

The Poetry of the Moment

Staged Subjectivity in Renate Bertlmann's Photo Videos

To copy the truth can be a good thing,
but to invent the truth is better, much better.

(Giuseppe Verdi)

In a nimble balancing act between irony and a careful securing of evidence, Renate Bertlmann's photo videos initiate a discussion about the reality of images. Since 2001 and after various experiments with performance, installation and object art, as well as with staged photography, the artist also explores the medium of photo video. The hybrid nature of this medium equally employs the imaging strategies of both photography and film, consolidating photographic snap shots into film sequences by means of animation and cross-fades. Through the fusion of these two different image forms—still image, in which time and movement appear to be frozen and film, its unique quality based on the organization of time and movement—artistic gems emerge, whose unconventional imagery reveals new perspectives and allows for a multitude of interpretations.

The enthusiasm for the genre (whose history Alain Resnais' begins with in the artist biography, "Van Gogh" from 1948, where sections from various paintings are compiled to tell one story) is based largely on the enormous amount of creative freedom and the fascinating technical possibilities this genre offers. Similar to film and video, photo video is likewise dependent on equipment as well as on the advances and developments in digital image processing programs. However, in contrast to the tedious production processes of film, photo video allows for a more direct, immediate, and inexpensive production. One single person can carry out work on the camera and computer so that, in the ideal case, the entire creation of a photo video, from the concept to choice of imagery and composition to sound design, stems from one single author. As the starting point for artistic activity, the most diverse photographic material can be drawn upon: found or newly produced images, staged photography or snap shots. Their visual quality is relevant and is defined by clair-obscur contrasts, spatiality, plane and contour, harmony or dynamics. The transformation from a static single image to a moving stream of images occurs through cross-fading and animation, whereby the transition to video clip is smooth. In addition, an effect of this process is that the position of the camera appears to be fixed, as if the artistic gaze was focused on the scene of

events from one specific point. This gives the photo videos a subjective, as well as a theatrical character and blurs the boundaries between documentation and *mise-en-scène*. In condensed narratives, realms of experience are constructed, whereby the penetration of reality and virtuality and the interplay of visual saturation and aesthetic concentration irritate and sensitize perception.

Thematically, Renate Bertlmann's photo videos – oscillating between matter-of-fact protocol and poetic transcription – revolve around the question of the subject as well as of the boundaries and possibilities our society provides for the work of humans on themselves. They are attempts at reassuring oneself in a time, where the development of media advances the differentiation of society and with the media presence of each individual potentially on the rise, the complexity of communication increases and along with it, the need for even more symbols. Precisely these symbols have always been at the center of Renate Bertlmann's artistic focus. Under the motto “*Amo ergo sum*”, she has developed a very personal variety of ironic-romantic feminism and with her versatile artistic work, she makes a case for a respectful and tender relationship to herself and to the world. She contrasts the objectified image of self and of the world in a knowledge society and its primacy of analytical thinking with aesthetic imagination and the power of subjective impressions.

Work with memory offers a starting point; it is a rather fragmented and ephemeral medium that is nevertheless the foundation of how we position ourselves in society, and that forms cultural identity in general. Guided by a leitmotif formulated by the feminist movement, “The private is political”, Bertlmann explores the spaces of individual and collective memory in her photo videos. The spectrum of images in her short works ranges widely. It ranges from subtle portrait studies that grant glimpses into the life and world of women friends, to mini-dramas, where dolls become the protagonists to examine patterns of roles and relationships. The spectrum of images include symbolically laden studies of nature, where unspectacular landscape scenery invites for reflection about the rhythm of becoming and disappearing again, as well as explorations of urban architecture and panoramas of life, in whose associative vista of images the simultaneous and non-simultaneous are themes: nearness and distance, movement and suspension of movement, history and presence. Time and again, Renate Bertlmann's gaze turns to her own art objects, whether they are concerned with finding an expression for the most basic human needs, wishes and sentiments, or whether they are about questioning ritualized patterns of communication and conventional gender roles. However,

now and again, her objects are also concerned with a formal experiment that examines the particular artistic view that both stages the interplay between form and color, space and time, image and audio in the film analysis and directs the meaning of the images through conscious contextualization.

The works have many layers of meaning and are puzzling, and are therefore, indebted to a central aesthetic paradigm of modernity: ambiguity. It remains unclear as to how far Renate Bertlmann's photo videos aim at representing reality or if they are rather concerned with reflections about how perceptual patterns are transmitted through media. Does authenticity even exist? Or is representation the only remaining possibility for self-assurance in the hall of mirrors that is our thought systems? In any case, the artistic view of reality remains fictional. The subjective dimension of experience in the image narrative—especially emphasized by the intimate, condensed form of the medium—is not the origin of the artistic implementation, rather it is the product thereof. The resulting product is not only witness to immediate individual perception; rather it constitutes a perspective that claims to be autonomous. In this manner, subjectivity is localized in the work itself and at the same time, disconnected from its creator. The creator remains intangible, hidden in vaguely perceivable subtexts and tangible spaces of meaning, that find themselves between, in front of, behind, and beside the images, and that precede their own visibility. Her works however, characterized by both a distanced irony and a tender devotion to life, provide us with breathing space in the flow of time.

Edith Almhofer, December 16, 2009

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