

## WALTER SEIDL Politics with an Esthetic Twist - The Works of Agnieszka Kalinowska

The artistic work of Agnieszka Kalinowska comprises a variety of media including video, installations and intrinsic two-dimensional, picture-like panels, with subjects inspired by everyday politics and culturally significant topics. Most of the esthetic qualities of the work recur on freeze-frame-like takes, still images which demand thorough contemplation from the viewer wanting to delve into their complex content structures. These frozen images occur in both video and the pictures which replicate the pictorial content of the videos and are mainly straw collages glued to the picture support so as to capture the symbolic act of narration in a two-dimensional pictorial landscape. Kalinowska's sculptural approach ranges from room-filling struggles with matter, reflecting the hunger for exploring diverse social conditions, to her latest objects made of thread in order to hint at fragile spatial entanglements.

One of Kalinowska's most recent videos, *Doormen* (2007), revolves around the stories of Manhattan doormen who talk about their experiences with everyday life and politics. The video shows six people dressed in their elegant, black working attire, sitting on chairs in front of a black background. What sticks out of the primarily dark surface are the narrators' faces, their white shirts and the white or metallic chair silhouettes. The whole scenario looks like a gathering on a theater stage, which takes the form of an intense intellectual discussion by actors or models which have been groomed for their stage appearance. The elegance of the scene purports the demeanor of a profession which demands utmost decorum in personal interaction. In the course of discussion it becomes apparent how extremely seriously each of the narrators takes their profession and how their values vis-à-vis a New York and American identity are put at the forefront of their opinion-forming utterances. It is at the level of enunciation that viewers get an overview on the present conditions of an American identity, which has been formed through the cultural narratives of over two-hundred years of democratic vision. Life in New York City has always been at the peak of social conditioning, demonstrating how treatment of people, at least on a surface level, reaches a point which generates the highest respect towards the individual. The stories within this hour-long discussion of the six doormen almost unanimously proclaim the democratic narratives which form the basic principle of a nation embracing the heterogeneity of life by tying people of different backgrounds together. Although shattered by different political eras, war and shifting world politics, the protagonists of this video live up to a cultural vision which was established right after the founding of the United States of America. In 1782, James Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur answered the question of "What is an American?" with the following lines: "He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds... Here, individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of

men.”<sup>1</sup> Like this literary output, relating to the cultural narrative of the American melting pot, so also the doorman from Guatemala relates his vision of freedom, which he found in the U.S. and which he believes even more strongly after having traveled to different countries in Europe and returned to his beloved New York City. The other doormen tell similar stories about their appreciation of life in New York and the U.S, as well as their work in important buildings on Fifth or Park Avenue. They encounter celebrities, actors and politicians who treat them as equals in a very natural manner which makes them proud to continue their job and enhances their belief in the values of American culture. Despite varying opinions about the Bush administration, the war in Iraq and the future of their country, the protagonists of the video seem content with their vision of a nation which they consider appropriate for a decent way of living.

With this highly esthetical video, Kalinowska raises questions about how current politics are being treated and how, despite the conflicting topics mentioned in the video, art can function as a way of meditation, tackling cultural and social issues, at the same time rooted deeply in the explorations of the individual in his or her humanizing capacities.

The reverse side of the political spectrum as a cultural signifier can be seen in the two-channel video *Great Scene* (2005). The video is a double projection on neighbouring walls, one film shot in front of the Mhat and the other in front of the Dubrovka Theater, both situated in Moscow. Again, the esthetics relies on single shots of the entrances to both venues where only slight movement occurs. Politically laden, the Dubrovka Theater became the site of a terrorist attack in 2002, when 800 visitors were taken hostage by Chechen rebels who wanted to make an end to the war in Chechnya. For viewers, the façade of the modernist building has been reduced to a few structural characteristics which are blurred by white snow falling in front of the camera; there are moments when the right part of the frame becomes partly white because of the snow. In front of both entrances, the artist walks around as if waiting for someone, dressed in a neon-green dress with pink stockings. Above the porte-cochère of the MChAt theatre there is a motto “Great Scene” written in Russian. Visitors go in and out, and each time the light changes from bright red when the door opens to a sober greenish light when the door is closed. The artist wears the same attire and pretends to wait for a person unknown. The structure of the entrance door reminds of Chinese architecture with its grid-like sliding doors. Moreover, the video’s sound derives from Chinese melodies which emphasize the scene. Kalinowska, again very subtle and sophisticated in her esthetic approach, hints at the political structures inherent to a dictatorship-like scenario implied by powers like China or Russia. Although more concealed in its political message through a non-verbal sound collage, *Great Scene* suggests a similar approach to the undercurrents of everyday politics to that addressed more directly in *Doormen*.

