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The Pull of the New Awkwardness

Daniel Hauser

Awkwardness has the makings of self-empowerment. Perhaps because it is something transitory and because the value structures that help produce awkwardness constantly shift. The article below is an attempt at understanding a state in which the personal and the social collide. Its starting point and center of interest is the series of events called *Die Neue Peinlichkeit* (The New Awkwardness) that was held in Zürich in 2015. At the same time I have invited the artists Silvia Popp and Jan Sebesta to each contribute a piece that expands on this subject. What resulted were two sequences of images and a text that harness awkwardness as a sphere of action.



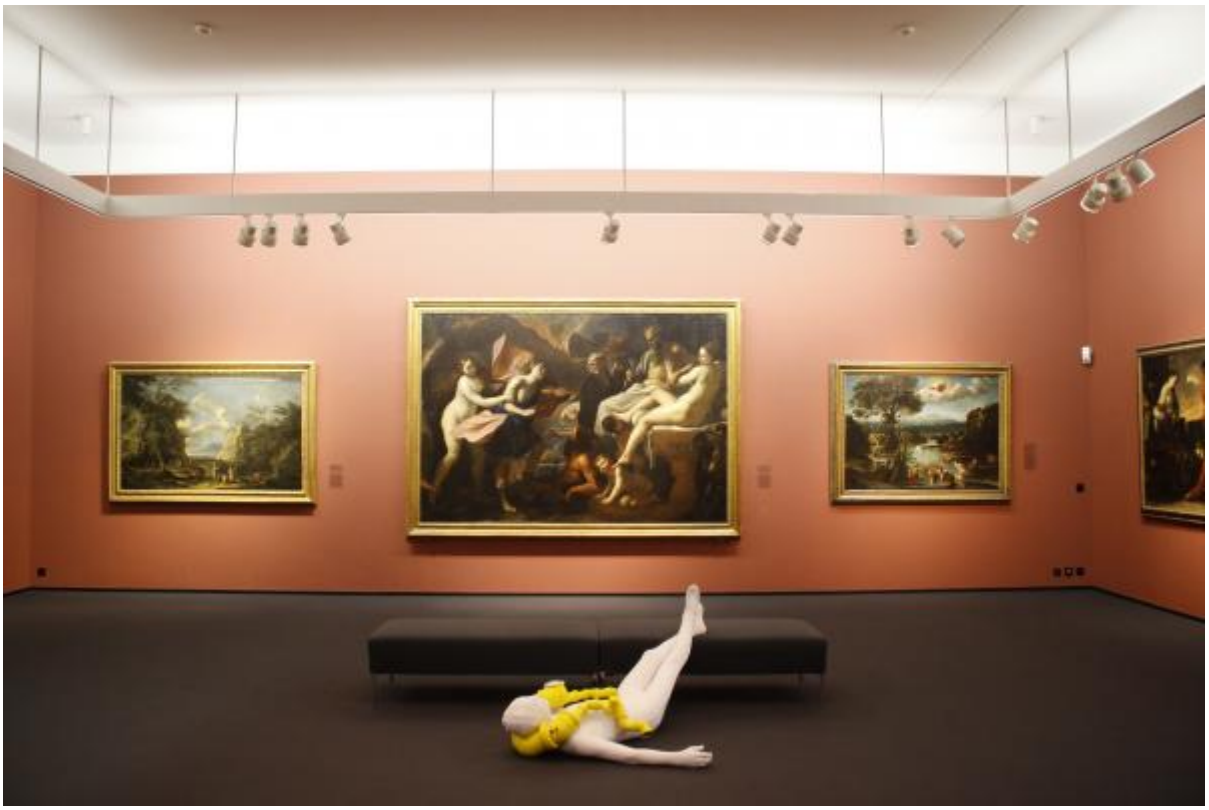
Capable All along of Winning a Majority

What meaning does awkwardness have today? And what is awkwardness anyway? The somewhat nebulous feeling that sets in when an awkward situation occurs can be described as an intensely experienced moment of self-consciousness, of shame, indeed, of being terrified of making an irreparable mistake, of not knowing something and thereby make a huge blunder. The fear of losing one’s face, of making a fool of oneself, of being pushed into social isolation and experience social death first-hand lends a primarily negative connotation to the awkward. Fear reinforces the urge to avoid awkwardness, which can, in turn, reinforce the sense of imminent awkwardness. Christian Saehrendt, art historian and author of the book *Blamage! Geschichte der Peinlichkeit*[1] (Embarrasment: A History of Awkwardness), has studied such fears of embarrassment. Saehrendt has found that a growing number of people have such a strong sense of awkwardness that it restricts them in their behavior. According to him, the media seize on these fears and feature stories about protagonists who embarrass themselves, which leads to high ratings and creates the delusory impression that we are gradually surrounded by nothing but disinhibited people. Yet in his opinion the opposite is true. Saehrendt declares himself a friend of awkwardness who, with his call to «Embarrass yourself!», recommends a self-experiment—for example, to stand up in a busy subway car and sing aloud a few verses of a song to people—an then to observe what happens and perhaps even have someone smile at you. In reality, awkwardness has thus been capable all along of winning a majority, but because it is usually considered to have negative connotations, no one wants to really believe this for now.

Slepenec - Jan Sebesta









Inside it was very quiet. I could hear only the monotonous rhythm of the tracks when I took the headphones out of my ears. I looked around and found that everything was fine. Almost all were into their smartphones. Only a few looked into the free reading material that appears twice a day. Still, I wanted to play it safe and waited a little longer before putting the buds back into my ears. After a while I was relieved to see that my inside played only for me and not for the other train passengers.

