

Subject, Participation and Formal Spheres

A conversation between Andreas Schlaegel and Anna Witt

Andreas Schlaegel*: *When art deals with social circumstances the term ‘relational aesthetics’ is often heard. A term coined from a book with the same title by Nicolas Bourriaud.¹ Was it important for your work?*

Anna Witt: It is obvious that Bourriaud describes questions that characterize my way of working. But my sources are different. Even before I ever read the book, I was occupied with many of the themes and authors he mentions, like Walter Benjamin or Deleuze/Guattari, who discuss the art of the public or political themes of everyday media. In the beginning of my studies, it was Warhol’s thesis of “15 minutes of fame” that interested me, as well as the television talk shows I grew up with. In regards to interactivity, Bourriaud mentions the “user friendly area” which interested me very little when I made “Geld zu finden” [To find money] (2003/8, p. 100). I also want to distance myself from the “service-art” that had its hype in the 1990s. For I don’t see a subversive intention nor an exciting social relationship of reaction. What interested me more was the idea of a counter culture, or rather the marginalization of the political left and a shifting of politics towards the aesthetical. “Park Fiction”², a public planning process for a park in Hamburg, mostly designed by artists, was one of the first important art projects I’ve dealt with for a longer period of time. In “Park Fiction” Bourriaud’s ideas come to fruition in many regards. That made me think about participation, political self empowerment and authorship.

In what way?

Most of Bourriaud’s examples refer to the relationships between artwork, artist and viewer which are generated on a formal level. However, for me the individual situation of the confrontation in a series of confrontations is more relevant. What I also found exciting are the participants’ relationships. For example Bourriaud describes Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ “Candy spills”³, where the visitor is forced to contemplate his own and the others’ behaviour. He speaks about a ‘production of a collective subjectivity’. What interests me is how to produce participatory processes, and how to overcome the artificiality of such situations.

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¹ Nicolas Bourriaud: *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon (les presses du réel), 2002

² Park Fiction is an artistic and social project that started in the mid 1990s in Hamburg. Intention was and still is, to establish a public park in St. Pauli under the conditions of a public planning process. The project’s complexity and sustainability make it a seminal project of the so-called participatory art. See also the comprehensive website: www.parkfiction.org

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, see footnote (1), p. 49 ff

Doesn't this also depend on the attitude of the viewer?

Normally, the visitor is open and acts like an art consumer. But for me – it was from the beginning – important to attach the functional capacity of art, – that, were brought more and more into a social context since the 1990s, – where the relationships between art and society mix.

And today?

My current works examine the relationship of the individual and social groups. My focus often lies on the individuals with their personal, concrete action; let's say as a representation of a collective condition. In the work "Radikal Denken" [Radical Thinking] (2009, p. 76) a single person can be watched while thinking, then the individual directly confronts the collective. Nevertheless, the personal content of the thoughts only shows as part of the whole collective text. And in the video "Domesticated" (2009, p. 70) the theme is to take into stock, on a social level, where the speaker compares the difference between 'us' and 'the others' from a self-analyzing conversation.

Like 'I' and 'You'?

Today, I think individualism and social positioning is more important than it was ten years ago. When I make this a subject of my works, I try to question the participatorial definition of the individual and the collective. And of course my own approach shall flow into the formulation of questions of the work. Like in "Missing Counterparts" (2008, p. 94) for the Manifesta 7⁴, which followed the concept of the exhibition, to include the regional context and the local identities. But that was also exactly what I questioned. The real political contexts became themes, even though the conversing protagonists were representatives of another place. In this way a framework of real fragments developed. That way, the collective condition remained as a question in the air.

And how does it look?

Individuality and the yearning for self-fulfillment has a lot to do with our zeitgeist. That is given as a social model. We operate in personality oriented definitions and formal

spheres and they play a big role in my praxis as well. I see my work as a model of a political approach because in the process of the production, I'm looking for a balance of power between the relationships of my authorship and that of the protagonists. I always try to think about this. As well as how the relationship triangle between viewer, protagonist and me, as author, works and what it says. The constitutive look is something that occupies me a lot. It plays a role and is not picked out enough as a central theme. What interests me is the subjective starting-point and the recapturing of the experimental character.

Are you sometimes puzzled to find people who are willing to be filmed?

Especially when I work with younger people, I see that they don't question the purpose or use of the videos. There is no shyness, no question: where does this go? Maybe that is because they use it in their daily lives and they are used to exhibiting themselves in the media all the time, on Facebook or YouTube. It's part of being in public, that something is being filmed.

What you publish about yourself is a form of currency. People don't communicate verbally any more, they exchange pictures and information.

