

Elisabeth Penker at 5020

The sculptural work of Elisabeth Penker uses hybrid-cultural codes and the medium of audio. For the past 4 years Penker has been working with the idea of "C.T (Cultural Translation)" which started in Oslo in 1999. By utilising translation in literature as a model for translation of visual objects and images, through the concept of 'cultural translation', Penker's project collects and archives people's cultural knowledge and life experiences in the form of audio materials and communication settings. The settings were then installed into the gallery space as a unique sculptural works. Penker invited experts and colleagues experienced in translation issues, to sit down and talk about what a possible form of visual translation might look like. From the audio and visual documentation of each exhibition/discussion Penker developed subsequent exhibitions. Creating an ongoing and ever changing library of audio-visual ideas about cultural differences and visual meanings. A colour coding system of red, yellow, black and white, which was adapted from the book 'Wie die Menschen zu Gelben, Roten, Schwarzen und Weißen wurden' and was used for a majority of the sculptural settings. Of course, all biologists know there is only one race, so why differentiate?

Why is the relation between class, gender and ethnicity still an issue in the context of fine art? Didn't we learn anything from the 80's. So, what to do with this information? How can a gallery exhibition or archive, change and motivate people to rethink their own ideas about cultural otherness and visual stereotypes? How can we break from our own instinctive and culturally learned imprisonment? Perhaps one should start a rock band, it will definitely reach more people and subconsciously undermine our youth's own visual imperialism, forget Modernism it goes back way further than that....

'In red & yellow
in black & white
you see all colour
blind in full daylight
times are changing - but it's so late
western-based education
honkey, honkey - cultural transportation
western-based way of seeing
how you see - what - why
art history makes you mad
art history is so sad
there is no time to make it all right
recycle these books and write it over
include different languages and translate
art history go away
I can not take you for one more day
there is broken glass on the floor
don't take this kind of history anymore
And I said yeah oh man that state is so bad
the original shit comes out of Europe
white male Europe, Europe, Europe

Penker's lyrics for the band Colore Blind, which was performed at a neighborhood bar, for her 'CT/3' exhibition in Vienna (2001). The song lyrics try to set in motion the same procedures and approaches that the more formalised gallery/museum 'CT' discussion's implemented. It's institutional critique without the institution. A social critic in a smoke-filled room. Perhaps the kids will understand it better.

Therefore even the lyrics...
complete me- maybe
complete me baby
Defeat me- maybe
Defeat me baby'

from a more recent Colore Blind song 'Nika' (2003), can be interpreted as continuing the 'CT' discussion into the realm post-feminism and identity politics. The lyrics were adapted from the all-female band from the 1970's New York punk scene and collaged together with fragments from a Croatian folk-song mixed with Arabic words. Positioned in the same gallery are Xeroxed posters of the 'CT' collages (2002-2003) which also attempts to break Penker's own visual codes to translate the "CT" project into a new hybrid-form which is constantly cannibalising itself to create new forms. By cannibalising one's own work and to let it become something else, is to break one's own idea of formal logic and aesthetics. Breaking your own visual stereotypes. To have other people determine the composition and colours could be the necessary procedure for developing culturally complex and open-forms of sculptural practice.

Chairs with no legs has also been a re-occurring motif in Penker's sculptural output since 1999, starting with 'CT/1' in Oslo which looked more like a picnic blanket with cushions rather than a sculptural object sitting on a pedestal. Each of the sculptural settings for CT/1, 2 & 3 needed a pedestal, or in 90's art-speak 'a platform', a zone of activities and neutral reflection. Only the sculptural work from 'CT/4' (2002) breaks this approach by producing instead of a pedestal a storage/bench and a table/shelf for the discussions. Ideally, these (non)furniture sculptures should be placed anywhere in the gallery or the home or office, wherever conversations take place. "Can you talk about it without talking", (2003) could be understood as CT/5, but no discussion is necessary/possible with this furniture because we are only supplied with the chair backs, but there is no place to sit anymore. The pedestals are still carpets but they seem to be more fragile, more integrated into the sculptural form, something not to step on.

Michael Hall (Wien, 2003)