How come something like this always happens to me when it is very quiet? Perhaps I just waited for it. I suspect that everyone is beset by fears of their own. Especially when something is beyond control.

We consumer creatures have the tendency to ingest exorbitant amounts of information. The consequences can be loud and somewhat unpleasant. And we produce unique items every day. Their molecular make-up varies and so does the smell. We can compare ourselves to a shell, a casing in which many things take place without us really thinking about it.

Existing matter is stuffed into it and processed. What comes out is a product that has a lot of substance but is unusable. For this reason, the whole thing often passes once more through a system of pipes and is subjected to a procedure until there is almost nothing left. The part of it that we define as clean subsequently comes back to us, albeit in a different form.

The awkward is a hidden force. The crux is to use this force at the right moment. One more reason to hang the awkward in signal yellow on the coat rack and thereby acknowledge that it will be with us for life. And so the loud information flows unchecked into the space and displays itself.

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Jan Sebesta wrote the text titled *Slepenec* to accompany his artistic work of the same name, which he first used in public in 2016 during a performance of several hours as part of the project Bridging Plays (*). Dressed in a white overall, he wore one each of his altogether four signal-yellow appendix-like systems of pipes around his neck on his way through part of the collection at the Kunsthaus Zürich. The yellow objects made loud as well as more discreet, partly explicit and partly rather vague sounds that are comparable to digestion-related sounds after an all too sumptuous meal. Jan Sebesta conceived of himself or his body as a «white wall» that, sometimes in motion, sometimes static, carries a work and with it relates to the collection and the audience. In Slepenec he is interested in the tension between visiting art collections as an activity, and a display of knowing yet dissociated consumption, and direct and, indeed, overwhelming immersion. No matter whether they are detached or voracious as they move, Sebesta is convinced that visitors are confronted with their inside. This inside causes them to send signals that make them locatable and make their intimate a loud issue. For many still a moment of awkward exposure, Jan Sebesta perceives this above all as a vital positive force.

Clarification: Slepenec – conglomerate, cobbled together, compound, agglomeration, dense accumulation of matters, composite.

(*) A project of the F+F School of Art and Design on the subject of «transitions», conceived and curated by Iris Rennert in the intricate and staircase-studded architecture of the Kunsthaus Zürich, open house, March 12, 2016. Featuring tours, performances and works by the artists Gregory Hari and CRIMER, Silvia Popp, Theres Raschle, Tonjaschja Adler, Jan Sebesta, Sweeterland, Micha Reichenbach and Iris Rennert.

