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The Seriousness of Life is Learnt from Playing

In her works Barbara Holub engages with anthropological questions which have a major influence on society and communication, social and personal identities. During the past few years she dealt with the psycho-social phenomenon of desire, exploring in several projects the links and interrelations between concealment and desire as well as the ensuing potential taboos and the fulfillment of longings in places dissociated from "every-day life".

In her exhibition project at the Secession Barbara Holub uses the different angles underlying the perception of adults and children to investigate the (adult's) longing for the innocence of the child. In this context, she deals with the traditional and generalizing roles assigned to childhood and adult life, and the cliché-ridden desire of the adult to recapture his/her childhood, believed to have been free of burden (and now disappeared).

The assemblage of video, image, sound and object installations which Barbara Holub designed for the Secession visualizes aspects and findings from her theoretical engagement with the complex of themes called "role behavior". As a component of a paradigmatic processual treatment of the theme, the exhibition at the Secession refers to a parallel project of the artist in Salzburg. In this context, employees of the Porsche co. in Salzburg were invited to set up a Carrera miniature race track according to their own ideas in the lobby of the local corporate headquarters and then play with the miniature cars. The situation of adults at play resulted in a life-size ink-jet print of a photograph as a visible artistic product of the performance. As one single object, it covered two corner walls in the lobby, in the same space where the races had taken place. Interviews inspiring the employees of Porsche Salzburg to reflect on the "play" theme became an immaterial part of the exhibition project. For this purpose, Barbara Holub held one-to-one interviews with employees in which they talked about the conventional roles attributed to childhood and adult life, and about possibilities as well as the longing to break with these. The people interviewed were asked to respond to questions about the way they felt as a child and feel as an adult, as well as about what they associate with every-day colloquial expressions such as "you're not a child anymore", "come on, grow up", "I cried like a baby", "I was as happy as a kid" etc. The situation was also characterized by the presence of a video camera and the fact that the interviews were taped.

In parallel, Barbara Holub asked friends from her personal surroundings in the art world the same questions. The results of both series of interviews were used in one part of the large-scale video projection shown at the Secession.

Barbara Holub had the three adjacent rooms of the Gallery of the Secession at her disposal. "The sequence of spaces is very important for my project. The first exhibition space is a transit room which has to be passed in order to reach the third room, being a "dead end" and therefore having a more contemplative atmosphere. I have tried to turn the sequence around in terms of functions. The first space is now the one where you can linger and listen to a radio play that develops towards a dénouement. The point is that you get an extra benefit from listening to the radio play from beginning to end instead of just passing through. As an invitation to stay, I placed inflated tabouret-high cushions in the room in a hopscotch pattern, so people can sit down, or take it as an invitation to play. Not so much hopscotch, it's more like hopping on bed the way we did when we were children."

(Barbara Holub)

In direct dialogues, the radio play reflects modes of behavior which are conventionally attributed to either "an child-like" or "an adult" mind and which basically seem to diverge according to the age of the person asking the questions. Thus, children ask for the sake of asking, are never satisfied with an answer, use questions rather to continue drawing the other person's attention to them. Questions asked by adults seem more clearly motivated by the need to scrutinize the point addressed, to classify and weigh it. The hypothesis on which the text of the radio play is based is a possible status assigned to the artist by society, which brings together the different motivations for asking questions. In this context, Barbara Holub also alludes to conventional clichés believed to give the artist "leeway" within society. "The radio play is conceived in such a way that traditional stereotypes are questioned indirectly by the sequence and interaction of statements, not by the text itself. There are no "roles" assigned to certain characters but while we listen, they take shape as various aspects of one possible person. The text does not specifically refer to the colloquial phrases forming the basis of the video projections in the last room, it is more of a collage in which the structure of 'naive questions' is juxtaposed with the structure of 'analytical, inquisitive questions'. This juxtaposition of two different structures is to open up a space to the listener in which individual reflections can emerge." (Barbara Holub)

Barbara Holub changed the architecture of the second, intermediate space drastically. A curtain narrows it down into a corridor. It shows the picture of a spectator stand populated with models, taken from the Carrera race track set, and incorporates the phrases which form the basis of free associations for those interviewed in one of the two videos shown in the third room. For the exhibition visitor, the depiction of spectators as models on the curtain generates a space of unmediated ambivalence for his/her status as an observer, which was unchallenged up to that point. The miniature figures, being as the spectators of a car race, are thus performing a new role, they become the observers of the visitors who proceed to the last of the three rooms to watch the video projections.

