

AN UNRESOLVED NO-MAN'S-LAND

When you see Heidi Voet's work, the first thing you feel is wonder, or is it aesthetic seduction? We enter a realm that seems delightful: fairy tales, romanticism, pleasure. But very soon we have to admit that all this turns out to be an illusion. The work still maintains its position, however, even after this sobering realization. We let ourselves be carried away by longings and thereby set aside the complexities of reality. The deliberate cultivation of this mental immersion is not the only motivation for spending time with the work. The work itself provides the elements necessary to detract from it, and this gives the poetic experience a deeper dimension. The more we experience life in society, the more we encounter the emptiness behind the symbols of civilization. We foster an appreciation of real life, stripped of all its mirages. In the no-man's-land between dream and disillusion we move between pole and antipole. We can at any time escape into a fantasy world, or put both feet back on solid ground.

The artist achieves her immediate effect on the viewer by means of recognizable symbols. Certain objects need no explanation. They are part of everyday life or play a role in mass culture. These recognizable signs summon up certain fixed connotations in the collective memory and are at the same time accessible to everyone's personal imagination. Intimate reflections do not form a no-man's-land detached from culture. In the very personal experience of our intuitive knowledge we become more open to shared social norms. Timeless desires pry us loose from a specific time and place. It is a matter of universal and at the same time highly personal experiences that refer to the bonds with ourselves and the cosmos. We exchange the social value of the symbols for a poetic value. Heidi Voet applies a strategy of smudging and sublimation to common symbols. She partly divorces the symbols from their usual meaning by means of bold combinations, changes of material, and the introduction of humor that puts it all into perspective. Her work proves that fantasy makes room for an infinite number of variations on visual codes. Every consumer article, advertising image or toy adopts a well-defined form that influences people. Designers have to take account of the whole previous history of the symbols and their psychological effect on the masses. Heidi Voet analyses the way in which visual culture produces a world of illusions mostly oriented towards consumption. To this end, she seeks inspiration in such varied areas as fairy tales, cosmic elements, supposed exoticism, and cheap export products. Her version of visual culture leads both to a poetic experience and to a greater awareness of the visual industry.

In the next step, the artist shatters our fascination for these seductive symbols. Time plays an important part in this. Sporadically, different time dimensions cross over one another. For example, this aspect comes to the fore in her early video installations, where the viewer is almost physically carried along on waves of time, for example in *Present Perfect Tension*, *Mr. & Mrs. (Moon-Corridor)*, *Mr. & Mrs. (Permanent-Marker)*, and *The Joker*. Projected film loops of trees, birds, clouds, or the sea enter our mind in

cyclical processes that ripple on, undisturbed. Trees branch out in every direction like virtual networks and, as a rule, they last for generations. We experience birds as a species; they come and go inconspicuously. A surge of waves or a cloud formation is always unique in some way, but we cannot hold onto this uniqueness. This is the sort of dominant nature that lays the foundations for the technological world. No concrete stories are to be found here. When, in *Mr. & Mrs. (Permanent-Marker)*, a child endlessly gives shape to his fantasies in drawn lines, sooner or later he has to make choices. Most possibilities are still open; life waits to be given substance at every moment, over and over again. Nature determines the basic forms, not the course of a life. As long as this freedom exists, people sense infinite potential for themselves. In reality, the danger that personal trajectories are determined by others is always lurking. By contrast, Heidi Voet's work actually offers a counterbalance to social pressure. Visitors find themselves in an alternative world where the imagination briefly gains the upper hand over reality. The recurring cycles of cosmic images evoke a range of experiences of time that lie very close together. Let's take as an example the child's hand sketching on the ceiling of the imaginary bedroom in *Mr. & Mrs. (Permanent Marker)*. First of all there is the cosmic time of the clouds and the sea, in combination with the eternal fantasy that is characteristic of a certain age. Then the viewer delves into his memory. What did he himself dream of as a child? In what way does time reverberate in his memory? For which yearnings did he make a real effort? Near and far overlap each other. Apart from being natural phenomena, clouds and waves are also cultural referents that affect our feelings. Our escape routes correspond to cultural and psychological patterns that make it apparent we are never alone. But this framework for escape does need measurable time to be its indispensable ally. We cannot continue dreaming forever, while life is in danger of slipping away from us because of our detachment. We also know that the whole installation has been staged for a temporary exhibition. For the occasion, notional walls and ceiling transform the architecture into a mental space. Each work is the result of a *mise-en-scène* that reveals its own components with a wink.

Time can also be present indirectly. In such cases, the transient aspect lies in the evocative nature of the materials, symbols and texts. *If Memories Were Wishes* shows a concrete wall lying horizontally and supported by five pillars at one end. These pillars are made of piles of postcards of exotic flowers. The more of them the visitors take, the more striking becomes the fragility of the structure of the skyscrapers. *The Earth is Flat* treats the viewer to a paper cloud cover suspended in the cross vault of a mediaeval chapel. We are taken back to the time when people believed in a geocentric world. At the same time, it begs the question of what will remain of our present image of the world several centuries from now. *Tomorrow* repeats the title word in a mosaic of gingerbread and meringue. The pleasant smell summons up childhood dreams, but just next to it we read the words 'the day before' in neon letters. We are looking at a fragile fairytale with a predictable ending. In *The Weight of Wonder* the driveway of a castle-museum is covered with fifteen tons of pink gravel. This promising route gives the walker a sense of lightness, whereas it was a feat of physical strength to get the epoxy-

covered gravel to the right place. In Heidi Voet's work the fantasy takes flight, which automatically arouses the idea in the viewer that the reality behind the impressions is more complex. By means of poetic exaggeration, she questions all society's prefabricated impressions.

