

Relationships

Jörg van den Berg, Director Columbus Art Foundation
Wolfgang Fetz, Director Magazin4 – Bregenzer Kunstverein, 2011

“In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.”¹

The video works of Anna Witt are based on actions and they confront the viewer with pictures. They mostly show performative interventions in public spaces. It is sometimes the artist herself who is acting; there are sometimes strangers, often passers-by, asked and invited by Witt to participate. With impartial interest towards her counterpart, Anna Witt creates playful situations and makes communal interaction possible. Witt describes her basic method as “offering people a space to act which they can design by themselves.” There is often language added to these physical actions. Non-verbal and verbal articulation opens space to think about a fundamental new definition of our communal living together.

Anna Witt was supported by the Columbus-Project Promotion of contemporary art from 2008 to 2011. The ending of this support by the Unternehmensgruppe Columbus is marked by the big solo exhibition in “Magazin4 – Bregenzer Kunstverein”² and by this book. Besides the documentation of the exhibition in Bregenz, the book mainly concentrates on the index which comprehensively presents works of Anna Witt’s artistic work of the first ten years. The detailed conversation between Anna Witt and Andreas Schlaegel leads to a composite of themes and questions that are relevant for Witt’s works. On the back-cover one eventually finds a DVD that shows a selection of ten works.

From the beginning; the book gives one an insight into the development of an oeuvre that works itself, surprisingly precise, into central topics about society. If you try to see a possible line of progression in the development of the work, it would lead from the self-centered works like “Ahnen” [Ancestors] or “Geburt” [The Birth] to works in which a plurality of ‘I’s’ act. Actually, it would end with works that explicitly work with a ‘we’; in other words, with a group of participants like in “Im Training” [In Training], “Domesticated” or “The Eyewitness”.³

Lastly, only in the first years can one find works that deal with the ‘I’ of the artist; also, referring to her origin. Looking back, especially these works seem like a necessary self-confirmation. Very soon the focus shifts away from the ‘I’; consequently, turning to other ‘I’s’. In the beginning of her career Witt mostly acted in front of the camera. Then little by little she made unknown passers-by into actors, participants and collaborateurs by asking them for certain actions in front of the camera. The action often stays the same throughout the work, nevertheless, the actors change. This way there appears no chains of action, no narrations, but repetitions. That is repetitions in a double sense. On the one hand, Anna Witt doesn’t invent new themes, but asks for repetitions of greater or lesser known actions. The gesture of arresting someone in the video “Push” or the raised fists of the greeting workers in the video “Gleitzeit” [Flexitime] are used as examples. On the other hand, the actors in the works always repeat the same action. These repetitions then hold differences in each individual performance. No action is similar to the other. The actors start to differentiate themselves through their actions. ⁴ What first seems momentarily redundant suddenly offers a variety of perspectives. Exactly this function is fulfilled according to Søren Kierkegaard’s definition of repetition as a memory propelled forward. “Repetition and memory are the same movement; only in the opposite direction because what one remembers had been, is repeated backwards, while simultaneously the actual repetition is a memory straight ahead.” ⁵ The raised fists of the protagonists in “Gleitzeit” can

not be relativized as a historic phenomenon, but stays in the present and asks questions about an actual working life now and in the future. The same is true for the gesture of arresting someone in “Push”. Eventhough it occurs in Los Angeles and is shown playfully; the brutality and/or power, between the actors, doesn’t offer the opportunity to distance oneself like it does with the same actions seen in a fictional Hollywood movie. Witt confronts the viewer with well-known actions and themes. Working through the eternally probable valid foundations and conditions of the organization of human plurality, she produces immediacy. With an inimitable directness of attention and candid elemental simplicity in the realisation; she is able to provoke absolute presence, the viewer has to confront oneself under the conditions of one’s presence. The repetition doesn’t create any relativation, to the contrary, it forces a heightend form of compulsuriness. Witt’s works with groups functions differently. Here a community of people as

itself appears in attendance. Was it in “Geld zu finden” [Money to find] really only a stage setting that Witt offered by happenstance to an audience at her opening, whereas in later works like “Domesticated” or “Im Training” she acted like an animal documentary film maker or rather as a coach. The artist offers an area of action where the protagonists appear acting and/or speaking. Like in the works where soloists perform one after another. This also applies to the aforementioned group works.

In this communal atmosphere, plus in acting against each other, a medium develops as a space between the people. In exactly this medium politics emerges. That is what seems to interest Anna Witt in all her works, to point at the action of the single person – alone or in a group – as a necessary precondition of society.

There is probably not a single work in the catalogue where a theme is not of a certain relevance for the viewer. Because of the familiar themes that Anna Witt works with as well as the self-evident way she works, the relationship between the work and the viewer becomes even sharper. In many of her works, Anna Witt is able to dissolve a withdrawn counterpart in favour of a quasi-participatory reception. The viewer immediately realizes that one is not dealing with actors, nor with a theatre play, but with people who are apparently coincidentally pulled out of their passive public anonymity to act vicariously for ‘us’. The actions themselves are never fictitious, but in an unrelenting way stay real. In this manner Anna Witt is able to create the maximum amount of identification for the viewer with the people on screen. One has to inevitably ask oneself, how one would act in this role. Anna Witt, in the modus of self-evident radicalness, doesn’t allow the viewers to distance themselves. The viewer becomes a participant. Just in this moment there develops an obligatory medium. And exactly in this medium politics originates.

1 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*. second edition. Chicago (The University of Chicago Press) 1998, p. 179

2 “Anna Witt. stetig aufbegehren” Magazin4 – Bregenger Kunstverein, March 5th to May 8th 2011. Parallel to this Solo-presentation the Columbus Art Foundation Ravensburg shows the group exhibition “politics- I-Is-we” including works by Alexander Kluge, Barbara Köhler, Thomas Locher, Mark Lombardi, Jan J. Schoonhoven, Albrecht Tübke & Anna Witt. See also: www.c-af.de/columbus/artfoundation/zeigen/ausstellung-politics.php

3 The work “The Eyewitness” wasn’t completely finished at the time of printing this book. In cooperation with Marco Ceroli, the art pedagogy, who at the Columbus Art Foundation is responsible for the children’s programm “the art-explorer”, at her solo exhibitions in the museum Goch and the Salzburger Kunstverein (both in autumn 2011) Anna Witt has worked with two groups of children between the ages of 7 and 10. Picture of the workshop see p. 236.

4 In this context it shall be referred to Hannah Arendt’s fundamental reflexions about acting and speaking. “The fact of human plurality, the principle requirement of acting as well as speaking, manifests itself in two ways, as equality and diversity. Without equality there wouldn’t be any understanding between human beings ... Without diversity, without the absolute difference of every person from any other there would neither be need for language nor acting for understanding.” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*) [the german original, see footnote (1), p. 213]

5 Søren Kierkegaard: *Die Wiederholung*. Übersetzt, mit Einleitung und Kommentar herausgegeben von Hans Rochol. Hamburg (Meiner) 2000, p. 3 [Repetition, 1843. Translated into German and edited with a comment by Hans Rochol]