

Ashley Hans Scheirl
Ob_scenery

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Textbook

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Introduction

“The body,” Terry Eagleton reminds us, “lies at the root of human history.” That is, one cannot separate questions of history, culture, ideas and philosophy from that of the human body, essentially. “Sexuality, too, lies on the cusp between Nature and Culture. ‘Human beings,’ Marx writes, ‘who daily remake their own life ... make other human beings to propagate their kind.’” This means that as individuals inhabiting bodies, we carry signs, signals and reproductive tools (whether biological or representational). We ourselves by virtue of inhabiting a body are political creatures, and our actions, activities and self-representations have a knock-on effect. If we consider, for example, the tendency for certain individuals in society to covet and flaunt wealth by wearing designer clothes or to drive expensive cars, this is more than a question of owning these items. It is also a spectacle and an active representation that casts a certain kind of desire for potential self-replication. Envy and want are often the reaction, and thus this desire not only casts a spell upon individuals to potentially also “copy” those they envy, it also wastes the energy and potential for individuals to take on different identities and self-representations. Thus we have in Europe as in many other western societies often a society that is often endlessly caught up in trying to appear, and thus be, more and more wealthy. Andreas Reckwitz argues that there are two different bourgeois cultures resulting: The older crowd have not caught on to Neoliberalism and tend to repeat and retain the homogenies behaviour they arise from. Meanwhile

a newer, younger middle class, the so-called Apple Generation, are influenced by the new forces of Neoliberalism, and believe they have not only individual singularity but that they are also liberal and resistant in their very tendency to consume.

As a transgender artist, Ashley Hans Scheirl has long made productive artistic and performative activity that follows, reflects upon or even parodies these trends. Eagleton remind us that, “In Marx’s view, the capitalist mode of production comes under the sway of a supremely bodiless form of reason, one that assumes a variety of forms. All the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all these senses—the sense of having. So that it might give birth to its inner wealth, human nature has been reduced to this absolute poverty.”

The artist is not only highly sensitive to this tendency, she often creates artwork that intentionally mimics capitalist modes of production and their lingering effects. Her work is often entirely about estrangement and while focusing on an ever-changing self that appears and re-appears not only in different media but in different genders, the artist is a shape-shifter, never easily reduced to one singularity. Eagleton continues, “Capital is a phantasmal body, a monstrous doppelgänger which stalks abroad as its masters sleep, mechanically consuming the pleasures they austerely forgo.” Notions of trans-national, Neoliberal Capital are constantly flitting in and out of the artist’s work, and this exhibition, as we shall see, is especially mindful of these conditions.

The Exhibition

The title of this exhibition is Ob_Scenery and has immediately within it several fields of reference that make a framework from which we may approach it. The words ob, scenery and obscene are immediately apparent, and suggested within this fragmentation of the two words is also the word obscure.

Ob in German refers to “whether,” “if,” and “or,” as well as “due to,” or even, when combined with und, the term implies something relevant, startling or urgent, such as saying “and how,” or “you said it!” There is immediately implied here something in the state of settling into meaning, or something that is contingent. Either way, it is unfinished, it lacks something, it is awaiting completion. Whether this lack or incompleteness is a so-called permanent status to the installation or something that is added to or “filled” by the visitor’s participation is unclear. However the sense of lack and the sense of want referred to earlier certainly arise associatively here, as does a sense of transformation and unstable self-dom, which are embodied by the artist in her praxis.

The underscore that separates Ob and scenery (Ob_scenery) is also a deliberate reference by the artist to marking out and emphasizing gender in text, especially in the German language. Meanwhile, the word scenery also gives us some clues in reading or experiencing the exhibition. The entire installation is itself staged. This is firstly highly appropriate to the context of Salzburg, which is often referred to as “the Stage of the World” not only with its famous Festspiele, but also with its own staged appearance that attracts high numbers of tourists. Not so unlike the city around it as it might seem, the installation is itself highly

theatrical. The exhibition involves several forms of arranged scenery, from video projections to collaged and wallpapered walls, to zany architectural interventions, to the deliberate browning of the entire space (which we will return to). The scenery presented is, on the one hand, a series of positioning's and re-positioning's of self-representation (that is, self-portraiture in different formats) and blurrings of gender and sexuality, and on the other hand, some social-political and socio-economic associations merged with and blended into these self-representations. Of course, there are also several props, including a giant turd seated like an actor on a stage, and we will return to these objects later in the text.