The video installations and spatial interventions draw us into a fantasy world with its own laws. They require time and movement from the viewer. But today's world is geared to rapid visual impressions that go out to the people. Over the last ten years Heidi Voet has primarily produced independent sculptures and objects. She lives both in Shanghai and Brussels and exhibits on several continents. In her contextual method she introduces aspects of global economy and culture. Her work comments on the lightning-fast shifts that occur in world cities. A series of vases on pedestals contain exotic flowers, but these turn out to be made of folded erotic photos. The transient pleasure of flowers and love contrasts sharply with the unyielding cinder blocks that they stand on. *Kick some ass barefoot tonight* combines these elements with concrete shoes displayed for pleasure or for sale. What both have in common is the superficial stimulation of potential consumers. *Fruit & Vegetables* refers to a series of hybrid beings with the naked torsos of Chinese models and lower bodies made up of fresh vegetables or fruit. Body parts and natural products spill harmoniously over into one another, thanks to their sculptural qualities. Both have a limited 'sell-by date', but the viewer is only able to see the sculptures as prints. During the world exhibition, these 'nymphs' also appeared on billboards on the streets of Shanghai. The title *If I was beautiful. If I had the time* was borrowed from a pop song. *Endless Magic coming to China* appeared in a Chinese newspaper. The improbable story reverses the exotic roles of China and Europe. *Is six afraid of seven/'cause seven, eight, nine/I'm about to lose the pieces I find* initially appears to be a colorful oriental carpet with an abstract pattern. At second sight it reveals itself to be an arrangement of thousands of digital watches. Each one is synchronized to the second, and every hour they sound an alarm. As time passes, small variations occur and the chaos increases. These cheap watches are a contemporary variant on the exotic carpet. They are the perfect example of an article with global pretensions and illustrate intercultural understanding. It is not only time zones that are far apart, but also cultures, even though the world economy is leveling them off to form a single pattern. The accumulation of minor misunderstandings ultimately leads to chaos. At first sight, Chinese growth seems impressive. Outsiders fall prey to a new version of Orientalism. They misjudge the fact that China is drifting ever further away from the Eastern 'fairy tale' and is becoming an integral part of the world economy. We are experiencing the globalization of investments and consumer markets. Individual countries may be superficially following their own rules, but the economic substructure means that all the world's leading players are dependent upon one another. The economic division of labor means that cheap, mass-market products are overwhelmingly produced in developing countries. People goggle at the status of other continents, while they themselves are a crucial part of the mechanism. To recognize the

underlying trends, it is essential to maintain a critical detachment with regard to superficial differences.

The notion of the absent performance has gathered momentum in Heidi Voet's works over the years. *Endless Lightness* refers to Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Swimmers form a sculptural chain in a stretch of water, keeping afloat by means of lifesavers on their arms. This act can be performed all over the world, as long as the landscape is impressive. The public only learns of the occurrence at a later date when the print is integrated into the exhibition. This living artwork refers to the mediatization of sports culture and exotic landscapes. Here, the suggested lightness of Brancusi's vertical column is reflected in the floating lightness of the horizontal chain of people. We know that the participants cannot maintain their performance forever, and even the poster is only on the wall temporarily. For *Shoot & Sprout*, Heidi Voet cut a series of grotesque faces out of potatoes. The result is an odd mixture of animism, archaeology, graffiti and social comment. As the potatoes continue to sprout, the sculptures will become caricatures of themselves, until they rot away. But the viewer has to be satisfied with a series of photos.

When analyzing the individual components we should not lose sight of the whole. Heidi Voet's work owes its uniqueness precisely to the well-considered dosing of the subject, the materials and the symbols. All superfluous elements are excluded. Content, form and context form an inseparable whole. Her recent *Stars & Constellations* installation sets the tone in this regard. The artist produced this work for a European exhibition in Brussels. Thousands of coins are scattered over the floor. The various sizes and colors twinkle like stars in the heavens. They represent the major players in the world economy: the American dollar, which was dominant for a long time, the Chinese Yuan and Yao, and the currencies of several other developing countries. The coins act as a portrait gallery for a range of economies, but without pedestals. The Euro is of course a prominent presence, but in an abstract form. The identities of the individual Euro countries are no longer in evidence; only eleven stars remain (as in the title), referring to the symbol of Europe. When designing the fake Euro, the artist was working on the verge of what is permissible. She discussed her proposal with the European Central Bank. The installation reflects the changing relationships between continents and states. This also includes the degree of identification (or not) with one's own currency, and the embrace/rejection of other world players. Coins on the floor remind us of beggars, too. Both in Europe and the rest of the world, the gap between rich and poor is growing wider, and this is even visible in the European quarter. Philanthropy binds groups of people together. People also throw coins in a fountain and make a wish, a form of superstition. *Stars & Constellations* makes it clear that globalization not only brings with it new products and cultural norms, but also fundamentally changes the strategic balance of power in the world. This geopolitical level often remains unseen in our everyday perceptions. It plays out on an abstract level between the cosmic dimension and the everyday activities of billions of people. The previous elements are clearly

visible, but the balance of power usually only reveals itself when you analyze the signs. The poetic intensity of the work only serves to heighten the contrast with the political reality. The symbiosis of cultures is at odds with every continent's objective need to maintain its global position. This is also an unresolved no-man's-land. Heidi Voet detects the evolution of society in recognizable symbols. Each work lies somewhere between a poetic experience, humor, and critical analysis. The direction in which this balance moves depends on the viewer.

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