media-saturated world has been raised so high that it takes an extra pressure to provoke an emotion or a reaction at all. In the single-channel video *For the Very First time* (1999) three women do find stimulation by breathing deeply into the petals of brightly blooming tulips. They suck the last waft of fragrance from the flowers and immerse themselves in the pleasure of their own senses. This visual perfume results in a mania of sensual satisfaction through complete submission to external stimulation. Is this the problem?

In society's search for the reasons behind its ills and the solutions to its problems of detachment, extreme pleasure-seeking, and self-centered psychosis, one often hears that the media is to blame, children are generally not raised right or that violence is too well-accepted. Oechsler does not provide any easy answers to the difficult questions in her work, but instead identifies and intensifies the stimuli.

Published in the exhibition catalogue: *Monika Oechsler At The Far and Farthest Point*, 05
Edith Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg, Germany: 2004