The third word evident in the title, obscene, is perhaps the most revealing term. Ashley Hans Scheirl has long toyed with obscene representation (and thereby tested its meaning and limits), especially in her long history of radical film-making that often utilized pornographic elements. Here in this exhibition, besides the usual appearance of turd (in a painting or as an object), what is obscene is not necessarily blatantly visual. There are at least two forms of the obscene here: a productive queering obscene by the artist throughout the various elements of the exhibition is merged with references to and parodies of the obscenity of Neoliberalism.

In this context, for example, the artist includes comic-book-like gold coin turds produced by the giant brown turd-sculpture, which clearly mock the trappings of wealth and late capitalism and illustrate that obscenity. They are also comically indicative of her scepticism she has for the bourgeois culture that on the one hand, she originally emerges from, and, on the other hand, which continues to persist, the same wolf in sheep's clothing so to

speak. These turd coins as with the entire aura of the exhibition are both dismissive of and attracted to the lure of all that glitters. The coins also reinforce the reference to a back and forth between vagaries of capital in their high-speed abstraction on today's trade market and the vagaries of queer representations of self. She finds that the tendency for capital to mutate, alter and deform at all costs in order to fulfill the tenets of supply and demand are naturally also obscene and likewise curiously akin to queer art and, she asserts, the performance of the cliché of the so-called art genius.

The shift of the production of goods to the value of exchange itself in late capitalism, she finds, has a parallel to a kaleidoscope of sexual identities that are not based on reproduction. Capital is carnival. Capital is the gay pride parade. Capital is perversion. Capital, especially in its current abstract, aggressive form of high-speed trading which tests and distorts the desire of the consumer and impacts swaths of populations of humans and animals alike, not to mention the finite resources on the planet, is the greatest order of obscenity.

There are two kinds of obscene to be considered here in this exhibition. The obscene may be that which we turn away from. Being repellent in nature, it is even often unrepresented or unrepresentable. We do not need to see the face of horror, it is not necessary for it to be directly shown, for us to know the obscene. Another version of the obscene is in its visual revealing. When it appears and is seen, its repellent nature will cause one to look away. But its memory will be sewn upon the psyche. The artist here stages a play between these two polarities, where there is a simultaneous hiding and revealing of the obscene in its various forms. This is especially evident in the

gesture of the hand pulling a curtain to reveal the obscene in contrast with the artist's use of various references to different forms of the obscene (historical and contemporary political situations, queer art, French Literature such as Jean Genet and Georges Bataille especially).

Relatedly, the artist is also interested in Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion that the experience and production of reality are tainted and powered by a "libidinal economy." She says that "This system of order/disorder circulating back to itself, which has to be produced anew again and again, regulates both the energy of the currents of desire and the pulse of the resistance to desire as well as the energy that is obtained when desire is deferred and hence translated to another "medium" and to another temporal system." Sandro Droschl writes that "Scheirl seems to employ at best these transitive forces, intensities and affects that drive us on primally deliberately as a motivation and to translate the dis/order built up in the course of their artistic and profoundly subjective development into 'images and languages of desire' and in that sense indeed represent circulating and transmedia works."

The browning in the entire exhibition is one such employment of disorder and thus has several key references. When all mixed together, colours in painting will become brown. The colours come then closest to shit or mud, and this association is for the artist deliberate. However the reference to Nazism is also very important in this exhibition. Ashley Hans Scheirl was born in Salzburg in 1956. This exhibition is her first solo presentation here, and as such it is a kind of homecoming project. She, as many in the region, grew up within a conservative society. Her grandfather rented his house to the Germania Burschenschaft.