Even though YouTube and co. are huge companies, the exchange also has something like a potlatch, the ritualized exchange actions of North American indigenous tribes Marcel Mauss described. His book "The Gift"⁵ and the expressed excitement for the social idea has occupied me for a long time.

I asked myself how do I justify that in my work? I always ask other people for something. But my videos are also based on giving and taking. On the one hand, as an artist I give something to society, but on the other hand I depend on it. Concerning the themes as well as the cooperation with the production. Maybe the people taking part in my videos don't profit directly, but my work is also a stage that gives them the opportunity to make an individual statement. That increases the motivation of the protagonists to take part. Many people use it, obviously there is a need for it.

⁴ Manifesta 7, the European Biennial for Contemporary Art that took place from July to November 2008 in Southern Tyrol and Trentino - Alto Adige. Anna Witts work "Missing Counterparts" was exhibited in Rovereto, one of the four exhibition locations.

⁵ Marcel Mauss: *An essay on the gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch) 1990

Can you give an example?

Yes, for example in "Battle Rap" (2009, p. 64). I arranged a discussion between ethnologists and rappers, with the goal to drag them out of their normal context and have them confront each other.

The rappers were conscious of their representation in the media and they had an idea that they could be instrumentalized. A few years ago when Gangsta Rap was a big topic, they had some bad experiences with private television and felt that they were presented in a distorted way. The rappers strictly verified how I presented them. In the beginning they also asked to participate in and have an influence on the editing. Later, they saw that I argued on their behalf.

When I finally showed the work in Munich, I was asked why the rappers weren't there, why they weren't interested in being part of an exhibition. That really didn't interest them very much. But the question shows a kind of art megalomania, thinking that it must be a great thing to see oneself in an exhibition.

When you yourself are in the image and the protagonists interacts with you, the confrontation looks like a direct exchange, like the ritualized contacts in "Kontakte" [Contacts] (2005, p. 174).

There the relationship is one to one, the protagonists become responsible. I lure them into a boundary and ask them to cross more or less over the borderline. This is a delicate moment. Then they have to find a new boundary that is socially somewhere else. It helps me because my physical stature alone is not a threat. Just the opposite, more often I experience a certain helpfulness which helps.

Like when you go to muscle beach and ask someone if they are able to destroy the gun? There your physical height indirectly plays a role as well. There your body indirectly becomes the subject.

Because I'm not strong enough to do it myself? That's true. But in the first place it also shows that it's not about the stage setting, but the act itself, the actual trial. ("Kraft" [Strength], 2011, p. 30)

I did this work in regard to the macho charged atmosphere in the region of the former Vorarlberg Military Museum in Martinsturm. It was full of phallic guns, canons, and weapons. The objection of the heroic seemed appropriate at a place like that, even though it seemed very absurd.

Yes, absurd like the camouflage in the Austrian army, you put forward as a topic in the video with the wonderful title "Auch wenn die Kost rein österreichisch ist, gibt sich die Küchenbelegschaft international" [Even though the food is pure Austrian, the people in the kitchen are themselves international] (2008, S. 84).

This is formally different, more like a video essay. My strategy here was to quote about intergration from a report by the army. Then I arranged for members of the army to willingly qualify their own statements through over affirmation. A statement like "We are all equal" is written quickl in a brochure. However, in a personal conversation it's hastily put into place. In the case of integration as a theme , there probably isn't a patent for the solution, that was especially interesting. The misunderstanding was important, in addition to containing the humour and not drift into predictable political correctness. I almost don't appear in the video, but my questioning was certainly very important. I was able to steer the conversations with my subversive strategy of interviewing.

Do you sometimes see the danger instrumentalizing people for your own purposes?

When I screen them publicly, I have a responsibility for them. I ask them to make a statement or to do things they aren't used to doing. I think the frame of acting also works for their protection because they overtake a role in which they act, which they individually form. It's naturally a narrow path on which I tread. An instance already occured where I stopped an ongoing project. When I realized that I wouldn't do the people justice.

Your artistic approach is committed to a classic critical approach: you quote existing texts, prove their validity in praxis, and document it. That connects this work with "Import-Export Life Conditions" (2005/6, p. 152), that refers, among other things, to a work of Santiago Sierra and its presentation in the catalogue?⁶

Yes, in addition both works pick out my own interest in producing them. It's not that I already have a clearly defined artistic statement from the very beginning. It's essential for me to have a reason to find something out. Like in the case of "Import-Export", where it was interesting for me to experience myself, and how it feels to be treated in a certain way. I'm interested in the conclusions that I draw through my actions as well as through a perspective on life. Which is to say, now I'm 24 or 25 and realize an artistic concept. If I don't laser away the line that was tattooed on my back for "Import-Export", I've got to live with it for the rest of my life.

