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On Bea Schlingelhoff's «Auftrag / No Offence»

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«Until patriarchy is abolished, must all women's labor also be mercenary labor?»

Fino all'abolizione del patriarcato,
il lavoro delle donne deve essere
considerato pure lavoro mercenario?

Until patriarchy is abolished
must women's labor also be
mercenary labor?



Denis Lavant looks mighty stupid slamdancing solo for the last sequence of Claire Denis' «Beau Travail». The 1999 film portrays a section of the Foreign Legion stationed in Djibouti. It dismantles the romantic escapism associated with mercenarydom and reconstructs it into sequences of highly ritualized choreographies that render the male body objectified, mechanized, standing besides itself. They are speechless, performative vehicles of masculine arts.[1] Using Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* — the handsome seaman impressed onto a British navy boat where he gets accused of mutiny — as a narrative flight line, the mechanical ballet sits at the center of a drama about jealousy, betrayal and murder. Denis' film negotiates between the literal and the literary, between an observation of the conditions of mercenarydom and the tales that nourish it.

We laugh at Denis Lavant spastically tripping over his own feet once he is removed from the pack's choreography, an exposed cogwheel in a mechanism. But in laughing about the romantic fool something about ourselves is revealed.



Bea Schlingelhoff. *Auftrag: No Offence*. Istituto Svizzero, Milano. 31.5.–1.7.2017. Foto: Giulio Boem

On a large vinyl banner in the courtyard of the Istituto Svizzero in Milano, Bea Schlingelhoff asks: «Until patriarchy is abolished, must all women's labor also be mercenary labor?» There is a double meaning implied in the word «mercenary», which seems to be disease and cure at the same time. To serve under someone else's cause is to rent out your body for low income, possible abuse and a loss of identity: the exact conditions that a women faces in a labor market under patriarchy, which will always operate along its governmentality. Schlingelhoff's

question here determines a status quo, the fact that a woman's labor condition is so alienated that it could only be mercenary labor. Yet the mercenary, as a socio-political and cultural construct, is played out against itself as a possible escape route from the conditions it was priorly used to sum up. To be a mercenary is the promise to attain a new identity, after a period of a temporary loss of identity. Schlingelhoff's question could also be the proposition for a collectively embodied fiction aiming to overwrite a reality that is so horrid that no one wants to live there anymore.

It is between those two poles, between literalness and literary-ness, that Schlingelhoff's exhibition titled *Auftrag* (German for order, commission, but also for application of, say, paint) / No Offense operates, between a critical model of clarity and a more ambiguous one. In order to do so, Schlingelhoff embarks on a double maneuver in which fulfilling the institution's expectations (the order) is the cover-up to put exactly said accomplishment into doubt.

Auftrag

An excerpt from a documentary about the Swiss Guards shows a mercenary cutting dress uniforms with a special device — a knife attached with a screw to a wooden board, rendering the cutoffs into even stripes. In documents accompanying the exhibition we learn that the activity is a punishment meted out for the disobeying of orders. The Swiss Guards themselves were established in 1506 under Pope Julius II and have served as the de facto military of the Vatican City State ever since. Recruits to the guards must be unmarried Swiss Catholic males between 19 and 30 years of age who have completed basic training with the Swiss Armed Forces. The dress uniform of the Swiss Guards was introduced in 1914 by Commandant Jules Repond, in the colors red, yellow and blue, in remembrance of the colors of the Medici family, which produced numerous popes over the centuries. Also responsible for major commissions to Rafael and Michelangelo at the Vatican, the Medici family thus operated at the foundations of art history as we know it today. So what the Swiss Guards are defending is not only history's most brutally patriarchic religion but also said religion's influence on all of western culture, situated in a boys' club in the center of Rome (The Vatican's female population is around 5%).

Schlingelhoff also literally dissects the color code, tinting the windows of the exhibition space and an annex building with the same red, yellow and blue. Externally, this demarcation functions like an overwriting of the architectural conditions of a cultural site with the hidden powers woven into it.

A series of stills from the video are printed out as carriers for pages torn out of notebooks containing the thoughts that led up to the show. While the stills just temporarily rent out their bodies to become artworks, the artist is pondering over whether feminism is for hire, putting her own role as an alleged practitioner of Institutional Critique into doubt. Aware that housing an exhibition that displays self-criticality and reflection feeds first of all into an institution's cultural credibility, Schlingelhoff situates herself as a mercenary, hired — by a Swiss cultural institution in Italy, funded by the Swiss consulate, housed in the Italian headquarters of UBS, one of the biggest patrons of contemporary art — to be, well, critical. Order completed, day is done.



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No Offense

Schlingelhoff's disobedience is not only towards a cultural site and its given sets of behaviors that end up reaffirming cultural legitimacy, towards a canonized art history (that includes Institutional Critique) but towards a critical model of clarity per se, in favor of a more ambiguous one.

While the application of paint (*Auftrag*) externally functions as a demarcation, it lends the interior space a strange glow, neglecting a neutral white. The area of the space that is tinted blue, the paint applied like flowing waves, feels like being underwater; it tells escapist stories of travels on the sea. (As large abstract paintings they might as well tell the story of Chris Wool drowning in a lake of cash.) Another Italian tale of the ocean is that of its respective colonies, Italian Lybia and Italian East Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia), all of which were colonized under a coat of arms bearing the same blue, yellow and red. Heraldry, after all, is a tool to mark newly acquired territory, which can also be the discipline of painting. (A few years ago, Schlingelhoff, while preparing an exhibition at the cinema AP News that I was co-running at the time, told me about the concept of situationism in the ocean, of female pirates reterritorializing the ambiguity that is the ocean.)



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The more crudely applied yellow drying out like crusted sand reminded me of the loss of subjectivity that Pierre Guyotat encounters as a Foreign Legionnaire in the madness of the Algerian War. For him the loss of identity as mercenary led to the radical formal decision to write a novel without a protagonist (*Eden, Eden, Eden*), and if Schlingelhoff is attempting to tell a tale, then it is one without a glorified heroine, but a collective fiction of empowerment.

Of course, allowing/opening up a space to such casual associations, a clean-cut-post-colonial-Whitney-program-educated critical standpoint is the first casualty, but it's one that Schlingelhoff is willing to take.

Finally the Glass Tower in the courtyard, tinted red with an automated light that illuminates it at sunset, seems to recount the story of Bannadonna, the artist who gets slain by his own creation in Melville's *The Bell Tower*. The artist Bea Schlingelhoff, well aware that she and her cause might face a similar fate, occupies Institutional Critique from a Melvillian standpoint. In giving all her actions and gestures a possible allegorical dimension, she is able to state her cause of highest importance without compromising what such a stating does. She does to Institutional Critique what one could imagine Kathy Acker would do to Melville.

[1] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster: *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 110, 112.

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