

**Interview with Barbara Holub by Maia Damianovic**

*The interview was conducted in Nov. 2001 on the occasion of Barbara Holub's project "Between Roles/ Zwischenrollen" in "Enactment of the Self", Steirischer Herbst, Graz, 2002 (curated by Maia Damianovic) and published in Barbara Holub's Musterbuch "Ideal Living", Triton Verlag, 2003.*

**Maia Damianovic:** *On my way to your studio I passed a heavily guarded building that aroused my curiosity...*

**Barbara Holub:** It's a synagogue. Did you notice the sign outside that says, "Visitors are kindly requested not to congregate before the synagogue"? I was tempted to make a work about it. It struck me as absurd to put such a sign up—one that, being written in German rather than Hebrew, seems almost to hope to attract unwanted attention—when the place is surrounded by armed police.

**MD:** *Signs and barriers represent the demarcation of boundaries. In the case of the synagogue, these boundaries are popular, cultural, and religious. We are currently witnessing an increase in that type of "them and us" mentality; divisions between East and West, between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, are being fought out on a worldwide scale. Your work consistently addresses the nature of these boundaries, which, on both a personal level and on a broader social scale, incite notions of prejudice and distrust, and can ultimately lead to the most absurd forms of hatred.*

**BH:** The will of Mohamed Ata, one of the men involved in the World Trade Center attack, is a perfect example of this. In it he outlined the arrangements for his funeral in minute detail: only devout male Muslims should wash his dead body; they should wear surgical gloves when washing his private parts; and no women should be allowed near his grave, as he considered them "unclean." Ironically, however, this carefully described ritual could never be carried out: there was no body left on which to perform it. Ata gave his life for the rewards he hoped he would receive in some afterlife, yet he completely neglected the fact that his body wouldn't even exist.

**MD:** *The appalling way in which the Taliban treat women—preventing them from receiving an education, prohibiting their appearance in public unless dressed in full burka and accompanied by a male member of their family—is the product of this kind of ideological absolutism.*

**BH:** As I understand it, women under Taliban rule simply don't exist. I recently saw a documentary about a clandestine women's movement in Afghanistan, which visited an underground beauty salon and a teacher who secretly gave lessons to girls. The film also documented the execution of a woman in a former football stadium, which struck me as a disturbingly symbolic. When asked how he could consider using a football stadium in this way, the Afghani foreign minister calmly replied that it was the only location large enough to seat all those who wanted to observe the proceedings. If the UN gave the Taliban enough money to build another site for executions, he argued, they would not have to use the stadium. These attitudes are so very far removed from our own that it is impossible to imagine what it is like to grow up in such a different cultural environment.

**MD:** *Perhaps multiculturalism is simply a utopian dream. If we are unable to avoid erecting barriers between others and ourselves, maybe we should bring attention to our differences instead and, in acknowledging them, develop ethical consciousness and a respect for "otherness."*

**BH:** I believe that one of our generation's greatest problems is that we don't admit to harboring prejudices. We try to ignore the fact that we come from a particular background and therefore necessarily find it difficult to understand the backgrounds of others. Our ethical consciousness develops in response to very minor, everyday events: how we deal with our friends or neighbors, for instance. In the courtyard where my studio is located there was an old, run down building, which lent a rather pleasing romantic note to the setting. The owner of the block, however, decided to renovate the building and rented it out to a yuppie graphic advertising company. Although they were tenants like us, they walked in as though everything belonged to them. They said they wanted to make the courtyard "beautiful." I had to ask them what they meant, because to me the courtyard seemed beautiful the way it was: our concepts of beauty were clearly quite diverse. For them, a beautiful garden was a carefully ordered green space, all neatly fenced off.