In the last of the exhibition spaces, Barbara Holub has set up two large-scale video projections next to one another. She designed the room itself as a transit space. The seating comprises several rows of airport waiting-area seats which are fixed to the floor and cannot be moved. As the seats are positioned at a right angle to the video projections, the conventional way of viewing, e.g. when we face the screen in movie theaters, is made impossible. "I wanted to create some momentum of uneasiness in the space, something that does not leave us alone. This is also symbolized by the strange transitory situation one always finds in waiting zones; it's extreme in airports because these are also a kind of no man's land, opening up a space in which you find yourself between the worlds, between languages and cultures, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. But then again, when you are there, you're mostly in a state of exhaustion anyway, so that you are unable to make use of the positive offer of this space in between." (Barbara Holub)

One of the two video projections shows people talking about childhood and adulthood. These are excerpts from the interviews Barbara Holub made with employees at the Salzburg "Porschehof" on the occasion of her exhibition project there, and with friends from her art-world environment. The passages are repeatedly interrupted by interspersed frames showing trampoline-jumping children and scenes of people playing with the Carrera model race track in super slow motion. The second video, which is a simultaneous loop, shows children playfully imitating

cliché gestures of adults and children according to instructions, again in super slow motion; again and again, the emotional and unmediated plane of play is left and seriousness takes over. "There are cross-references between the two levels of film; thus, the child's level also contains adult aspects and vice versa, so that these categories are called into question. Due to the high-contrast treatment of the black and white images and their dynamic movements, the children emerge in space and vanish again whereas the grown-ups remain in the two-dimensionality of the static interview situation. However, their gestures and gazes repeatedly communicate with the children's video. Depending on whether the children appear or not, the two projection screens occasionally merge in one image. For me, this spatial set-up is a very important part of what I try to construct as content. As you can only see the pictures on the screen at a right angle, you really have to turn your head. The special seating arrangement requires the viewer to consciously direct his/her gaze onto the screen so as to perceive the images. The natural direction of the gaze would be towards someone sitting opposite or an empty seat instead. I think that this contributes to the ambivalence which also maintains the ambiguity as to whether the images are random or not. They are edited as a loop so that you need not watch them from beginning to end. They are not built up like a movie with a dramatic development. Or rather, the "drama" evolves through the "third image" developing by coincidence from the relationships evoked by the two projections mounted next to each other. I am concerned with the way a certain randomness is perceived, and with the question for the freedom of determining which way you want to look - with other viewers also becoming part of the picture/gaze. Just as we are not aware of certain role patterns because they just happen, I want these elements to be addressed in a focused way in the two videos while they may well be perceived in a casual way." (Barbara Holub)

As was the case in numerous earlier projects, Barbara Holub's project for the Secession is also about visualizing for us the possibility to experience acquired theoretical knowledge with our senses. In this context, she neither proposes ready-made solutions and insights as something mandatory nor does she prescribe scientific tenets in a doctrinal way. Much rather, Barbara Holub's projects seek to break up the unquestioned self-evidence of behavior patterns and routines from every-day life so as to make people aware of them. Her choice of themes makes it impossible for any beholder who responds to her visualized hints to use the insights gained for self-reflection only. References to a more comprehensive social relevancy of what has been experienced are too obvious to be ignored. Hence, Barbara Holub's engagement with the "play" theme allows it to be read in many ways. Presented as an invitation to play for employees of a corporation acting on the basis of market-economy criteria, the project refers to links between play and performance in every-day working life. "Those who work relax by exercising or watching others play on sports grounds or on stage (especially from in front of a TV set); those who do not work yet prepare for work by playing that they are adults and working." (Quoted after Robert Pfaller, *Der Ernst der Arbeit ist vom Spiel gelernt. Eine Spekulation über Verwicklungen im Verhältnis von work und culture.*) In the framework of institutionalized art Barbara Holub's project also conveys other readings. Less related to the context, general reflections on the human condition arise automatically: *Play as the Origin of Culture (Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel, by Johann Huizinga).*

The processual method and the introduction of Barbara Holub's multi-partite project into different fields of reality enables transdisciplinary approaches to a greater extent than insisting on the existing field of institutionalized art reception would allow. Their rejection of any adherence to the institutionalized context of art is

what makes Barbara Holub's projects specially challenging.

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