The Idiots as the Successful Measure of Traditional Awkwardness

But how does this new awkwardness distinguish itself from traditional awkwardness? To paraphrase Richard Sennett, traditional awkwardness must be a relic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With *The Fall of Public Man*,[2] the middle class, having just begun to emancipate itself from the aristocracy, started to separate between public and private sphere, which caused precisely the private nature of private individuals, as something hidden from public view, to become attractive for the public. Individuals aspiring to a career in the public realm—say, as politicians—were suddenly forced to develop an auratic charisma, elide the public and the private and become collective individuals, in order to draw the sought-after attention to them. When influential individuals created scandals as politicians, they were subjected to social catharsis and subsequently removed from their position and divested of their authority or even executed. This personalization of the awkward has persisted to this day, though not everywhere in the same bloody form anywhere. In election or referendum campaigns, for instance, people are thrashed well below the belt —to wit, exclusively by patriarchally acting species who tend to stand out due to their tremendous hubris and who, with said tendency, upstage others in front of cheering campaign fans.

In a magazine article, the activist and author Laurie Penny takes the dystopian fantasy series *Game of Thrones* [3] as an opportunity to target the exponents of such traditional

awkwardness: «The moral lessons so far are murky but sensible. Dragons are awesome. Men are invariably dreadful. Following religious zealots into battle is a poor life decision. Honor is a made-up concept that will probably get you killed. Most importantly, there are very few truly evil people in the world: instead, there are just stupid people, and scared people, and petty, vindictive people, and sometimes those people get put in charge of armies and nations, and that's when the rest of us are really buggered. That's what *Game of Thrones* is about.» Laurie Penny goes on to say that the fantasy series helps us «rehearse» trauma. «They help us prepare for it. You sit down to watch terrible things happening to made-up people and you imagine how you'd cope if that were you, or someone you loved, and even if the answer is ‹not at all› you find yourself feeling a bit better. Right now, the really frightening prospect is that the world is actually being run by vicious idiots with only half a plan between them who are too busy fighting each other to pay attention to the weather, which is about to kill us all.»

Based on this and with reference to Sennet und Saehrendt, one could say that bourgeois culture, which established itself in public institutions such as theaters, museums, schools or court rooms, has—in those very venues—willingly learned to politely and unabatedly internalize the values of the charismatic, of listening respectfully and remaining silent in the (for a large part dark) auditorium—to this day. For Saehrendt this would be the middle class that has voluntarily squeezed itself into the corset of the fear of embarrassing itself, driven by the eagerness to be able to distinguish between good and bad taste—with a view, that is, to the lower-class outsiders, who are without a chance, and the upper class which lives in luxury and feels above it all. The author Georges Bataille,[4] finally, describes the bourgeoisie as a social force that hates waste and functions on the basis of balancing the books. According to Bataille, it is only the bourgeoisie which starts hoarding the proceeds and enjoying them in their own home—rather than in public but, without keeping them in circulation within society. All that is generous, orgiastic, exorbitant has disappeared since the end of aristocracy. The bourgeoisie appears but plain anymore. The display of wealth occurs discreetly and in private, exclusive spaces. Anything else would be unseemly and, as a result, awkward.

Awkwardness and the Depoliticization of the Public Realm

For some time now attempts have been made to redefine awkwardness. Accordingly, the awkward has been written about more than usual in recent years. I already mentioned Christian Saehrendt's call for self-embarrassment. The 2010 book *Awkwardness*,[5] a slender volume penned by the writer, theologian and translator Adam Kotsko, is by now the most prominent English-language source that is referred to by numerous authors who have since written about awkwardness. Kotsko claims that we live in an age of awkwardness today. The reason for this is that the Western world has thus far been unable to offer alternatives to Post-Fordism and the loss of traditional value systems which were cracked by the civil rights movements of the 1960s. For by Kotsko's definition awkwardness is precisely the mood that sets in when there is no clarity as to what guiding rules enable credible conduct. This creates an unsettling behavioral uncertainty.