Political action in a concealed plot can also be seen as the main trigger for the video *Emergency Exit* (2003), in which people move with their hands along an architectural ledge, hanging in the

air and one by one moving from screen right to left. The only information viewers obtain are pieces of a conversation on the street. One can hear street noise, cars and emergency vehicles passing by, and at intervals, voices screaming: "Hey you people!" What remains unclear is the reason for this sudden evacuation of people and the real content of the conversation in the street. It is the fear of the unknown which causes an effect or call for action, yet the mystery of the scene provides no hint to the actual event. The only message visible is the Latin sentence on the wall of the building, which translates as "You shall not prevail over me". Some acoustic references of the conversation hint at the fact that the action is taking place somewhere in the U.S. Thus the inscription on the building obtains an immediate political connotation, that of an invincible superpower, sometimes engaging in military action without direct cause. In this way Kalinowska transcends the American political discourse about the "Other" as an invisible enemy who might want to harm the world's greatest superpower and therefore has to be defeated beforehand. In this video, Kalinowska plays with the moment of anxiety, not only on a national-political level, but also viewed as an increasing personal disorder, which affects more and more people, afraid of losing their jobs, homes or secure environments.

The latter point also becomes obvious in the video *Well, that is what everyone thinks about us militaries*, where Swedish military men and women gather in a bluish room to reflect about their job and fate. In a second scene, one woman from this the group appears alone, contemplating her work aboard a ship and the possible dangers of war that could threaten the whole environment. Almost naively, she considers her job a great thing to be lived and strived for, yet the actuality of world politics takes a different turn when it comes to joint endeavors in fighting the war on terror. Viewing this group of Swedish naval officers, however, again makes one think about the invincible "safe haven" of Europe, which, on the other hand, is a fortress where immigration laws are even more restrictive than in the U.S. Here, Kalinowska again uses her simple esthetic freeze-frame to focus on the military and the room with its blue background, but also engenders a different thinking mode while viewing a content crowd of people, seemingly unaware of the imminent dangers implied by their job.

Aside from video used as the most important means to convey artistic messages, Kalinowska works with a variety of materials such as straw, which she uses in installations and panels to transcend the realistic content of her images. From stills of a number of sites presented in her videos, like the MChAT Theater in Moscow, Kalinowska forms intricate straw collages demanding a very precise form of creation related to handicraft and operating on a totally different level. The same is true of small objects such as *Burning String*, in which the artist treats everyday encounters with an ironic, esthetic twist. Although most of Kalinowska's works can be viewed as a formalist approach to the possibilities of working with images, they all refer to direct political events, which are presented mainly via media images and thus already filtered through the

camera's eye. Kalinowska is well aware of the thin line between what is shown and what left out and therefore decides to focus on a minimal visual vocabulary with a convincing pictorial language. Eventually it is up to the viewers to discover the political implications and cultural signifiers presented on the screen, in straw collages or spatial constellations. Her purpose is to combine an artistic reference canon with an everyday politics which intertwine in a visual matrix open to manifold ways of reading and interpretative gestures.

In: Agnieszka Kalinowska, exhibition catalogue Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2008

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<sup>1</sup> James Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. „Letters from an American Farmer“. The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Vol 1. Paul Lauter, Hg. Lexington: Heath, 1990. p. 897.