**MD:** *This experience filtered down into your work *Between Roles*, 2000, where you placed two people on opposite sides of a fence and filmed their conversations. Where did your inspiration for the piece come from?*

**„zwischen rollen“, 2000  
video, 32 minutes**

**The artist staged a garden situation with grass, a fence and garden chairs in her studio set next to a „real“ fence in the courtyard. People were invited to participate in conversations „across the fence“, which were video taped.**

**BH:** I had been following the development of the Housing Estate Pilotenweg (Arch. Herzog, de Meuron, Krischanitz und Steidle). It was especially interesting to see it when all the houses were built, but the gardens were still empty plots waiting for each new owner to impose something of their own personality. To me, these gardens were symbolic of the emancipation of the owners from the constraints of the architect's vision. I had always thought it was notable that the "artist's impression" of what a finished estate might look like seldom showed people actually using the buildings or amenities in a functional way. When I later returned to Pilotenweg, I was quite amazed by what varied gardens people had created in their little plots, even though many were furnished with identical Home Depot-style products. It was a wonderful example of the scope for individuality within the standardized. Inspired by this, I created an idyllic bucolic setting, with real green turf and two loungers on either side of a brown picket fence, for *Between Roles*. I also offered all the participants the possibility of using an alternative "real" outdoor setting in the courtyard in front of the studio.

**MD:** *How did the presence of a video camera and the "staged" quality of the setting in *Between Roles* affect the participants' conversations?*

**BH:** I think most of the participants just pretended that the camera wasn't there and that they were simply talking amongst friends. For some, however, it was harder to relax because they were being filmed in conversation with someone they had always wanted to meet. I tried to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible, allowing them to develop their own relationship to the setup. It was interesting how, for some, being filmed seemed like an opportunity to express their own opinions, even though the physical setting of the piece was not conducive to such an approach. I was surprised that the issue of trying to cross the fence was raised in only one conversation, although I had not made it difficult to pass or cross the fence. The pair in question had established a good rapport and subsequently felt increasingly uncomfortable about being separated. Without making a big show of it, one of them said simply, "I want to sit with you on your side."

**MD:** *Quite a few recent social theories, emphasized the importance of the group, of the collective and collectivity, yet this approach also tends to lead to the formation of ideologies. The set up of *Between Roles*, on the other hand, encourages a more intimate form of dialogue, one in which personal prejudices are revealed and explored. In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva draws our attention to the difference between the general authority of discourse and the personal intimacy of dialogue.*

**BH:** In my pieces I try to locate the difference between the personal, intimate and public discursive dimension. I try to explore both the private and public arenas by setting my works in a non-institutional context and then transporting them into the institutional. I like to create environments in which, although I have set predetermined parameters, anything might happen. As a result, unplanned, at times subversive, elements emerge in my work. On the other hand, of course, an analytical, theoretical academic foundation is also important. I feel I have succeeded with a piece when it can be read on both levels.

**Annex b, 1999/2000, video (unedited)**

**Two sites were investigated: the housing estate „Fontana“ in Oberwaltersdorf about 30 km south of Vienna, and the veterinarian border control station at Nickelsdorf. Fontana is an example of a European „gated community“ and utilizes various architectural styles, ranging from ancient Roman villas to American bungalows. All the buildings are arranged around a lake with golf course. The artist conducted a series of interviews with the estate manager, residents and potential home buyers at Fontana and held a "guided tour" at the border control station at Nickelsdorf, questioning what impact the „threat of crime“ has on producing architecture.**

**MD:** *Your video Annex B from 1999 addresses the issues of insecurity, distrust, exclusion, and exclusivity within the community. It delves into the realities of a fenced-in, protected residential area and, in the process, raises questions about the ambivalent relationships between control, freedom, and security. Being "gated" simultaneously implies being included and protected, whilst at the same time being excluded and having limited autonomy. In each case there is a tinge of xenophobia.*

**BH:** Unlike some of the gated communities in the US, there were no visible signs of "gating" in the neighborhood where I shot my film. When I spoke to the community's Canadian manager about this, he explained that they had been very careful to avoid any aggressive symbols of exclusion because they thought that Europeans might be uncomfortable with them, due to the repercussions of World War II.