The work also seems to formulate a critique of Sierra's approach and besides that points to a certain thoughtlessness or a certain cynism of artistic statements.

It wasn't my main intention to criticize Sierra's concept and confront it with my own approach. I found his concept even suspenseful and had an interest in taking it up. Although my way of working is very different, what interests me most is the circuitry. The interactions and associations between the existing relationships of power. Of course, there's a hierarchy but there's also an exchange.

Another work that continues the association of levels in hierarchies is "Team West" (2006, p. 138). For this work, I first accompanied the security team of the Viennese West Station. Then I founded my own security team which tried to copy their strategies: to understand how the rethinking works, how uniforms and body language look when one undertakes a certain function in a certain system.

Like people who are loitering (drunks, homeless or young people), who are not travellers or customers at the station, who don't have a function and who disturb and question the local neo liberal capitalist system solely through their presence. How these people are automatically defined as evil. In opposition to them, another level of identity emerged with the uniform.

What happened - what I couldn't foresee - was that the security guards themselves are living in a certain dependency. Such as when even the loiterers became self-empowered who then in turn controlled others. That is a hierarchy of controlling instances which become independent in and of itself. This is what interested me most, that such complex interweavings and entanglements can be shown this way. In the run-up to when it was about a relative simple concept of emulation of a security team, it was unpredictable.

Doesn't it also subliminally deal with eroticism? For instance, "Kontakte" reminded me of VALIE EXPORT and her "TAPP und TASTKINO" [Tap and Touch Cinema]⁷

You are not alone in thinking that. The Viennese newspaper "Der Standard" also made a reference to it and the review of the exhibition was titled "new Tap and Touch Cinema". I think this is O.K. A lot of people need this association to categorize what I am doing, even though I would distance myself from it. I see the similarity more on the level of being pro active, of going out onto the street and talking to people. In contrast, I then involve people on another level than Valie Export. In my work there's something I would call "equality of treatment". Sexuality is peripheral. Like in the security check in "Push" (2006, p. 132) or in "Kontakte" where I pick out as a central theme the power factor of touching, in spite of the fact that I am a woman. Repetition is another factor that's important. The main subject isn't the female body but the political body. This can be easily misunderstood.

When you talk about a similarity in the frame of the action, would you call yourself a performance artist?

No, I don't see myself as a performance artist in the "classic sense", like VALIE EXPORT or Marina Abramović. Even though there are often certain performative aspects of my works. The historical performances of the 1960s and 70s are undeniably inspiring. I mean, I see another level of emotion and pathos that I can't and don't want to show. Nudity, even as political concept, was never a theme in my work. Perhaps only in the early work "Giving Birth" in which I'm naked. Actually, this has a strictly conceptual background.

What role has the political body in "Die Geburt" [The Birth] (2003, p. 186)? The work was shown as a part of the last Berlin Biennale, in spite of the fact that it was hidden in the corner.⁸

The connection to the theme of the Biennale was obvious: "What's waiting outside". It's a relatively early work from the year 2003. At this particular moment on a philosophical level I dealt with the term revolution. The work developed out of this. I was interested in the actual moment of revolution, when an existing system for order tilts, and in the

⁷ VALIE EXPORT realized "TAPP und TASTKINO" as performance on November 13th 1968 in Munich at the Stachus. Peter Weibel was on the megaphone. The action was filmed and in this manner the "Tapp- and Tast-film" was produced. For further information see: www.valieexport.at

⁸ 6th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, was *draußen wartet / what is waiting out there*. Published by Kathrin Rhomberg, DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne 2010

vacuum that comes afterwards. I read that birth could be the most revolutionary act in human life, more than any other social change. I found this exciting because birth is a completely passive act: you're born. Then, relatively spontaneous, I played my birth with my mother, but wanted to play the active part.

How did it feel?

It was a fairly intimate affair. As a young student I was in a phase of my life when I tried to cut the umbilical cord from my mother and my parent's home. In fact, we crossed an intimate boundary, especially concerning the touching of a naked body: the mother's body is almost taboo. If I'd been a man it would've been even more pronounced.

This is immediately perceptible for the spectator as well. Looking at this "border-line-crossing" of this specific intimacy, he has to behave in a genuine way, right?

The work is often seen very ambivalently. There are people who can barely tolerate it, they almost have to look away. Maybe because they feel ashamed about the intimacy. However, for my mother and I it wasn't that embarrassing. She wasn't even very puzzled about it.

Is this way of asking oneself typical for your early works?

