

Anna Witt

The Familiar – the Foreign – the Other from the Periphery

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For more than ten years, Anna Witt has been pursuing an artistic practice in which she employs various sociological methods in order to investigate interpersonal relations, the interplay of social power, and participatory processes. In actions, interventions, performances, installations and similar formats directed towards interaction, she realises experimental set-ups that give her protagonists space to articulate themselves, to find a way to individual opinions and attitudes, and to express them. Depending on the topic in question, the people she works with may be passers-by addressed purely by chance as well as groups or individuals carefully selected in the run-up to a project. Witt's works demonstrate a special interest in how political attitudes and decisions are revealed in social action and patterns of behaviour towards other people; decisions that evade the filter of the conscience due to individual or collective factors – e.g. spontaneous actions or those that follow traditional social patterns.

One such factor is disclosed by the work *Rap vom Rand* (2009) – the not uncommon, blind automatism of the sciences when categorising and judging their study subjects according to given criteria. In this context, the social sciences in particular are in danger of tripping over the problematic power gap between the researcher and the subject of his or her research. In the video *Rap vom Rand*, which was made in the context of an exhibition about migration in Munich, Witt has a number of ethnologists who had carried out scientific research on the ghetto discourse, gangster rap and the youths involved, most of whom have a migrant background, take part in a direct verbal rap battle against the rappers they had studied.¹ The focus is on the ethnologists in a way usually reserved for the individuals and groups researched by them; they are subject to analysis and judgement by the viewers. In the video the young scientists, whose clothing and attitudes differ very little spectively, which the video simultaneously provides, it appears that some of the rappers take up and restage the attributes linked to this peripheral existence, in order to capitalise on them. Both the ethnologists and the rappers employ specific stereotypes, through which they define their position as well as the position of others in society. In the video, this is also reflected in their staging in urban space: Witt met the performers individually in their everyday lives and recorded the shots in front of backdrops that each one had chosen

from the rappers, perform significant statements from their research, attempting to break open the uniformity of scientific language by means of rhyme and added rhythms. The rappers respond using their own language to the statements that are being made about them.

The significant aspect here is the emerging discrepancy between self-image and image in the eyes of others. Although we cannot deny that all the ethnologists in the video have a certain affinity with the subject of their research, they offer generalising judgements and thus make serious omissions with respect to the rappers' individuality and differences in living situations. Sometimes the statements appear quite comprehensible and fitting; sometimes they merely repeat known stereotypes about the rappers as a so-called 'peripheral group'. For example, the description by one ethnologist of "hip-hop as a marginalised group's cultural form of expression", the "counterpart to the socially integrated" was denied immediately by some rappers: "Rap doesn't mean that Sigggi will break your ribs. I am the nice one that likes to speak with lips", or "Hip-Hop isn't subaltern [...] you can be hip-hop no matter where you come from and how much money you have." Although some statements included fitting aspects, it emerges that scientific discourse often operates with categorisations that fail to do justice to the diversity and ambivalence of reality.

Making the statement "The Familiar – the Foreign – the Other from the Periphery" in another sequence of the rap battle, the same ethnologist examines the problem associated with scientific and other general categorisations: according to what criteria can rappers or hip-hoppers be defined plausibly as the others, as alien, peripheral groups of society, and what is the effect of this categorisation? Often, it is only these implicit political attributes attached to specific artificial criteria that determine where the periphery and the centre of society are located, who belongs in favour of historical locations, the rappers present themselves in the context of prefabricated urban housing estates. The picture of the city that emerges in this way reflects, on a subliminal level, social identity in each case – an identity that develops from the interplay of attributions by others and self-definition.

¹ Cf. Jörg van den Berg, Wolfgang Fetz (eds.), *Anna Witt. Werke 2002–2011*, Berlin 2011, pp. 65–69.