**MD:** *Ironically, of course, despite being provoked by notions "political correctness," such an approach, with its endorsement of a collective amnesia of the past, is equally exclusionary. I find these PC attempts to deny the existence of differences between people most disturbing. Listening to your interviews with the residents of the gated community, one can sense their desire to emphasize the "normality" of their longing for security and comfort, and to play down the aspect of exclusion. There is a strong undertow of propriety and "harmlessness" to their words. Yet, a more open discussion of their prejudices and fears might lead to a better understanding of their fellow man.*

**BH:** I would like to confront notions of "political correctness" in my work. It's time we found the courage to admit that we simply aren't PC, that humans aren't perfect. Conforming to prescribed notions of what is PC requires a non-involvement that negates our individuality. We are brought up not to discuss or admit to our prejudices. These were issues I hoped to articulate in *Annex B*

**MD:** *Distrust, discomfort, and fear are particularly in the public eye at the moment because of the so-called War Against Terrorism. Consequently, works like Annex b and Between Roles gain a particular pertinence.*

**BH:** *Between Roles and Annex b* became pertinent in ways I had neither intended nor foreseen. Of course, the work of any artist takes its inspiration from a particular socio-political climate, but it was never my aim to promote any particular cause, and I don't want these works to be interpreted as a comment on the present crisis between the West and Islamic fundamentalism.

**MD:** *After watching the Annex B, I was struck by a conflicting sense of contentment and loss. It reminded me somewhat of utopian-dystopian literature, in particular We by Russian author Alexi Zemyatin, where the residents have everything they supposedly need to make life comfortable, yet their lives are rigidly regimented by rules they must obey. Increasingly, our society is moving towards this utopian-dystopian middle ground. The Annex B deals not only with physical segregation, but also reflects on how the denial or exclusion of otherness can lead to a standardized, middle-of-the-road existence. We relinquish our independence and individualism in a kind of Faustian exchange for security and creature comfort.*

**BH:** For me it's based on *Begeisterung*, or enthusiasm—something so common in childhood. When you're young it seems there are a hundred things to discover: how to climb a tree or scramble down into a cave, how to build some strange fantastical machine or find a "hidden treasure" that adults don't know about. The problem starts once we become caught in the comfortable trappings of a globalized service culture; this freedom of spirit is no longer appreciated.

**MD:** *Globalization is a modern-day form of cultural and geographical colonization, motivated not by individual needs, but by an attempt to bring the whole world into line with the West's socio-economic model. A broad selection of people worldwide, however, is becoming increasingly suspicious of the relentless onslaught of material promoting the "humane" and "democratic" benefits of globalization. It seems increasingly apparent that globalization simply replaces the need for cultural economics based on culture with an economy based on capital.*

**BH:** We are all influenced by economics to some extent. Even the time we spend together could be seen in economic terms: "Is it really worth my spending two hours with Barbara? What can I get out of it?" I'm slightly exaggerating, of course, but I do think that one of the main problems of the twenty-first century is our obsession with material aspects. I'm curious about how and when we decide we can

afford not to evaluate what we do from an economic perspective. Gardening is a fascinating, and rare, example of people being prepared to put in labor without being paid in return, especially nowadays, when everybody complains that they don't have enough time. There would seem to be no other explanation than that gardening gives pleasure. In *Between Roles* I wanted to create a relaxing garden atmosphere and then observe how participants would react to the one disturbing or strange element in the whole situation—the small picket fence.

**MD:** *When I look at your work, I'm struck by the absence of, let's say, an ideologically controlled direction.*

**BH:** I believe that theory should emerge through practice and my method is not obviously didactic. When I worked as an architect I usually was the only woman in meetings with politicians, developers etc. and currently I'm the only woman involved in our project for the Graz 2003 cultural capital, yet I have deliberately never chosen to use gender issues as the central focus of my work. I don't think highly simplified divisions such as "female" or "homosexual" make for effective political or critical art. I'm very much against generalizing about how we "belong" to this or that group. I came across a marvelous example of this while making *Annex b*, 1999/ 2000 at the veterinary border control station that monitors the health of animals being moved across borders for food consumption. All of us being taken around the center were given the same white hygiene caps similar in style to military or police caps to wear. When I asked why the design of the caps was so elaborate, they explained that they had had to create something dignified as they were often visited by politicians and heads of state. So the same caps are worn by the truck drivers and by both elite and ordinary visitors alike. It struck me as fascinating that equality came from the highest level in the hierarchy: the workers dressed up rather than the politicians dressing down. I was particularly interested in this detail because the upsetting of hierarchical systems is an underlying aim in all my works, even when they seem quite harmless.

