

Screening the Performative between Art and Culture

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"In concentrated form and not entirely without a touch of irony, Monika Oechsler presents a ritual of exclusion taken to extremes in her work "High Anxieties". In a psycho-terror drama played out by five young actresses, a girl who does not accord with the group's ideal is literally trashed. The group's vehement articulation is as frightening as is the silent defensive posture of the victim, who, it seem, wants to be an actress - the contemporary version of the princess. She is accused of pretending to be angelic and innocent while in reality only thinking of the effect she can create, in fact being manipulative. She is nothing, false, vain and stupid: *"You've got no talents, you haven't got any talents, actually... it's so stupid and pathetic, you're not going to be an actress, because you can't act.... you could never ever make it as anything.... What are you going to do with your life?... You are so empty, you are not even a person... nobody is listening to you, nobody is even listening to you now.... look how stupid and immature you look.... you are blushing.... and now? What are you going to do?...."*, and so on. The group heaps accusations and reproaches on the girl, the proverbial scapegoat. The compulsion to match up to a role model, a cultural ideal that is set up and imagined as a "self-contained and free "personality, and the rigid insistence with which compliance is demanded find pitiless and violent expression here. That this drama of compulsion is particularly the case for female role models is made all the more clear as the actresses, themselves on the threshold to womanhood, display all the seriousness of puberty and its childish ruthlessness when their external and internal images, their projections, overlay each other in their furious attacks. This mixture of aggression and rejection transferred to a shared negative projection of the role model cannot be presented in a static image, but requires performance. The multiplication of the action on more than one video screen, requiring the viewer to constantly look from one to the other, corresponds to the way the attackers outnumber their victim. This is an exemplary illustration of the inner heterogeneity of cultures and the projective transmission of role constraints - including those connected with gender - in societies.

It is characteristic that these girls "only" speak. But their speech is action; it is a form of attack, accusation and revelation, all in all an exclusion ritual. Their statements are not so much descriptions of facts as actions, namely attributions. For what, exactly, are facts in the field of character traits?

Finally, the aspect of action through speech directs attention to a discourse in which the concept of the performative experienced its first, if brief, career. The founder of "Ordinary Language Philosophy," John L. Austin, introduced the two related terms of constative versus performative speech. Constative sentences state facts, and thus can be true or false. Performative sentences "act" by saying what they are doing, and thus can succeed or fail. Austin's examples are christening a ship, marrying, apologising, making a promise and so on. In all these situations, certain, often ritualised sentences play an important part as "speech acts". Apologising consists of saying one is sorry and asking for forgiveness. Regardless of whether one means this seriously or not, the action can only be carried out by articulating the appropriate words. There need be no underlying intention, although it might help. In the course of his lectures Austin lets his own distinction between constative and performative speech collapse and replaces it with new concepts. The reason for this lies in the mutual interpenetration of the two areas of constative and performative in our language games and the lack of a grammatical criterion for clearly distinguishing them. Indeed, to a certain extent a statement is also an act, and speech acts are generally embedded in a vast field of references between meanings and applications.

The ambivalence between statement, accusation, insult, injury, rejection and so on not only appear in a confusing way in Oechsler's work, but are also performed - not least of all in the

particular form or violence through which these words are capable of “doing” something. Austin calls the force with which the verbal utterances perform acts “performative force.” One example of this is the binding force of a promise, obligating the person to really do what he/she has promised. Oechsler’s actresses make use of a certain “performative violence” in order to draw quite different cultural and social demarcations. Here, social exclusions and inclusions correspond to an image of the self and of the world that always seems to be prefabricated in all its delimitation. As a consequence, we must conform, must (cor-) respond to this image, and it is this correspondence that gives it its power. The naturalisation of these demarcations, exclusions and inclusions is what makes our so-called facts so “hard,” and this hardness is something we help to produce, socially and culturally.”

Video cult/ures , Museum of Contemporary Art, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany

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