

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS/SOFTCORE INSURRECTION

Kari Rittenbach on Tobias Kaspar at the Kunsthalle Bern



The idea of freedom – originating within Western rights discourse dating from the Enlightenment via the American and French Revolutions and later codified (unenforceably) by the United Nations following World War II – today seems almost an unbearable political or philosophical concept. Exploitative markets and extractivist industries enjoy fewer regulations than individual persons, while calls to tear down ironclad barriers have been replaced by the intransigent demand for physical fortification (to curtail the flow of “drugs” and other undesirables) in a span of less than 30 years. Aggressively mediated public debate collapses into rudimentary binaries while the polar ice caps slowly melt: my right to free speech is yours to shut up, already.

Theodor W. Adorno maintained that art’s necessary autonomy was in fact illusory, as the artwork itself arises from a struggle with greater sociohistorical processes, whether or not this key internal conflict can be easily identified, and is more likely to be misinterpreted in its own time. Yet at this particular late capitalist moment, complex juridical projects and blandly direct “political” messaging seem to be flooding the (compromised) institutional spaces of art – especially in the Anglo-Saxon world – where they operate as belated correctives to a severely damaged social contract, and without clear reference to related issues raised in preceding decades. Under such conditions, any latter-day defense of (Kant’s) *schöne Kunst* appears illiberal.

A recent monographic exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern – ironically titled “Independence” – toyed with the modernist assumption of art’s freedom in relation to current, often precarious conditions of “content production” for twenty-first century artists toiling long after the demise of Institutional Critique. The eponymous theme unraveled through various strategies of deferral, evasion, and display, served to unify a heterogeneous array of readymades (“Uniforms,” 2018); appropriated fixtures, sterling silver flatware, and/or ceramic vessels (“Hotel Marquise,” 2016; “Room Service Set,” “The Incomplete Aesop,” both 2018); a carousel of slide transparencies (“Ninfa,” 2008); a handful of small bronze sculptures resting on the floor, absent pedestals (“Stan Smith,” “Hunter,” both 2016); a short non-narrative video (“Hydra Life,” 2013); and so on, under the logic of the reference – either art-historical or mass-cultural (fashion, film), and presumably always in relation to their author. Unnamed in the promotional and informational literature both prior to and for the duration of the exhibition, “Independence” ostensibly challenged the biopolitical emphasis on the gender or racial identity if not charismatic personage of the artist today, which accrues social capital and exposure through consistent imaging, like a prestige brand.

Without any attribution to a clear figure, then, the background chain of dependencies sustaining such a mid-career retrospective – gallery or patron support, international exhibitions, publication history, critical reception – was revealed, in its absence, as more or less arbitrary. What might the same titular independence mean in relation to an intricate network of (personal and professional) social ties? If not a newfound meritocracy, then perhaps no show at all. Considering how

the research and event-based projects of the artist, eventually confirmed as Tobias Kaspar, often trace or in fact operate through the very “friends, lovers, and financiers” who enable the art world as such, the particular pun of the exhibition title was finally clarified. Historically, this irreverence could also be applied to the site of the Kunsthalle itself, which nearly 50 years earlier hosted the legendary sculpture exhibition, “Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)” underwritten by Philip Morris Europe (demonstrating the coincidence of corporate sponsorship and the “new art” of the current era), and even the sociopolitical position of the surrounding city of Bern, de facto capital of the Swiss Confederation, situated centrally within the Eurozone while impartial (though not impervious) to it.

If, psychically and ideologically, independence is rather misunderstood complicity, the exhibition’s hanging, in its perfectly stage-managed, riotous disarray, still expressed a dark pleasure in the potentiality of contemporary art sans artist. A particularly perceptive viewer might have identified Kaspar through his prior works: for example, the ovoid earrings Yves Tanguy once made for Peggy Guggenheim, photographed at her museum in Venice and titled after a stray observation published in the first edition of her confessional autobiography, “One afternoon in his flat they began to exchange clothes. It was rather a homosexual performance, disguised, of course, by the most normal gesture” (2012), first shown at Halle für Kunst Lüneberg; or the almost entirely white abstract C-print “Berlin, Wed June 1 (kitchen)” (2010, from the series “Why Sex Now”), which was suspended off the wall and so bared consignment labels on the verso of its

Tobias Kaspar, „Waiter, Sitting Woman in Summer Dress with Foulard (blue, red, polka-dotted background)“, 2018



large-format frame naming the artist, work, and the now-defunct galleries Alex Zachary, New York and Silberkuppe, Berlin. Those without the privilege of hearing about “Independence” by chance or word of mouth might just discover it after the fact – a form of seduction and artificial scarcity practiced in the luxury retail environment to further enhance commodity fetishism. This perverse economy of exclusivity, another rich vein of inquiry for Kaspar – how libidinal investment in the deferred or postponed – has led to strategic maneuvering between the fantasy-ridden realm of free, market-driven social systems shielding

the highly desired art object. In Bern, the grouping of works including two framed embroideries (“Untitled [NFS36]” and “Untitled [NFS35],” both 2018) and others visualized in varied patterns as large-format photographs (e.g., “Two Women in Polka-Dotted Jumpers, Miniskirts Made from Feathers [grey, green, yellow]” and “Group of Standing Gentlemen [blue, red, green],” both 2018) were developed by a St. Gallen-based textile company as figurative, prototypically stylish European scenes for distribution to the Japanese market; a kind of self-parodying “Occidentalism,” or historical pastiche, again repeated in the

increasing globalization of contemporary art from Europe to Asia, and beyond.

Two major elements dominated the exhibition through metaphorical and literal means, otherwise swallowing the subtleties of individual artworks into the pronounced drama of their spatialized tension. For "Harlequin Teddy" (2018), Kaspar arranged a chromatic series of 1000 soft animals along level surfaces of the exhibition space near the entryway, in tight geometric formations situated mostly low to the ground. Their number and newness signifying machine production, their matching colors in eerie conformity, these regimented rows broke out into more dynamic poses in the largest gallery, as individuated bears piled atop the grand skylight overhead or dangled daringly on rope dropped from the ceiling, as if caught in the act of climbing to freedom. This mimetic mutiny was staged behind, beside, and over the top of crude exhibition architecture: a series of large-scale panels, faux-framed houses, and windows deconstructed and then scattered obtrusively throughout the galleries. Recalling the conceptual trope of recycled display surfaces, or even Michael Asher's 2008 installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, these reclaimed elements were purely theatrical – salvaged from a recent amateur stage production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (adapted from the Ken Kesey novel) in Schaffhausen. Set within a provincial mental hospital, the sane protagonist (Jack Nicholson in the movie version) loses his mind, and life, in his attempt to shatter Nurse Ratched's institutional monopoly on reality.

Locked in this battle for escape, despite both questionable agency and externality, the small automaton "Aibo" (2018) returned the exhibition to its plausible independence from human

authorship. A hypoallergenic dog-like robot equipped with a camera and artificial intelligence, its statistically modeled machine learning necessarily depends on human interaction to develop more sophisticated behaviors, not unlike domestic canines. That "Aibo" – through more prolonged contact – soon habituated to Kunsthalle employees rather than occasional visitors demonstrated the idealized, even optimized mastery of the institution when released from those challenges associated with artistic labor or performance. (No shit.) A limited-edition readymade in deliberately short supply, the extreme artifice of "Aibo" is also something of a political ruse for the artist-dandy, and the perfect object of *l'art pour l'art*.

"Tobias Kaspar: Independence," Kunsthalle Bern, September 22–December 2, 2018.