**MD:** *Yes, the harmlessness in your work is only apparent. I believe that ideological didacticism and formal transparency are the underlying problem to a lot of contemporary neo-conceptual work. Much of it has become conservative; in the sense that it is based on tautological arguments and forms that don't go beyond familiar parameters. This result reminds me of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the "body without organs": art that desires to achieve some sense of "deep meaning" whilst remaining transparent and uninventive. You seem to address some of these issues in the piece about childhood, mit vorgehaltener hand, presented at the Vienna Secession.*

**„Mit vorgehaltener Hand“, 1999**  
double video projection, 43'

**Common phrases in the German language referring to childlike behaviour or expectations related to adulthood were the bases for conversations the artist held with people from her environment, as well as with „representatives“ of corporate life - employees of the Porsche central administration headquarters in Salzburg. The other video shows children who were asked to perform certain gestures like holding a hand in front of their mouth, when you feel embarrassed - gestures which usually happen spontaneously. In order to emphasize the aspect of performance and what happens „in between“ (what can be seen, in between expectations etc.), this piece was edited in slow motion, once in a while almost transgressing the border to the video with the adults.**

**BH:** When I edited the conversations with adults from *Mit vorgehaltener Hand*, I began with the more superficial, innocuous parts. From there I moved on to the deeper layers, the ones that are usually hidden, the ones that we don't dare address because they make us feel uncomfortable or question the very principles on which we have built our lives. Similarly, the pretty garden set-up of *Between Roles* looked perfectly innocuous and the role of the fence was not made clear right from the start. I wanted it to remain obscure and elicit different emotional responses from those involved by offering several possible interpretations.

**MD:** *Mit vorgehaltener Hand, explores how our cultural archive—the accumulated written record of a society—influences identity. Childhood is positioned in an ambivalent border between social and cultural authority that will lead to social assimilation and something that's outside of that.*

**BH:** Actually, the piece for the Secession was a parallel project to one I did for the Porschehof in Salzburg. I wanted to demonstrate how the German language contains a lot of sayings that reference

adulthood and childhood. For instance, the expression “Stop behaving like a child!” implies there is a universally agreed standard for what is acceptable “childlike” and “adult” behavior. Such definitions are also related to our professional lives, where an unwritten, and at times even unspoken, code of conduct actively operates. This code exists within the art world too and on a broader cultural level. My main interest in *Mit vorgehaltener Hand* was to use those verbally defined boundaries between childhood and adulthood to explore how we behave in certain roles and at which moments we want to cross the line—not in extreme situations, such as when we go in search of exotic gratification on vacation, but how we need to express ourselves independently, free from behavioral restrictions, in everyday moments.

**MD:** *The seating arrangement for the viewing of Mit vorgehaltener Hand was rather unusual. The seats were at a right angle to the video projections on the wall, so when you sat down you had to turn your head deliberately to see it and the first thing you actually saw was the head of the person sitting next to you.*

**BH:** The set-up was a replica of the seating arrangement in the departure lounge of Vienna airport. I wanted to explore the relationship between the presentation of the work and the audience, to see to what extent the maker of the film can influence how the viewer perceives the work and how involved they become with it. In many ways *Mit vorgehaltener Hand* was closely related to film. The two videos were each 45 minutes long, so in total they ran the length of a feature film. This was a complete contradiction of our normal expectations of video art: usually we just wander into the gallery, stay for two or three minutes, ten at the most, and then leave. I took these viewing habits into account, but even if you stayed for only five minutes of *Mit vorgehaltener Hand*, you would already have a strong sense of involvement and of how the viewer is drawn ever deeper into the piece.

