
Systems of Inversion

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Manifesting itself through performative interventions and video installations, Anna Witt's practice addresses the repetition of stereotypical constructs and the cultural *habitus*¹ of the individuals and their visual representation as determined by family values, customary politics, and prevailing communication media of Western society. This approach is exemplified by the way in which her video installation *Radical Thinking* (2009) addresses the word "radical." It portrays anonymous mall shoppers whom the artist asked to stage a "radical thought" in front of the camera. Instead of uttering the thought, they are silent and internalize it – inciting viewers to wonder what the shoppers refuse to pronounce: what is truly radical about their private thought? Later, each thought scrolls down the monitor in the form of a text, slowly building up an impromptu manifesto: "There are no longer any personal decisions, and nobody is responsible;" "Work is abolished;" "National borders are newly defined at all times, the world is divided in new ways;" "Everybody can withdraw cash without any limits;" "Trends are abolished." How is radicality revealed? Radical in opposition to what? Should changes in socio-political policy promote themselves by the need for radicality? Witt spins such terms around, implying the ways in which they remain relative to time and context, always a reflection of desire or nostalgia. It is impossible to forget

how, until the mid 2000s, the term "radical" was frequently used (and abused) to describe practices belonging to the ambivalent genre of "political art," and then revived as a model of "efficacious" socially-engaged art.

If in this work the speech act is reduced to a bare minimum, forcing us to imagine radicalism in its manifold and arbitrary forms, then language takes front stage in *The Eyewitness* (2011). Voice-off comments impose themselves over nine images that the artist bought from Reuters news agency that reference issues discussed in news around of the world at that time.² These were blown-up and glued onto movable walls. Image banks such as Reuters sell pictures that are capable of serving as multi-purpose illustrations for journalistic articles that deal with similar subject matter. Witt deploys them in the same way – as empty backdrops for nameless events – aesthetic decisions mirrored by the camera work, which moves sideways like a scanner to examine (rather than the entire context) the subjective reactions these pictures engender in a group of children aged 8-10, whom she has asked to interpret them. Normally, this kind of iconography doesn't affect children to same extent that it does adults, who have a feel for how to construe visual information extrapolated from daily media. The camera shows only fragments of the pictures, forcing viewers to focus on the development of the comments. A mix of fantastical associations that incorporate semi-truths, misunderstood facts, and acquired knowledge

emerges from the children's observations that reflect the overheard opinions of their family members or school educators. For the artist, these are emblematic of subject-formation in relation to contemporary identity politics.

On initial reading, Witt's practice ascribes to the genre of socio-political public art that has its roots in the community-based and activist approaches mapped out during the 1980s and 1990s in Northern Europe and America. Contexts and situations appear to be the favored artistic tools, effortlessly molded into videos that disperse the site-specific connotation of origin. Witt's methodology frequently uses the interview format within an atypical style of *cinema-verité*, which was in vogue during much activist art produced in the 1990s. When related to issues surrounding documentarism and globalizing media, her approach manifests a certain level of abstraction, perhaps conscious of the unanswered predicaments related to the fundamental issues of power and emancipation acknowledged by Brian Holmes³, the most influential theoretician of the movement. Her strategies seem to align themselves with the performance-based precepts of some of the post-conceptual artists like, for instance, Andrea Fraser. Witt adopts systems of reversal that induce a turnaround process in consideration of whatever nature ideas might have: private, socio-economic, cinematic, etc. This can be perceived in the video *Push* (2006) in which she asked anonymous passersby on Venice Beach, Los Angeles, to push her down

on the hood of a parked car. In return, she performed the same action on them. This role exchange becomes a mnemonic call from the recurrent affair of daily arrests on the streets of the Californian metropolis to a classic motif of Hollywood action movies, but also has a counter-effect: the occupation of power, supremacy, repression, according to a repositioning that occurs at alternating times.

Ambivalently sitting between fictional re-enactment and documentary staging, Witt's approach to role-playing (or role-reversal) provokes a distortion of attitudes. In her multi-channel video installation *Roles* (2008) actors of African and Middle-Eastern background act out a white far-right Skinhead while describing how their work and personal experiences depend on – to borrow a definition from Frantz Fanon – the inscription of race on the skin; in other words the constitutive function of "vision" as a site of power-knowledge. Whether actors or unidentified passersby, all are co-opted by the artist to stage simple *mises-en-scène* of events, commemorative monuments, memories, and so forth. In the installation *Empower Me* (2007), Witt convinces casual passersby to perform the role of seized hostages who, once brought into the exhibition space, are given the opportunity to define the demands for their release. From among these, a couple of teenage girls speak without politically-correct filters about what they want in relation to the improvement of their immediate surroundings, demanding "1 villa, 2 mil. [...] laws from the age of 14."

The artist plays the part of their captor, pronouncing such requests. In doing so, she not only hijacks in view of instigating a sense of urgency for spectators to take a more active stance in political life, but she also pirates the familiarity of video messages in TV news that were conceived by terrorist groups such as *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) during the 1970s and, most recently, in the kidnappings of foreign hostages in Iraq.

Witt successfully reinterprets the infinite horizon of 21st century modernist tools – annotations, variations, reconstructions, etc. – by putting equal emphasis on copy and original, re-stagings and re-contextualizations in which documentation instates an autonomous process of actualisation. For artworks always depend on audiences who, through the process of interpretation, become chroniclers directly involved in the constitution of the work: all iconography is replaced with its inscription into medial reception.

1 Within the social sciences Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to indicate a condition based on the determinisms that operate through the relation of immediate complicity between positions and dispositions, schemes of perception and appreciation, classification and hierarchisation, interest and practice produced in those very fields. Reflexivity offers the only possible liberation from this kind of symbolic domination.

2 For instance, a demonstration against Guantanamo Bay detention camp, a group portrait of politicians, an image of Angela Merkel shouting, etc.

3 Brian Holmes, "Recapturing Subversion," in: *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*, Eindhoven 2009, <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/05/18/recapturing-subversion/> (last accessed on July 23, 2013).