

Still lifes. *The Disappearance of Interiority* - Jean-Ernest Joos

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There is something uncanny about the way Bettina Hoffmann uses a very simple and low-tech device to articulate a complex reflection on subjectivity, violence and images.

The device is surprisingly simple. In photography the subject is alive and moving and it is the photographer who imposes immobility by taking the picture. Photography is all about the reduction of reality to an image. In Bettina Hoffmann's project the subjects are immobilized by the will of the artist. Prior to the image taking they are ordered not to move, not even a blink, as the camera moves around them in a precise and calculated manner. The videos are therefore moving images that re-enact the stillness of photography in a strange way.

In this case, the stillness has a double meaning: a formal one linked to the medium, and an existential one related to the status of individual identity. Let me first point out the way in which Bettina Hoffmann uses the video camera. Contrary to the medium's inherent logic, here the video camera does not film movement—the models are still—but serves the purpose of reproducing the static quality of photography. The movement is thus translated into a succession of still shots and points of view which unfold continuously as the camera moves. The immobilized bodies are subjected to very unusual framings and perspectives. In fact, Bettina Hoffmann takes the liberty to fragment the human body in places where one least expects it: heads are cut off, arms are left without trunk or shoulders. She uses the power of framing to its full extent. What is essential in each shot is not what is placed in the center, but that which is on the edge of the picture, where it is cut in two with one part off-frame and another in-frame, with one visible and another invisible. The viewer is invited to direct his/her gaze along the edges rather than towards the center where there is little to fix one's eyes on. This power of framing is further reinforced by what can be termed inappropriate framing; a process that actualizes the violence inherent in the images in a systematic and almost incoherent manner. The reality is subjected to the arbitrary agency of the medium. The representation of a subject by means of a medium is relegated to a secondary status. It is this agency of the medium in all its force that is revealed here.

This unmasking of the medium induces a quasi-existential experience. The viewer who looks at these still lifes can not but face the fact that s/he is looking at human beings submitted to a photographic sadism that reduces them to a cruel immobility. These human subjects therefore become objects, or in the artist's words "sculptures." What is shown, and what the viewer sees is of the order of pure exteriority: a pure and simple existence in space. The human sculptures appear strictly as a succession of external shots. The third dimension has to be subsequently recomposed through the connection of these two dimensional shots. In fact, the camera literally moves around the sculptures, and it is left up to the viewer to reconstruct the whole. However, since each shot is always linked to the preceding one, no matter how hard one tries, the whole will always be elusive.

There is something inconsistent in the way these images are processed.

Bettina Hoffmann's videos are anti-portraits. A portrait traditionally consists of a partial, one-sided view of a human being that can, by virtue of the image's "truthfulness," claim to represent its subject in full. In this case almost all sides are shown, but the different perspectives refer only to each other, without being organized around a unifying entity. We are left with a fragmented reality. At this point, Bettina Hoffmann's project shifts from a strictly formal level to that of a reflection on identity and subjectivity. The human sculptures are nothing but exteriority, their interiority vanishes in and through the process. The ordinary viewer has expectations regarding the representation of the human form. S/he seeks an interiority, a narrative, an identity, a meaning to be interpreted. On this level, Bettina Hoffmann plays a perverse game with the viewer.

The videos stage familiar situations, for instance a dinner, a party, a meeting, etc. The situations are staged much like a typical TV drama series; they refer to scripted moments. The viewer is enticed to make up his own story, but faced with such a wide array of potential storylines s/he simply cannot decide which one is the most fitting and appropriate. One builds the stories with the elements shown. There is always a set, made up of everyday objects, and characters staged in relation to each other. Yet, the connection between the characters and the objects are paradoxical and inconsistent. The gaps can not be bridged.

The potential narratives are thus severed from any identity, interiority, or personal history. We are trapped in strictly external relations between the staged elements: characters, objects, sets. The multiples narratives have no organizing principle, and they do not refer to any meaningful human experience.

An existential violence emerges from the artist's manipulative use of the medium. She imprisons her subjects in a situation of complete subjectivation. They are objectified and stripped of all interiority. In this sense, Bettina Hoffmann touches upon the postmodern rethinking of interiority. The postmodern critique asserts that interiority is a modern construction that can be deconstructed. This is exactly what she does: deconstructing interiority by means of the video medium.

To sum up the different moments of the artist project: first of all, she initially subjectifies her models by forcing them to pose as things among things; then, she subjects the human sculptures to an photographic agency that frames them inappropriately and violently; and lastly, she delivers these fragmented, subjectified bodies emptied of all interiority to the viewer's gaze. The viewer is now in a position to re-enact the entire process of domination set into motion by the artist.