**MD:** *Your predilection for the interview format presents the listener-viewer with a highly subtle form of communication; one that might justly be described as “giving” or “generous.”*

**BH:** For *Mit vorgehaltener Hand*, I filmed conversations that lasted all evening, which flowed from one topic to the next. I made no distinction between the people to whom I was talking and myself. And because I was happy to give as much personal, and at times highly emotional, information as my interlocutor, the conversations frequently broached more intimate topics. I wanted to give the participants the chance to explore various emotive and psychological dimensions without any attempt on my part to pigeonhole them to fit my conceptual agenda. The idea of merely addressing someone, without any sense that communication is a gift, rather disturbs me. Of course, I cannot deny that, even if I address the people participating in my pieces as equals, there is still some form of hierarchy, because I'm the author and even if I concede the performers a certain amount of freedom, it's clear that, in the end, I'm the one who edits the material: it's my vision and I decide how I want the audience to perceive the piece.

**MD:** *With your quasi-documentary approach that uses the spontaneity of dialogue to great effect, the overall creative expression of your work is more grounded in reality than metaphor. In today's super-mediated, spin-doctored society, “reality” can be interpreted on any number of different levels. Recently, there appears to have been a shift in art making towards a reassessment of reality and a questioning of political and social authority.*

**BH:** I prefer to avoid using metaphor in my work and employ eminently recognizable symbols to which everyone can relate: deliberately obtuse artwork strikes me as dull. To some extent I have always been interested in deconstructing metaphors. In *Mit vorgehaltener Hand* I investigated how the German language operates with sayings referring to the difference between adulthood and childhood. We seem to have common understandings or shared metaphors about what is childlike and what is adultlike behavior, as if those were precise definitions. The familiar suburban settings of *Between Roles* and *Annex b / SET!* were intended to make viewers feel comfortable and subsequently lead to the discovery of other secret or hidden elements—elements that perhaps I myself hadn't seen. When making *Mit vorgehaltener Hand* I wanted to edit the video in a way that would make it difficult to be sure whether it was a documentary or whether it was fiction. When someone asked me whether I had scripted the dialogue, I knew it had worked. When you look at a documentary, you know it's a documentary and you can maintain a safe emotional distance from the person talking. I wanted to strip away that element of safety.

**MD:** *What do you make of these pseudo-documentary reality TV programs?*

**BH:** Reality TV stems from the lack of adventure in our everyday lives: watching it is a way of making up for that lack. Perhaps it's too easy to dismiss these types of show, but I still think the general public is cheap for indulging in them. It's also true to say, however, that on a more subtle level, art's relationship to its audience echoes some of the traits of reality TV.

**MD:** *The precursor to reality TV was a show made in 1973 about the Loud family from Santa Barbara, California, which broadcast snapshots from their everyday lives over a period of time. By the end of the series, the husband's extramarital affairs had been exposed, his wife had kicked him out of the family home, and son Lance had declared he was gay. Reality TV highlights the fine line between performing and acting because, although people are supposedly "being themselves," they are aware that they're being filmed.*

**BH:** The people I film always know what is going on. I would certainly never seek to emulate Elisabeth T. Spira, whose works are, in my opinion, exploitative and voyeuristic. For one of her "Alltagsgeschichten" she visited the popular weekend spot of Danube Island near Vienna to film fat, middle-aged men and expose their modest intellect. Her subjective interpretation was neither personal nor innovative, but simply prejudicial and served mainly to entertain her audience.

