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Sexist Role Play

Christian Jankowski's ‹Retrospektive› at Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin

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The artist Christian Jankowski likes to play with social roles in his work. For his exhibition at Contemporary Fine Arts (CFA) (January 15 – March 5, 2016) he reversed roles and summarily made an actress curator of his Retrospektive. However, this play is by no means innocuous and cements sexist gender stereotypes.





Digital announcement of Christian Jankowski, Retrospektive, Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, January 15 – March 5, 2016

A few weeks ago, my friend C. sent me this exhibition announcement with the comment «Look, isn't this ?!?!? — insane.» A frame-filling photo portrait of a beautiful woman with long blond hair, slightly pouting pink lips and a provocative look. The picture is reminiscent of comp cards that actors/actresses or models use as business cards. The writing on the card explains that it is an announcement of an exhibition of the artist Christian Jankowski. The woman in the picture is Nina Hoss. She is curating the exhibition. At least that is what it says on the invitation. Hoss is an award-winning German actress who, among other films, starred in the Christian Petzold movies Wolfsburg (2003) and Barbara (2011).

The card reads differently now. It is not advertising an exhibition of a photographer's portraits. It is about switching roles. Actress curates exhibition. This is really typical of the artist in whose work playing with social roles is a recurring theme. In his video piece Galerie der Gegenwart, 2097 (Gallery of the Present, 2097) (1997) two children mime an ‹artists talk› between Uwe Schneede and Rosemarie Trockel. And in his exhibition Dienstbesprechung (Briefing) (2008/2009) at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart Christian Jankowski had the staff of the museum swap their professional functions. Thus a technician briefly became director of the museum. The most likely latest example is this year's Manifesta 11 in Zürich. Jankowski asked the invited artists to interact with ‹non-artistic› work environments according to the motto What People Do for Money: Some Joint Ventures.

Admittedly, such role playing does not cause much of a stir anymore in today's art world. What is interesting here, though, is the question what social role models the artist references in his respective projects and in how he depicts them. Do they serve to subvert or affirm culturally hegemonic attributions and conventions? These are the questions raised by Jankowski's Retrospektive in Berlin. Employing Nina Hoss as curator serves as a PR gag on behalf of the artist. The CFA Gallery's press release also clearly conveys this: «The exhibition, which will predominantly showcase a selection of cinematic works by the artist, was consciously timed to coincide with the Berlin Film Festival, the Berlinale 2016.

Jankowski expressed interest in having the exhibition curated by an actress. Intuitively, Nina Hoss was selected, as the artist is not at all familiar with the theatre scene. The actress, who in turn had never heard of Christian Jankowski, spontaneously agreed […].» [1]

Hence it was by no means on account of her professional expertise that Hoss was invited and asked to take a new look at Jankowski's art from her perspective as an actress.[2] She becomes a poster girl, an image, a passive advertising vehicle. Astonishingly enough, Hoss herself confirms as much in an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: «At the beginning the gallerists told me reassuringly that I wouldn't really have to do anything anyhow.»[3] Taking on the role of a fan, she recounted full of admiration how she first met the artist: «By the time I […] had seen all his works and we then met for the first time to discuss the project, I actually had something like a fan moment. Jankowski appears in many of his own videos and to then see him in the flesh right in front of me briefly made me quite nervous. »[4]

In the same interview the actress indicates that she may indeed not have had much of an influence on the exhibition's configuration. The journalist Johanna Adorján asked: «And, did you kick those [works that appeal less to her out of the exhibition]? Because [as a curator] you'd be allowed to.» Hoss: «Yes, I think I have. Well, we'll have to see how that works out, but I definitely wouldn't show those prominently.»[5] In fact, nothing in the actual exhibition indicates conceptual curatorial input on Hoss's part. She is present in the proper sense only in the invitations that are placarded on the walls.

The role play presented here is so bold and simple that one is almost tempted to grant Jankowski some kind of hyper-affirmative critique. Isn't the artist aiming to demonstrate the mechanisms of the art world and show the extent to which art today depends on celebrity effects? And is the picture of Hoss not an exaggeration of social stereotypes — the naïve, beautiful, passive blonde — and hence an implicit critique of such simplistic imagery? This is hardly the case, however. At no point in this role play does the image of woman encounter us in an exaggerated way — say, too garish, too vulgar or too offensive — for it to offend the eye. Geared towards the media and so omnipresent in advertising, the use of woman as image functions all too seamlessly here, advertising not a product but, rather, the work of the artist. In Retrospektive, Jankowski reproduces and affirms these stereotypes and joins a ubiquitous sexist chorus.

One is tempted to continue Jankowski's discriminating game, as one immediately wonders why Hoss, who is actually a highly skilled, self-assured actress, went along with it like that — why she didn't resist this objectivization. In other words, one is inclined to view Hoss not just as a pretty, but also somewhat naïve cover girl. The otherwise well-regarded critic Raimar Stange is among those who, unhesitatingly, falls into this trap. In Artmagazin he expresses his amazement that in spite of Hoss's collaboration an actual exhibition has materialized: «As someone who is not really ‹from the field,› Hoss has curated this exhibition. But this change of roles is not showing in the exhibition; it has become a retrospective the way a ‹real› curator could have realized it. This is exactly why Retrospektive has become a watchable affair featuring almost all of the artist's major works.»[6]

It is not a matter of what Nina Hoss should have done or not done — it would have been easy to find another actress to take over her role. Nor can the role swap be justified by claiming it serves to hold a mirror up to the art world. For however apposite his observation about the art

world with regard to celebrity culture may be, Jankowski reproduces gender-discriminatory stereotypes for his Retrospektive, using them deliberately for the public impact of his own work.

[1] Press release regarding the Christian Jankowski exhibition Retrospektive, Contemporary Fine Arts, 2016, http://cfa-berlin.com/exhibitions/retrospektive/press/ (accessed March 11, 2016).

[2] An at best interesting endeavor, as a critical look at Jankowski's role play would seem to be perfectly suited for a professional actress.

[3] Johanna Adorján, «Reden wir über Kunst, Nina Hoss,» Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 11 , 2016, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/nina-hoss-als-kuratorin-von-christian-jankowski-14005859.html [http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/nina-hoss-als-kuratorin-von-christian-jankowski-14005859.html] (accessed March 11, 2016).

[4] See n. 3.

[5] See n. 3.

[6] Raimar Stange, «Retrospektives Rollenspiel,» Artmagazine, January 17, 2016, http://www.artmagazine.cc/content91845.html [http://www.artmagazine.cc/content91845.html] (accessed March 11, 2016).

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