In a 2012 article titled *Das Potenzial des Peinlichen* (The Potential of the Awkward),[6]Aram Lintzel interprets Kotsko's awkwardness as a moment of uncertainty as to what rules and codes one should follow. This very uncertainty is viewed by Kotsko as an irreducible, strong quality of contemporary societies that no one can escape, but for which there are also no solutions. Hence this concept of awkwardness is said to signify possible forms of social interaction that do not follow a fixed regulation, but rather leave a lot of room for improvisation and, with that, also provide first criteria of sorts for a politics of the awkward.

Unlike the traditional understanding of awkwardness, the basic approaches toward a reassessment of the concept of awkwardness introduced above are no longer associated with charismatic figures (politicians etc.). The «new awkwardness» is geared to social

constellations that are predicated on behavioral uncertainty. This sounds promising. And, indeed, there is something to be said for Saehrendt's call to self-embarrassment. It remains to be seen whether this call goes beyond an idea for original isolated actions. Kotsko's awkwardness, in turn, surely depends on a brilliant way of thinking, which says more or less that rules or norms that we develop as humans exist only to cope in ever new ways with the constantly changing social orders stets. Or to put it differently: awkwardness above all helps us to create social orders and to constantly change them again. For if social order had control over every daily encounter, there would never be any awkwardness.

After extensive reading, this approach, though interesting in itself, has an increasingly irritating effect on me. Especially because it soon becomes clear that Kotsko's study, which also aims to be a philosophical essay, draws predominantly on Martin Heidegger's 1927 philosophical treatise *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time). Making references is important to me in my own artistic practice, yet at the same time it is important to me what references are made and in what way this is done. What reasons might Kotsko have had to use Heidegger as a main reference for the concept of awkwardness? Why is it that for this very subject he sets his heart on a thinker who a mere five years later publicly championed the National-Socialist Party of Germany (NSDAP)? Kotsko incorporates Heidegger as someone who thought and articulated as an author, but not as someone who, as a college professor, also played a social role or who contributed to the history of his time. Isn't Kotsko, in doing so, sacrificing the opportunity to rethink a social approach to a philosophical problem? Kotsko does mention that we live in an age of awkwardness today also because the West has thus far been unable to offer an alternative to the loss of traditional value systems which were cracked, among others, by the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet he only scantily touches upon these civil rights movements in his approach. Why this reduced approach? His book suffers from this. This is why, to me, it appears above all apolitical.

Finally, Kotsko's speculation that the by now established awkwardness is irreversible and the diagnosed unsettling behavioral uncertainty will still not cause modern societies to be tempted by the promise of fascism seems rather naïve to me. Open and admittedly complex and contradictory social conditions never just simply exist all of a sudden and are never irreversible; rather, they need to be won over and over again against the kind of explanatory models that lead us to believe in the sweet poison of the plain and unambiguous.

The New Awkwardness as a Liquefaction of Boundaries

So what allows awkwardness to become an artistic and curatorial possibility as tested just recently in Zürich? What could projects look like that are borne by political awareness, by wit, presence of mind and at the same time by a still possible insouciance?

The fact that a series of events realized in May–July 2015 by the five Zürich art institutions Kunsthalle, Helmhaus, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Haus Konstruktiv, Shedhalle and the self-organized art space Up State was called *Die Neue Peinlichkeit*, The New Awkwardness, has a certain logic—albeit a hardly foreseeable one—in light of the reassessment of the socially relevant concept of awkwardness that is in the air. Of primary importance to the initiators were concerns such as cooperation and diversity of voices. The series of events was based on the visiting principle: the Helmhaus at the Kunsthalle, the Kunsthalle at the Shedhalle, Up State at the Helmhaus, the Shedhalle at Haus Konstruktiv, Haus Konstruktiv at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst at Up State. A team consisting of curators and art educators or facilitators has taken up the possibility of a politics of awkwardness and engaged audiences that were unfamiliar to the individual team players. With questions regarding situations that often structure the way individuals experience public event programs, the experience of awkwardness was offensively addressed and provoked: am I at the right place here? Who asks

the first question? Why is it that no one is sitting in the first row of chairs? The selected formats varied. There were talks on art education as the mother of awkwardness, on the issue of expectations for art, a fuss about one of the most conflictual and awkward protocols: the dinner after the exhibition opening—who is invited? Who sits next to whom? Who enjoys the food and who is bothered by it?—and tours of two collections that could not be more different.[7]

