

## **Ashley Hans Scheirl. Ob\_scenery**

*(Extracts & Off-shoots from the original 2018 exhibition text)*

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Ashley Hans Scheirl has long made artwork and performative activity that intentionally mimics capitalist modes of production and their lingering effects. Her work often confronts estrangement as related to late capitalism and the production of identity, including gender identity, within this paradigm. We encounter in her work an ever-changing self that appears and re-appears not only in different media but in varying genders, roles and states of play. The artist is herself a shape-shifter, never easily reduced to one singularity. It is no accident then that notions of trans-national, Neoliberal Capital constantly flit in and out of her work. This work has many iterations, as an ongoing, if constantly mutating, series of portraits (most often painted) and witty figurations, all involving theatrics in the form of colourful cross-dressing (including three-piece suits and bright-coloured ties), sexualized motifs, scatological references, and bended appropriations. Altogether whether paintings, sculpture, film or an installation of all of these together, her work often seems outrightly embedded with a firm stance of some sort. Indeed her figure often faces us with some sort of challenge. Whether there is a political statement lurking behind this stance or not depends on the situation, however one does sense an internationally-derived counter-culture constantly at work in her practice. In short, Ashley Hans Scheirl, the artist, as well as her artwork too, is always in a state of transition, seemingly without exhaustion. This text will attempt to briefly explore her practice in the context of her 2018 exhibition at the Salzburger Kunstverein.

The exhibition was entitled *Ob\_Scenery*. The words *ob*, *scenery* and *obscene* are immediately apparent in the title, and suggested within this fragmentation is 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, something contingent. Unfinished, it lacks something, it is awaiting completion. Whether this lack or incompleteness is something that is added to or “filled” by the visitor’s participation is unclear. However a sense of lack and the sense of want certainly arise associatively here, as does a sense of transformation and unstable *self*, as embodied by the artist in her praxis.

The underscore that separates *Ob* and *scenery* (*Ob\_scenery*) is also a deliberate reference to marking out and emphasizing gender in text. Meanwhile, the word *scenery* also gives us some clues in experiencing the exhibition. The entire installation is itself staged. This is 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 endless tourists.<sup>i</sup> The exhibition is therefore itself theatrical, with arranged scenery, from video projections to collaged and wallpapered walls, to zany architectural interventions, to the deliberate brown-ing of the entire space, which we will return to. The scenery is, on the one hand, a series of positionings and re-positionings of self-representation (ie., self-portraiture in different formats) and a blurring of gender and sexuality, as alluded to above, and on the other hand, a series of social-political associations blended into these self-representations, but also combined with an image of - or even an imaginative, symbolic, if indeed parodic depiction of - the city itself, its history, and its psycho-geographies. Notably, the scenery also includes several rather oddly-flamboyant props, including a giant turd seated centrally like a perverse humpty dumpty, which we will return to shortly.

Which leads us into the third word evident in the title, *obscene*, itself perhaps the most revealing term. Ashley Hans Scheirl has long toyed with

obscene representation (and thereby tested its meaning and limits), especially in her radical film-making that often utilized pornographic elements. Here in this exhibition, besides the usual appearance of turd, what is obscene is not necessarily blatantly visual. A productive queering obscene is evident throughout the exhibition, 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 squirted out by the giant brown turd-sculpture, clearly mocking the trappings of wealth and late capitalism. The coins are also comically indicative of her scepticism for the bourgeois culture that she originally emerges from, and, that continues to persist, the same wolf in sheep's clothing. These turd coins as with the entire 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 fulfil the tenets of supply and demand are quintessentially obscene and likewise therefore oddly and pruriently akin to queer art, including as the parodic 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 distorts the desire of the consumer and impacts swaths of populations, not to mention the finite resources on the planet, is the greatest order of obscenity.

There are two other kinds of obscene to be considered here in this exhibition. The obscene may be that which we turn away from. Being

repellent by virtue of its very character, 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 actual 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. 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 more oblique 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."

The browning in the entire exhibition is one such employment of disorder. It also immediately outraged the Salzburg public, where this outrage was vocalized at the exhibition opening and artist talk. Brown represents, of course, shit or mud. What the public also immediately understood is that Nazism (and its association here with Salzburg) is naturally also a reference. As Ashley's first solo presentation in Salzburg, it was a kind of obscene homecoming, since she was not only born there but grew up within an ultra-conservative society there. Decades ago, her grandfather had rented out his house on Linzergasse to the Germania Burschenschaft. Today, the Burschenschaft is conspicuously still there. Before the house in the street, remarkably and directly beneath the Burschenschaft's sign and logo, are three "Stolpersteine," that is, memorial-stones embedded 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 taken from this very house, which was confiscated, and then deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

The Germania Burschenschaft is a private members club. Its underlying energy and identity is a deep nationalistic identification with “Germanic” culture. A number of Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) politicians are members of similar “Vereins” (associations or clubs). The Freedom Party targeted refugees negatively in their 2017 election campaigns, often playing upon the public’s fear of the other with clever, high-quality videos, and when elected in coalition, went on to find ways to dismantle Austria’s social system, slashing programs for women, the poor and refugees. These cuts corresponded with tax benefits to the wealthier segments of the Austrian population. These political developments 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.<sup>ii</sup> The artist, having spent part of her childhood in this house, knows these histories all too well. Today the Freedom Party’s power and influence has diminished (they were forced out of the coalition due to a number of embarrassing scandals), but vestiges of their racist and intolerant policies inform the new government coalition, despite this now comprising the Green Party.

A dark passage into living history as it unravels is evident in this exhibition. Entering this brown exhibition is therefore akin to entering an anus. The anal reference is apparent on a number of levels beyond the turds, brown walls, and excrement of dark politics re-emerging today. The artist is also 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, provoking an analysis not only of the artwork but of this culture and present time we inhabit. Everything is open and floating; also, disordered. It is not always going to be a pleasant experience, but it is often a humorous one, no matter how serious the terms of reference and the political histories and current context.

The final word associatively appearing in the title is *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; the smouldering fog of recurring historical tragedy and injustice, including the current political tides in Europe, again rearing their obscene head. As we’ve seen, the artist’s personal history is tragically entwined 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 her work, while simultaneously subverting these narratives and realities, very much into a different present tense. They are in many ways indeed the very material of her practise.

In her self-portrait, as repeated in the wallpaper, the artist represents herself as immersed within this history and conundrum, obscured by them, partially emerging from them. The swirling grey forces around her are steeped with a sense of doom. The artist reminds us of the danger of history repeating itself while emphasizing that elements of resistance are always necessary, and as much as they may seem impossible, they are ever-present. 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. This exhibition often appears as an unravelling depiction of processes of repression, sexual impulses, bodily drives and the unconscious as entwined with larger socio-political topics and the construction of identity. As such this is itself 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 infective and reproducible effect.

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<sup>i</sup> Salzburg was named as the number one “City Destination” for 2020 by Lonely Planet.

<sup>ii</sup> The Austrian ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government fell after an embarrassing scandal involving the FPÖ’s leader, caught trying to bribe a fake niece of a Russian oligarch. .