The address is Linzergasse 5, and before the house in the street are three “Stolpersteine,” that is, memorial-stones that are placed into the cobblestone street. The names on these stones are Ernest Löwy, Ida Löwy and Herbert Löwy. Ernst was the father, born 1900, Ida the mother, born 1901, and Herbert the son, born 1926. In 1942, they were all deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

The Germania Burschenschaft is closest to something like a fraternity or private members club. The underlying energy and identity to the club is a deep nationalistic identity with “germanic” culture. A number of Freedom Party politicians are apparently members of similar Vereins. The Freedom Party represented refugees negatively in their 2017 election campaigns, and are now deliberating on how to dismantle the social system that Austria had earlier pioneered on establishing, especially targeting programs for women, the unemployed, the poor and refugees. These cuts will apparently correspond with tax benefits to the wealthier segments of the Austrian population. These political developments today are part of a right-wing resurgence across Europe both reacting to and swayed by the forces of Neoliberalism. They are also a case of history repeating itself to some degree.

Entering this brown exhibition is also akin to entering an anus. The anal reference is apparent on a number of levels beyond the entire browning of the walls. We also encounter several representations (including a sculptural prop) of turd. The artist is also very interested in a radical potential found in Freud’s notions of the anal phase. Where this phase exists between the oral and genital phases, everything at this time of development is open and pre-gender. The space and architecture are thus “queered”

into the anal phase by the artist for this exhibition, provoking an analysis not only of the artwork but of ourselves and of this culture and present time we inhabit. As with the anal phase, everything is open and floating; that is, disordered. It is not always going to be a pleasant experience, but the artist also ensures that it is often a humorous one, no matter how serious the terms of reference and the political histories and current context. Terry Eagleton reminds us that, "Freud, in whose view the small infant is in the grip of an anarchic set of bodily drives from which the ego is yet to emerge. The mind is belated in relation to the body. When it does appear on the scene, it represses a good many of the forces which went into its making, thrusting them into that non-place we know as the unconscious."

The video fragments projected on the two walls and on the monitor bring along a trajectory of the artist's work since the 1970s. There gestures from the body, which carry a language and form of identity-testing in themselves, are traced over decades. The videos also demonstrate how this project by the artist has been so long in the making and is itself unfinished, perhaps always to be unfinished.

The final word appearing in the title, although more associatively, is the term obscure. As with the browning of the space, in her self-portraits we see the artist emerging from a cloudy obscurity, here a grey one. This appears perhaps as the smouldering fog of recurring historical tragedy and injustice (the cruelty of humanity unto itself), which namely includes also elements of the current political tide in Austria, all once again rearing its obscene head. The artist is no stranger to this, having a personal history entwined very closely with this political one. The body, Eagleton reminds us, is a reservoir of these histories, and thus Ashley

Hans Scheirl carries these histories within herself and work while simultaneously subverting these narratives and realities, very much into a different present tense.

In this painting, as repeated in the wallpaper, the artist represents herself as immersed within this history and conundrum, obscured by them, partially emerging from them, and while her gaze out of the fog us emits an element of hope, the swirling grey forces on every side of her are steeped with a sense of doom. This is not to say that it is all hopeless, not at all, but at the same time there is nothing optimistic about this expression. While the current political situation in Europe is nowhere near what it had been decades ago, the artist nevertheless reminds us of the danger of history repeating while emphasizing that elements of resistance are always necessary, as much as they may seem impossible. The artist sees a form of resistance in hovering between hope and despair, with courage, with conviction. The charged character of the artist's persona, body and artwork, which are entwined and reflective upon each other, and being so, are all unsteady and resisting a stable form by their very entangled nature, may thrive despite the uncertainty or even the degraded re-emergence of dangerous political tides, and as such is a form of resistance. It is also, in being an immersive experience for the visitor and a highly visual one at that, contagious in its spirit, and emancipatory in its reproductive and reproducible effect.

Biography

Ashley Hans Scheirl was born as 'Angela Scheirl' in Salzburg in 1956 and studied restoration at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1975 to 1980. In the early 1980s she moved to New York, working for the weekly performance evening "Wednesdays at A's". For 16 years, Scheirl lived and worked in London, where she was part of an international scene of queer artists and adopted the transgender identity "Hans". In 2003 she received her Master of Arts diploma in fine arts from the Central Saint Martin's College. Since 2006, Scheirl has been a professor of "contextual painting" at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In 2017 she participated in the documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel. She is currently living as a DAAD Fellow in Berlin.

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Opening hours Café Cult: Mon–Fri 11 am – 11 pm