The collaborative project offers exciting starting points for further discussion. First of all, it seems to comply with the demand for increased cooperation between cultural institutions, though not necessarily in the way intended by the axiom of cultural policy, namely to generate higher attendance figures and to be able to better appreciate and know the audience. Instead, the project aims at an experience that is shared with the audience: to expose the particular guest from another institution due to the lack of familiarity with the conditions of the specific institution and its home audience. Thus it is predestined for all kinds of impending awkwardness. With this, the series also attempted to put into play issues of affiliation with a particular location, discourse and audience to loosen up things a bit. The collaboration itself also rather effortlessly raised the question of the focus of the individual institutions and, in the process, rendered appreciable that all venues are indeed different, but their overlaps and shared interests are more numerous than previously thought.

The fact that *Die neue Peinlichkeit* again brings up the often empty seats at event series as an issue points (despite pop culture and changes in social values) to the still internalized culture of deferential listening and courteous silence—behavior still found in bourgeois-oriented art institutions. Although the traditional bourgeois art public has, for some time now, made way for diversity, the art industry continues to be very much hierarchically structured. Hence one may well ask how one can engagingly—and without awkward silence—share something in art when, for all purportedly low-threshold access, hierarchical power is still very pronounced.

A possible answer to this question is provided by the work *Gypsum*, which the artist Lara Almarcegui is currently showing (until early September) at the Casino Luxembourg. Almarcegui has shredded all gypsum walls of the forum for contemporary art into 20 tons of gypsum powder and removed all the built-ins from the building that, over the past twenty years, have contributed to shaping the planning, realization and perception of every exhibition, project, performance and educational and introductory events. Moreover, she has researched all construction materials that make up the Casino building and listed these on a wall in the exhibition space. Finally, she has examined the soil of Luxembourg[8i] and clarified legal issues for obtaining the rights of mining resources such as ore and oil for an area of up to 130 m below the land on which the Casino stands. Almarcegui hardly has the intention to drill for iron or oil. Yet with her act of appropriation she renders something visible: what lies underground is an integral part of the city and the economy that prevail at the surface. *Gypsum* disposes of the very walls that, radiantly white, on the one hand can be a projection space for experimental artistic practices beyond the everyday framework and, on the other, as part of the exhibition industry invariably represent power as well. The work expands the space around the building in the imagination with its exploration of the subsoil. To what extent does *Gypsum* cause the aforementioned value structures that help produce awkwardness to shift as well? The panic-like fear of making a mistake and embarrassing oneself has to do with the power of authorities who claim to know what is stable and faultless. The pulverization of white walls doesn’t dissolve power structures, but it does point to other powers and forces that are suddenly exposed.

