

***A Not Entirely Human Gaze*** - Jean-Ernest Joos

Text for the exhibition *Drain* at Oboro, Montreal, 2014 (videos *La Ronde*, *Momentum* and *Décalage*).

What should we look at? What are we asked to see? Bettina Hoffmann's camera has an exacting, disquieting and enigmatic presence. Yet it is also personal, subjective, intrusive, voyeuristic and, by the same token, mechanical, cruelly arbitrary, entirely anonymous and violently imposing. This is the constitutive paradox that the artist works into her medium. Here the camera is neither a tool for making images, nor a medium whose immanent possibilities are to be explored. The camera has a real structured presence; it is inhabited with its own will and agency; it is even the object of the artist's creative decisions. Its presence—and the gaze it imposes—is what the viewer must experience. Its mediation is omnipresent, because it occupies the stage, moving between the characters-actors as if it was one of them. And much more, as the camera, with its life and action, imposes itself on the viewers and the artist like an inescapable obstacle.

When asked about her process of making images and using the medium, Hoffmann makes references to film, advertising and personal uses of photography. Yet, in Hoffmann's "film," the camera has lost its functionality: she shoots truncated bodies, characters whose subjectivity is absent and identity indeterminate, unfinished scenes, off-centre images in surprising frames, even out of focus. This controlled dysfunctionality is almost a destructive force and Bettina Hoffmann's signature across various projects.

When asked how she manages and controls this destruction of visual codes in the challenging context of a moving camera, her answer is startling. She refers to her camera as a mechanized eye that scans the space and autonomously records what she herself doesn't see, arbitrarily capturing spaces that are overloaded with information and others that are empty. She sees herself as a subject deprived of the power to make images who only controls the selection of images independently generated. She thus adapts her vision to the camera's eye, explaining that for her the mechanical eye is purely visual, while the human eye remains under the brain's control. The result of this selection process is much more than just images, it is a complete experience of the confrontation between the human subject and the mechanized eye, and even of what it means to "see." It doesn't see like a human, she tells us of her camera.

Our postmodern hypermediated world has accustomed us to "reading" images by giving them meaning and coherence through various means: we insert them into a logical and sustained narrative; we associate them with human intentions; we make them the expression or manifestation of a subjectivity. Bodily images and spatial locations are reinterpreted as the exteriorization of meaningful interior lives. Yet all these means are illusions that serve only to compensate for the images' deficiency and to conceal ambiguity, this is Bettina Hoffmann's radical position. Restore the images to what they truly say, maintain the appearance as pure exteriority, this is what guides the artist's montage. The coldness of her videos is explained by the denial of any redemptive psychology that could save us from what is profoundly distressing in the images. Contrary to any psychology, Hoffmann wants to empty subjectivity of all interiority, remove the artificial unequivocalness from the compositions, and allow images their enigmas between the information overload with no apparent relevance and the vacuity of meaning.

When selecting her images, she tells us that her consideration is a purely visual process and speaks surprisingly about the "visual solution." The work involves the erasing of the self and the self faced with what the images force us to accept: multiple interpretations, narrative ambivalence, the dissociation between the exterior and the interior, and the arbitrariness of information. I expect the viewer to do the same: watch, feel, endure. And this is how, behind the camera and the images generated, the artist's will obliges our complicity in the subjection.

References to the artist's statements are excerpted from an email interview conducted in English between the author and the artist in September 2013.

Translation : Oana Avasilichioaei