In my early works it was important for me to define my own point of view. For "Jung und unabhängig" [Young and independent] (2003, p. 192) I wrote a text that started with: "I am young and independent. I have friends, a partner who loves me, no financial problems. I have a future..." I was promoting myself like an advertisement. My interest was in the media and self image, and what one should embody: dynamics, easiness, self-confidence. I tried to convey it convincingly, sovereignly, and it enumerated a lot of positive characteristics. They all fit me, but it didn't work, I made mistakes all the time. Maybe because one doesn't necessarily believe everything about oneself.

How do you present the political body in the new works?

"Gleitzeit" [Flexitime] (2010, p. 36) is one of the newer works that discusses the new flexible models of work time. Not only on a theoretical level: the pose with the raised

worker's fist is common and historically tied to the struggle for the regulation of labor. I was occupied with the modern forms of deregulation of labor. Also because it concerns myself: the self-imposed time factor that even crosses the border into self-exploitation and beyond. In society, work is seen as something absolutely positive. Especially in creative businesses, it's seen as uncool to work little. To be fully stretched to the maximum and not having any time will correspondingly be judged positively. This is what I connected with the pose that is a simple, clear parameter for what you can achieve physically.

With which restrictions did you confront the protagonists in "Gleitzeit"?

As director I set the scene that people can fill. At first, one thinks that the time factor isn't that important and can barely imagine how elementary it can be. I tell the protagonists when the recording starts, but not when it ends. In between they are left alone. It's a bit mean, the people don't have any experience with what's appropriate. It was exciting to see how differently people dealt with it. Some people identified with the project and immediately developed the ambition to stay in front of the camera until a muscle cramped. The actors knew that the three video channels established a group. As a result, the opportunities of solidarity or competition were offered. In addition to this, it was also about individual conditioning. For those people who stood there for twenty minutes with erected fists, the fist slowly started to sink downward. In the video you can see the physical effort, a pithy element.

And a metaphor ...

I like physical effort a lot and it appears more often in my work. Physical strength itself is an interesting theme, an absolutely historically romantic associated term: that you use physical power to achieve something at all. During a performance in Hungary I held a banner. It was exactly big enough that I could hold it with an outstretched arm. On the banner I had written by hand in Hungarian: "As a child I dreamt about living in a communist country. I thought democracy wouldn't give me the chance of regimented training." ("Disziplin" [Discipline], 2007, p. 120) The text is autobiographical. I really thought communism was about that because I once saw a documentary about Chinese athletes who were maltreated. As a gymnast, I had

always had a good understanding of my own body. My little sports club was a kindergarten compared to the Chinese drilling.

In Hungary, a lot of people found the banner completely absurd and started discussions with me, they tried to point out that I had the wrong information. Some were pleased that somebody reminded them of something positive about the time of communism

Different sports do influence the perception of physicality to a great extent. I think of top athletes and Matthew Barney. Or of Klara Liden who was also a gymnast. She often uses immense physical strength in her works. This aspect of presenting the body has a lot to do with culture and concretely with education.

That was especially important for "Im Training" [In Training] (2010, p. 42). Gymnastics by itself doesn't have a negative connotation. Cheerleading on the other hand is often reduced to a cliché. I don't think that my video refutes this cliché but it does try to depict the athletic level. There are two video channels, one only shows the acrobatic exercises. That was my personal access as well. The cheerleaders attach importance to their physical performance of the act and it's shown as such. The actual shift happens on the text level. Namely, the cheerleaders formulated political statements and wrote their own texts. Naturally, it was important for them to speak for themselves. That works theoretically but the athletic level was as important.

With the pictures in these works you make your research transparent. That helps the spectator to recognize the shifting of levels. Because it is important that the cheerleaders in your video are not the political activists whose YouTube video you show on the accompanying monitor.

The confrontation with the supposed original was very important for me on the aesthetic level. In Vienna there was this group which had already made the political decision to conduct cheerleading as an end in itself. Also men could join the group which doesn't happen that often. Probably because of this, the group was so open when I asked them.

How many restrictions did you give the group? How much could the group members develop on their own?

I didn't give them a theme for their texts. But I met them and showed them examples of 'radical cheerleading' from the USA. I explained to them that this is a form feminists have acquired to speak about themes which they consider important. The statements by the Viennese cheerleading group against populism and the current education policy could have been formed by the American cheerleaders as well.

In art, like in society, political activism has a certain image: they're the ones with the banners and the dreadlocks. The aesthetic of the political seems completely assured. I wanted to oppose that, what my video already demonstrates. Especially because they look different and move differently. It's also about maintaining control over your own body.