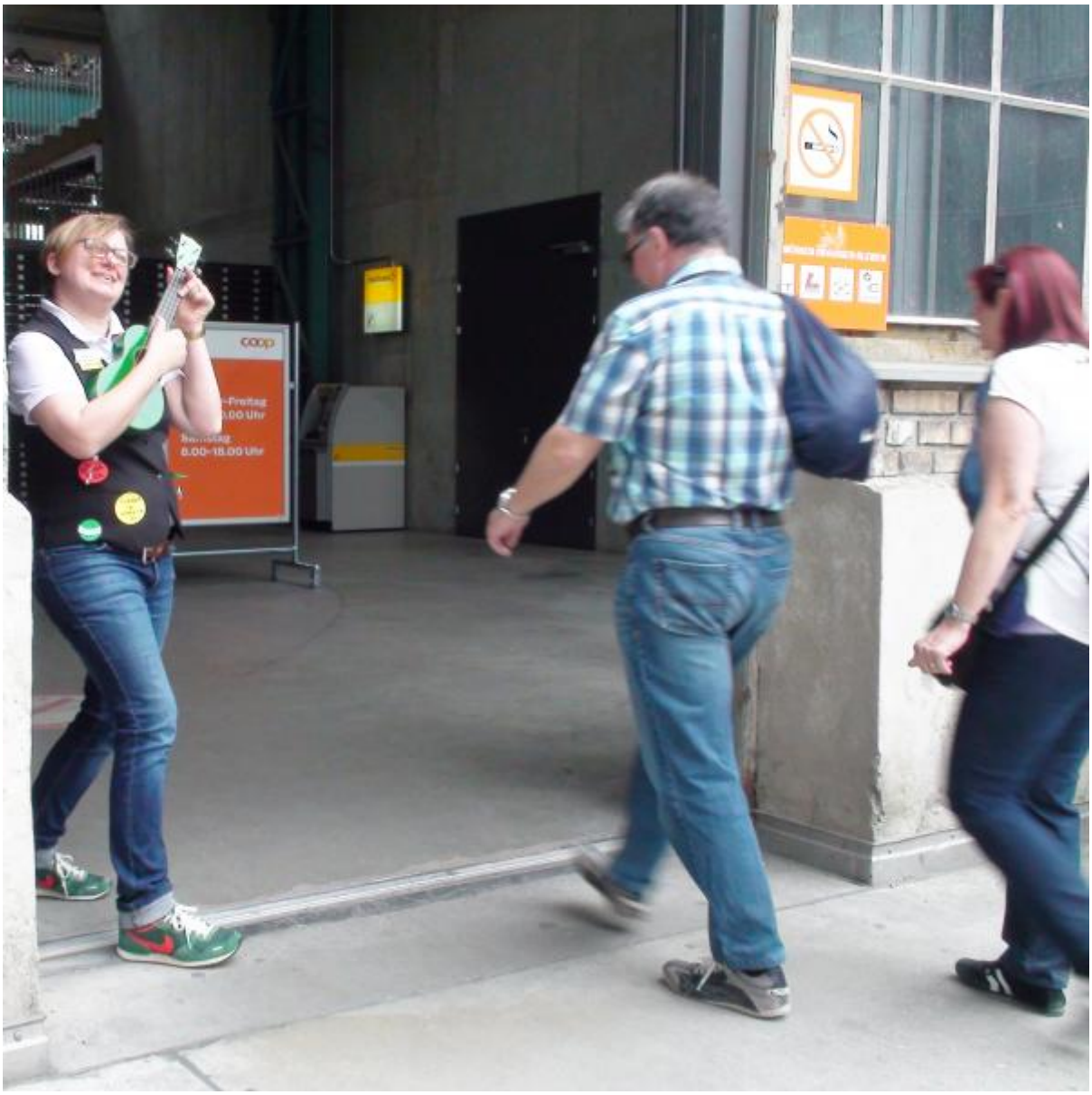
That there are people to whom nothing is too embarrassing is boring. Awkwardness, by contrast, is really interesting as ingenious delight in the collision of contradictions, in places where uncertainty and lively confusion are created. This is where the team of *Die neue*

Peinlichkeit comes in. This team is less concerned with turning awkwardness into a joke and again seeing everything through the prism of irony. The point is, rather, to take the interstices of complete uncertainty, which we passed through again and again since being a teenager, seriously as what they are: as situations in which we cannot tell anything apart. Yet instead of silently reorganizing and stabilizing things privately, in order to subsequently present them once more in the white cube, perfectly staged, as a so-called experiment, it would be possible to present the disordered, the entangled and that which doesn't really seem to fit together just like that, just as it would also be possible to invent and refine the language for it. For instance, in the way the poetry slammer and author Hazel Brugger[9] does it when she describes what sweat-inducing inner conflicts and vivid aggressions slip, as interstices, into a sentence that is started in a conversation with someone and that at some point, after escape movements bordering on hallucinations, is also ended. The use of contradictory ways of thinking where involvement and dissociation remain unpredictable and where simultaneous speaking beyond deferential listening is indomitable: this makes it possible for the quality of describing, depicting and presenting to gradually change, without always having to know whether what is shown is the right or the wrong thing. In the process, the uncertainty may throw us, more than previously, into emotional confusion, yet the important thing is that it gives rise to shared forms of showing and communicating, which also provide shared enjoyment.

