

MARIO PFEIFER: EXPLOSION

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All over the world, democracies are collapsing; it seems that even they are no guarantee for justice. Against the background of continuing demonstrations, rallies and violent riots, especially in Saxony, the question arises of how art and art institutions can – or indeed must - contribute to sociopolitical debate in these explosive times. Might the staging of an exhibition or play about Pegida or refugees in Bautzen help towards overcoming right-wing populism, right-wing extremism and neo-fascism? It is safe to assume that its effect would be limited. Finally, it would be seen only by people who position themselves against exclusion and violence in the first place. This being the case, what might be a more conceivable means of contributing to the debate within the framework of the art museum, beyond presenting a picture of reality? What kind of artistic approach would serve the purpose of reviewing the certainties of the politically and culturally educated people who visit exhibitions? Rather than confirming certainties, would it not be more astute to place a wider, more complex question on the agenda? The question, for example, of why such extreme political stances arise in a progressive and wealthy country?

The question “why” was the motivation behind inviting the artist Mario Pfeifer, born in Dresden, to develop a project on the current socio-political situation in Germany, with the emphasis on Saxony. The decision is owed to the fact that Pfeifer’s work focuses on the portrayal of local communities all over the world, and to the artistic methods he uses.

In his artistic work, Pfeifer directs his attention towards the individual and his/her lifestyle and living conditions. He travels to various regions of the world, where he lives and works for long periods. He becomes assimilated within various communities, many of them marginalized. Whilst his approach is similar to that of so-called participatory observation, used e.g. in the field of cultural anthropology, his primary interest lies in his immediate surroundings and in interaction with others. It is the exchange of ideas that interests Pfeifer. He creates an atmosphere that allows his protagonists to tell their own stories, to express their own thoughts, views, fears and experiences, thus reflecting upon them.

The artist transposes these narratives into visually stunning films and installations. He opens up diverse perspectives, creating different approaches for thoughts on work, religion, (sub)culture, capitalism, justice, racism, migration, democracy and the media.

In his works, which move aesthetically back and forth between the documentary, music video or scientific film, Pfeifer works with the possibilities of the essay film. The various narrative forms, timeframes and visual imagery, set alongside one another on an equal basis, are reminiscent of Hubert Fichte. The title of the exhibition is taken from the author's "ethnological novel" *Explosion*, from a series of works entitled *The History of Sensibility*, written in Brazil in the 1980s.

Like Fichte, Pfeifer prefers polyphony and a non-linear narrative to a single narrator perspective. This approach reflects the artistic position of being the person responsible for selecting the images, literally deciding upon the interpretation of the chosen subject. The merging of various shots highlights the way in which the presentation of individual realities arises, at the same time as calling them into question.

However, the intensity of the films is due not only to the shots themselves, but also to the human dynamics behind them. It is enhanced by the editing and the superimposition of image and sound. In this way, the empathy underlying the encounter between the artist and his partner is inscribed into the perception of the viewer.

In what way can the artist's specific working method be applied to the political situation in Saxony? Is such direct and open confrontation even possible, considering that our perception of current socio-political reality today is defined by floods of media images, snippets of interviews with angry citizens, talk shows and reports quoting the shortened statements of experts and politicians? Compared with the works produced in Brazil, Chile, India and the USA, *On Education and Fear, Disenchantment and Protest, Equity and Cleavage in Saxony/Germany* is formally quite different. As regards content, however, the exhibition makes visible references linking this work – involving nine detailed discussions – with the others. The selection underlines the fact that the social living conditions, experiences and sensitivities examined on a local level do not exist in isolation, and cannot be viewed without placing them in a wider context.

Kirsa Geiser

Approximation in the digital age to a humanity condemned to disappear

2014

26 minutes

This piece is concerned with the disappearance of a culture that has existed for thousands of years. The descendants of the Yaghan, in Tierra del Fuego, Chile, have legal rights to practice their nomadic culture. However, due to national conflicts between Chile and Argentina and the interests of globally active enterprises, they are no longer able to use their fishing grounds. Instead, they spend their lives marginalized, in a ghetto situated in the neighbourhood of a local history museum dedicated to their own cultural history. This museum is named after the German missionary and ethnologist Martin Gusinde.

The artist combines various image sources: video footage of impressive but inhospitable landscapes, photographic material from the 1920s, images from a more recent “scientific” film about the Yaghan, museum dioramas and shots of people working on the assembly line at a local seafood factory. These documentations are continually interrupted by what appear to be private shots of Pfeifer’s direct interaction with the Yaghan people: preparing a meal, in a club, out fishing in stormy seas. He is also seen talking to two women who are looking at the artist’s I-Pad, evidently examining Martin Gusinde’s photographs for the very first time. In this way, they can identify their predecessors with the aid of digital technology.

Approximation... is a 3-channel installation portraying a people’s loss of identity - including their history, crafts, beliefs and community - along with the enforced abandonment of their own image. Meanwhile, they bear witness to the historicisation and touristic evaluation of their own culture. However, it is also a demonstration of compassion, communication and interaction that not only culminates in a work of art, but also returns a piece of identity to the people it portrays, by means of new technology.

In place of an explanatory subtext, the video is accompanied by music composed by Kamran Sadeghi, in which he combines historical recordings of ritual Yaghan chants with contemporary electronic music.

3

Reconsidering The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California by Lewis Baltz
1974

2009

13 minutes

In this video, two stories are told. The first one is about a photo book. Over 40 years ago, Lewis Baltz took serial photographs of the exteriors of factory buildings in an industrial area in the south of Los Angeles. Armed with the photo book, which was already historical, Pfeifer travelled to the place featured in the photographs. There he interviewed the long-established small entrepreneur J.R. Billington, asking him questions about the time depicted in the album. From his personal report, it becomes clear that the industrial location, which appears inoffensive, used to play a central role in arms production. Amongst other things, missiles for the Vietnam War were manufactured there.