**MD:** *Your work indicates a certain absence of passion, compassion, love. The boundaries you explore—whether through one of the Between Roles conversations, or one of the interviews with those in the Annex b—identify a dispassionate territory that is institutionalized and controlled.*

**BH:** For me, passion is the one thing that makes life worth living. Our whole being should be oriented towards passion and love. But I would never want to illustrate this, or try to offer an example, because it would be limiting for those who set out to follow it. I would rather show an absence of passion, expose a need for it, or maybe create a desire for it. In my opinion, Danish director Lars Von Trier's Dogme-95 films, such as *"Idioten"* are incredibly successful, because they establish the rules of Dogme-95, whilst simultaneously rejecting all standards and commonplaces. This is something I would like to achieve in my own work.

**MD:** *Elements of your work call to mind Umberto Eco's novel The Name of The Rose, which also deals with the overstepping of boundaries. In Eco's work, a conservative monk poisons those of his fellow brethren who have read Aristotle's On Comedy—a book found quite by chance in the library archives—because he cannot accept the topic it discusses. In a highly touching way, The Name of The Rose criticizes prohibition and the setting of prejudicial parameters and limitations. I think your work is essentially about making these parameters visible.*

**BH:** I like to generate new standards by which to judge things. Not because I want to judge—in fact I don't like the word "judgment" at all—but because if you want to make people question their judgments, you have to throw the field open. In order to involve people in my work I have to offer them something they can relate to, such as preformed, standardized judgments about where the boundaries or limits lie. The pieces I'm working on at the moment explore what seduces someone to commit a crime and how quick we are to judge other people's behavior. I'm not talking about serious crimes, but those petty crimes that would not be prosecuted, yet nonetheless concern the temptation to forget certain limits. I base the works on photographs of situations I either chance-upon or have set up. An appropriate analogy for these new works would be a child's drawing book. The ink drawings outline the images so that there is no hierarchy to the presentation of the information—each part of the drawing carries the same value. It thus falls to the viewer to emphasize certain aspects, or to make new associations.

**MD:** *Although the outlines of the boundaries themselves remain perfectly visible...*

**BH:** Naturally, the outlines are very clear, and this is also a problem when translating the photographs into drawings: shadows and grey scale information are impossible to create in this technique. And so a number of the images can no longer be read clearly. Only when I give the works titles is the possibility introduced of those minor "crimes" having been committed.

### **„Swinging“, video, 2001**

**A video shows a teenage girl on a children's swing, reaching higher and higher, until her legs fall down vertically: This action is edited in between with the same girl moving back and forth in a very controlled way on a porch swing (which is called „hollywood swing“ in German).**

**MD:** *Individuality and subjectivity as outlines for personal and collective identity are increasingly essential social issues today and hold an equally special place in contemporary art making. I sense a burgeoning new existentialism based on a revitalized sense of accountability to the Self, and that, in my opinion, is based less on a question of “correcting” differences or of arriving at a consensus, than of acknowledging and building up a respect for those differences. For me, your methodology marks a socio-political shift from the simulation of being to the existential being. In many of your works you set up a theater, a forum in which the participants can perform and we're never quite sure what the outcome will be.*

**BH:** The media culture we live in has made us so aware of how we should behave in everyday life that for me the question is: When do we actually have the feeling that we *are*, rather than that we *perform*? I want the people involved in my projects to discover this for themselves, by chance as it were, and quite often this happens quite naturally and far better than if I had carefully scripted it. For example, the new video I'm working on, *Swinging (working title)*, involves a girl on a porch swing. The girl I found to star in the video is only twelve years old, but she looks about fourteen or fifteen. In reality, of course, she retains many childish characteristics—she still plays with Playmobil figures, for instance. Just 50 meters from the adult swing on which I was to film her, stood a children's swing. And guess what she did when we went to shoot the film? She went straight over to the children's swing, sat down on it, and started to swing on it higher and higher until she almost fell down. She had completely forgotten how she was supposed to behave for me and for the cameras: this was her own reality. Moments such as these are fundamental to my work. At times I think that the end product is less important than the transformations that the participants undergo during the creative process—transformations that I don't even show to the public. It's almost as though I use the context of an exhibition as a pretext for those very few individuals who participate in my work to experience something they normally would not. And so what I show actually says more about what I don't show.