Greeter in Action - Silvia Popp




SILVIA
GREETER
Montag-Freitag
7.00-20.00 Uhr
Samstag
8.00-18.00 Uhr
YES
JA
THANKS
for
stopping
by!



The greeter wears a vest with informative and illustrative badges during the enthusiastic greetings. Even better, she also plays an instrument. Greeter in Action / Silvia Popp, 2016

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The artist Silvia Popp is working on a widely ramified work that she is developing partly alone and partly with Anja Moers as part of the duo Studio Action. This includes the research-based works combined in the Insel-Institut, works dealing with public spaces and landscapes, as well as projects that address tools, work, working conditions and many questions of values in the context of work, people and a changing world. People themselves are always central and, though rarely visible in the picture, are usually addressed very directly. A good example is the work-in-progress Greeter in Action. Inspired by Walmart greeters and similar figures, Silvia Popp acts as a performer on her own account somewhere near a mall entrance, a bus stop, a hockey stadium or in the lobby of the Kunsthaus Zürich, where she warmly, endearingly—indeed, possessively to the point of being conspiratorial—welcomes the people who arrive and, after accompanying them for a little while, says goodbye to them again. The straightforwardness of her approach is so surprising and disarming that for a few seconds she causes a loss of control, triggering all kinds of reactions in the addressees.

Numerous addressees respond just as warmly to the greeting, until they notice the small shift (or not) that may exist between the personal and «the personal». Both those who feel they have been had and those who didn't trust the situation from the outset, may be seized by a sense of sudden awkwardness in the face of such cordiality on the part of the greeter and their own spontaneous acceptance or, alternatively, their knee-jerk resistance.

What is interesting about Silvia Popp's approach is that she is there, with plausible sincerity, for the people she greets and only lets them go when they can say to themselves: hey, that was awkward for a brief moment, sure, but it plunged me into a space of closeness where personal sensitivity and some sort of awareness of public encounter collided in a refreshing way. And that to me is worth my embarrassment!

Although the greeter vest is studded with badges and buttons bearing inscriptions such as «Yes, Oui, Ja!», «#1» or, most recently, «BAM!», it still remains unclear what the greeter is supposed to represent—in sharp contrast to the underpaid touters who are out there on behalf of businesses. This may irritate, yet what Silvia Popp exposes here is precisely the intermediate space that initially can be embarrassing and then immediately relaxes, as it becomes clear that the greeter definitely doesn't have any evil intentions. Perhaps.

[1] Saehrendt, Christian. *Blamage! Geschichte der Peinlichkeit*. Berlin:Bloomsbury, 2012.

[2] Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York:Knopf, 1977.

[3] Penny, Laurie. «Why Game of Thrones is the perfect show for the modern age». *New Statesman*, 29 April 2016.

[4] Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

[5] Kotsko, Adam. *Awkwardness*. Winchester, UK; Washington, USA: zero books, 2010.

[6] Lintzel, Aram. «Das Potenzial des Peinlichen». TAZ, February 14, 2012.

[7] *Die Neue Peinlichkeit.* A rotating program of events by/with/at Helmhaus Zürich, Kunsthalle Zürich, Shedhalle, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Haus Konstruktiv and UP State, May–July 2015. Program newsletter

[8] Lara Almarcegui, *Luxembourg souterrain*. Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg – Forum d'art Contemporain

Luxembourg, 2016.

[9] Hazel Brugger, *ich bin so hübsch*. Zürich – Berlin: Kein & Aber Pocket, 2016.

DANIEL HAUSER

Daniel Hauser is an artist. Together with Marie-Antoinette Chiarenza he forms the artistic team RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co). He is head of the Fine Arts program at the F+F Schule für Kunst und Design in Zürich.