Pfeifer's documentary camera trip, which leads from the interior of the metal processing factory towards the outside of the building, shows a world of manual work that seems oddly outdated by today's standards. In combination with a story about the socio-economic history of the Orange County region, a former agricultural area, new levels of meaning are added to the world of Baltz's photo book.

Originally produced as a 16mm film and conceived as a dual synchronic projection, a digital version of the piece is shown in the exhibition.

4

Corpo Fechado

2016

45 minutes

By means of both documentation and fiction, the artist investigates a section of the almost impossibly complex religious diversity found in Brazil. In a country where the population has always been divided by class distinctions and racism, and where democracy threatens to break apart, leading spiritual figures take on an especially opinion-forming position in society.

In an exchange with three spiritual and religious leaders and healers, Pfeifer attempts to visualise their thoughts and practices and the way in which they strive to improve and pacify humanity on a lasting basis. Cristovão Brilho uses

energy from space in order to heal people. Tata Katuvengeci, a community priest, introduces the traditional mask rituals of the Bantu culture in West Africa to the Brazilian religion Candomblé. Unlike other African cult elements, these rituals have never become established in Brazil. Xarlô, on the other hand, is the author of the so-called Makumba Cyber Manifests on the future of humanity. The fact that all three of them address the local Brazilian population in and around São Paulo prompted Pfeifer to convey a picture of the working lives of their possible addressees. Religion not only means prayer and rituals, but also the production of liturgical objects for various denominations. In this way it is linked with people's daily working lives, as the shots taken in the factories of São Paulo reveal: they feature crucifixes from the production line, series of healing crystals and mesusahs from a handicraft production unit.

1+5

On Education and Fear, Disenchantment and Protest, Equity and Cleavage in Saxony/Germany

2016 - ongoing

546 minutes

The prologue of the exhibition consists of citizens' statements last year on the subject of Germany's situation and the uncertainty of democracy, as distributed in and by the media. *On Education and Fear, Disenchantment and Protest, Equity and Cleavage in Saxony/Germany* also shows eight individual interviews, each around 75 minutes long, woven together through a structure of questions. We see and hear how an entrepreneur, a trade unionist, a committed citizen, an activist, a mayor, a conflict researcher, an author/psychoanalyst and an educational scientist describe their experiences and views regarding contemporary socio-political circumstances. In so doing, they give a report on locational advantages, wage inequality, fear, in-work poverty, xenophobia and refugee aid, migration, German domestic work migration, lack of political education and the effects of the liberalisation of the working world. The interviewees describe their social commitment, their activities and interests and the resistance they encounter when it comes to asserting and publishing their ideas.

Although the discussions were recorded in film studios, the relationship between the artist and the interviewees appears relaxed and familiar. This close relationship enables the protagonists to openly express their arguments and thoughts, creating an antithesis to the shortage of information in the media, which increasingly shapes our understanding of politics. It is important to listen

to unpopular opinions and arguments before one can begin to discuss the ideas they represent.

6

A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue

2010

51 minutes

Rather than a closed and linear narrative, this piece consists of nine individual parts that can be seen in various combinations. The artist allows the viewer to decide in which order the story is read.

A protagonist, encountered in one of the scenes having a traditional shave, meets various people throughout the episodes. He holds discussions with each of them, forming different kinds of relationship. The inhabitant of a meagre hut on the outskirts of Mumbai tells him about the arduous life he leads, in which labour migration and the loss of his job have resulted in him spending the last 20 years of his life collecting paper on the city periphery. On another occasion, he is out walking when he meets a fisherman casting his nets in a river beneath long motorway bridges. The pictures, most of which are characterised by poverty and work, are set in contrast to shots of a young woman undergoing laser eye surgery. In her encounter with the protagonist, there are signs that a love story influenced by Bollywood stereotypes is about to begin.

The movement through the opposites of rich and poor, artist and protagonist, fiction and documentation, in combination with very slow, concentrated images, results in a video installation that allows and inspires different interpretations. In this way, the picture of the city and its economic, social and cultural divisions is literally recreated again and again in the eyes of the viewer.

7

#blacktivist

2015

5 minutes

The focus of the two-piece installation is on firearms possession, racism, police violence and resistance, themes that are all virulent in the USA. Part one consists of a video of the same name about the Flatbush Zombies, an underground rap

collective from Brooklyn/N.Y. Part two alternates between discussions with the musicians and shots of an arms factory.

Pfeifer prompted the three rappers to write a text on their view of the current socio-political situation in the USA. Together they shot the music video, which incorporates drastic found footage.

The discussions between the artist and the musicians reveal the pacifistic and community-building approach of the members of the collective. They are critical of the glorification of violence found in the media, and sometimes also in the work of mainstream rappers. The interviews are combined with documentary sequences showing production in the 3-D arms workshop Defense Distributed (DD) in Austin, Texas. DD, an anarchistic non-profit initiative, invokes the freedom of opinion anchored in the constitution in order to publish digital construction drawings, allowing anyone to build a firearm. The ambivalent reactions to this are extremely explosive: is arms manufacture in the form of open source production – weapons for everyone – a social meltdown, or a subtle attack on the gun lobby?

In using the combination of music video, interview and documentation, Pfeifer questions affirmation and provocation as stylistic devices. He meets - and at the same time defies - specific expectations of the genres of documentation and music video.

The virulent video images of the Flatbush Zombies take the genre of rap to extremes. The provocation is a success: with more than 2.7 million Youtube views to date, and thousands of comments, the rappers have generated a huge public to which they are able to communicate their thoughts.