

## **Prêt-à-porter on the conveyor belt**

Interview: In her work *The System: prêt-à-porter* the artist Barbara Holub, since 2006 president of the Viennese Secession, addresses the shifts in economic structures and social form of appearance using the humanitarian and global circumstances of the Humana relief organization.

Manuela Hötzl (MH): In your project “the system: pret-à-porter” you use the example of Humana to examine the “second-hand industry”. What kind of systems did you encounter?

Barbara Holub (BH): The starting point of the project was a yard sale in Los Angeles. This is a structure of a parallel economy that is very typical of Los Angeles. The population uses the indifferent zone of the front yard that is not bordered by a fence – and where one never really knows whether it is public or private – to organize yard flea markets. As public space in L.A. is not space where people linger in the European sense these yard sales also have the aspect of offering an informal possibility of communication. The fact that yard sales flourish is not solely based on economic necessity but also on the need for unplanned society.

The next step in the cycle between garbage and reuse\* is then recycling, whereby the boundary between “second hand” and recycling is a slight one.

MH: Humana also illustrates aspects of the economy, charity, and business management in a global context. At the same time in urban societies second-hand clothing is also a business, as it allows people to individualise their clothing. What role does fashion play in this context?

BH: The increasing globalisation of the fashion chains, which means that you encounter the same fashions and the same clothes brands in all cities, increases the interest in different, individual items of clothing. And so second-hand clothes offer an alternative to expensive designer one-off pieces, above all in the Western world and for creatively oriented sectors of the population. Humana conducts a very precise analysis of the respective fashion trends so that they can sort their clothes in the most effective way possible and distribute them to the various target groups. For example in the retro-shop you can find the currently “fashionable” items that designers copy with a slight “twist”. Humana advertises that they have the originals of such designs. On the other hand in the case of clothing exported to Africa care is taken that the skirts are, at a minimum, knee-length (regardless of European fashion trends) and there is an awareness that T-shirts with imprints are greatly prized – as identity bearers of our culture that convey a feeling of “belonging”. The question is therefore, what does one orient oneself on? Which culture is currently the most desirable, and thus dictates the codes?

MH: The fact that Humana has moved its sorting system to Slovakia, Bulgaria and Turkey Europe’s economy reflects the present state of neoliberal economy.

BH: Irrespective of the fact whether this applies concretely to Humana or not, it seems that today in order to remain competitive even businesses that are humanitarian in their orientation must subject themselves to neo-liberal circumstances of production. The result is the absurd situation that social aspects are delegated or must be “outsourced” in part.

MH: The intention is that this project should later follow the journey taken by the “clothing”. For example in Africa it is planned to “Africanise” the European clothing with a local designer. What role does “fashion” and clothing play in regional identity – and what differences, in your opinion, exist between Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Africa?

BH: To “Africanise” would be a further example of a model in which one culture determines what is currently “hot”. However, I don’t wish to think in categories of conquest but to place self-confidence in

the foreground. I am simply curious about the look of items of clothing that take our pieces sorted in Europe as their raw material to transport the current culture and aesthetics of certain African cultures – regardless of what is currently sought after by the dominant Western world as “African design”.

We can, in principle, observe a trend towards fashionable mainstream items of clothing that have a short fashion life, that can be bought cheaply as used clothing and that, on the other hand, meet the wish of certain population groups for distinctive clothing. The different fashion worlds that exist parallel are thus reflected in the second-hand world. As the next step in my project I want to visit Humana’s newly built sorting plants in Slovakia and Bulgaria – to examine, among other things, whether there really still are regional differences in Europe in regard to fashion and identity.

MH: As an artist you work with installations, actions etc. What does material in the conservative sense mean for you? In the case of Humana is “fashion” the material?

BH: In my project “the system: pret-à-porter”, as in all my projects, the material is communication. The question of fashion, that is to say the added value that elevates an item of clothing above a merely functional object is for me only the communicator that allows entry into the system from a concrete side or allows one to question this system. This process of “refinement” and with it the creation of an added value is, naturally, an aspect that also exists in the case of all artistic works.

MH: As a member of the group “transparadiso” you work a great deal with “urban interventions” and direct urbanism and wish to change the distanced method of approach used by town planners. What role do aesthetics, design or fashion play here?

BH: In the transparadiso projects, too, design is the transport medium for content. The objects that we develop are intended to open up different fields of action that allow social interaction (communication) beyond the familiar patterns, to arrive at new programmes in the context of an expanded notion of urbanism. This is based ultimately on a combination of programmed urban planning. The aesthetic aspect always aims at linking everyday life and the discourse, and is therefore highly significant for the formulation of our projects.

MH: You generally choose different operational areas for your artistic interventions. Now you are using a “fixed” location, the Vienna Secession. Is there a contradiction here?

BH: I regard my current task in the Secession as a large project in which the board and I have the opportunity to aim at achieving an effect that is naturally far wider reaching than what can be achieved by an individual art project. The Secession as an institution is here only the starting point or the culmination of positions that in the best case should exert an influence not only in the context of art but also socially. As an organisation of artists we wish to re-establish the Secession as a place of production at the centre of the public realm.

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\* See also: Michael Thompson, „Mülltheorie. Über die Schaffung und Vernichtung von Werten“, Klartext-Verlag, Essen 2003: Thompson deals exhaustively with the question how a second-hand object can have the innate potential of achieving a permanent value (e.g. by becoming an antique) or, where its value is transient, of becoming garbage.