

Independence

Under the term “autonomy,” independence in art long meant freedom of artistic creation independent of market or government influences. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, artists served as a projection surface for a life freed from constraints that promised relative independence from socioeconomic conditions. Yet this unrealistic idea of artists having the freedom you, as a civic subject, do not dare to take has meanwhile been largely abandoned. A number of artists even pursued a critique of the institutions that include them and of the constraints associated with those institutions, though in the long run this didn’t lead anywhere. As necessary as it was, the constant pointing to the unfreedom of one’s situation eventually did start to smack of paid criticism and, instead of transforming the situation identified through analysis and critique, stabilized the institutions which accepted the criticism as a distinction. Nowadays, the situation is porous and the individual actors are more interdependent than ever. And yet the art world is at the same time a self-contained world whose rules and openings call for constant questioning.

The artistic practice presented in “Independence” is not a sceptical, detached position, but rather one that draws on unlimited resources inside the structures and stories of art. It is downright fascinated with mechanisms that shape the processes of value creation and taste formation. It is interested in how and when symbolic added value and desire are created. Especially in contemporary art, the latter manifest themselves as forms of a refined exploration of aesthetic and social dynamics—dynamics which occur in what tend to be more well-defined systems in other spheres also invoked here, such as fashion and film.

Both inside and outside of the Kunsthalle building, “Independence” is framed by backdrops that reference two films: Miloš Forman’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), in which Jack Nicholson questions the prevailing order in a mental institution and turns it upside down. This film “has no interest in being about insanity. It is about a free spirit in a closed system” (Roger Ebert, film critic). The second film being referenced is *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars van Trier. In this film, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), who is suffering from depression, foresees the collision of earth with the planet Melancholia. The confrontation with a sense of existential emptiness is central to this apocalyptic film. The cinematic references open up interpretations that could be applied allegorically to the institution of art and its society—an institution by itself in whose relentless dynamic some individuals find themselves brought to the edge of a psychological abyss.

The personal living environment provides a potential place of retreat. One of the

characteristics of the artistic approach underlying “Independence” is that it lets the personal living environment and lifestyle, the “friends, lovers, and financiers” of artistic practice, come very close—so close, in fact, that a cycle of production and recycling is created where it becomes fuzzy who acts and appropriates on whose behalf. And what is more, artistic production ends up becoming really staged and performed as a result of the specific social background—another backdrop of the exhibition—which no longer distinguishes between what is private and what is not.

Arranged within these backdrops are new and older works, including many stemming from groups of works. For example, “Independence” features a series of new prints which draw on imagery of the Japan collection of a famous St. Gallen-based textile company. From the 1960s until recently, the company developed figurative imagery for its Japanese clients, which represented a typically European *haute bourgeoisie* taste for luxury—imagery serving a demand in showing a variety of embroidered scenes in styles ranging from Art Deco to Dior’s New Look. These and other works exemplifying the practice demonstrate an interest in cultural transfer processes of styles and fashions within a sphere or beyond it, tracing global trajectories. The mechanisms of fashion, its dazzling power of seduction, of creating a desire to be someone else, and the possibilities it offers to embody or simulate identities are one of the key frames of reference for the practice presented here. It often operates similar to fashion whose logic ranges between the market and an elusive irrationality.

Another protagonist of “Independence” is AIBO. This silver-colored robot dog is currently only available on the Japanese market through a lottery, a form of artificial scarcity that creates extreme desire. Hence it is celebrating its European premiere at Kunsthalle Bern. The word “aibo” is Japanese for “partner” and is an acronym for “Artificial Intelligence Robot.” AIBO is no longer a toy like its first version in the late 1990s but a teachable artificial intelligence for the contemporary Japanese household.

Some “events” in “Independence” and in this artistic practice in general are also infiltrated by (marketing) strategies of recent and older art history as well as from other spheres. Practices of historical Conceptual art or of Relational aesthetics, which pushed social interactions between the public and the artist with feel-good actions, are discreetly taken up.

Against this backdrop of numerous references, the question remains: What kind of independence is being declared here? Is it the independence from the Kunsthalle which shows one’s work? From the market?

And if so, from which one? Or in general from the constraints of being in the world and from regulative structures that may be socially shared? The flipside of independence is and continues to be the lack of dissemination which eludes access, while at the same time being open to all invocations. It, too, finds a backdrop here.

The artist remained unnamed in any written form until the end of the exhibition. Visitors could ask themselves whether it was worth going to the opening of an exhibition when it is unclear who or what is behind the invitation. To the artist, on the other hand, it may offer the freedom to place special emphasis on the exhibition itself rather than on the marketing of the name. While the name may represent a promise or create certain expectations, self-imposed anonymity flirts with seduction through the appeal of the mysterious.*

Valérie Knoll

* Kunsthalle Bern, “Independence,” press release, Bern, 2018.





Press Review

In presenting “Independence,” Kunsthalle Bern mounted a show whose “artist remained unnamed in any written form until the end of the exhibition. Visitors could ask themselves whether it was worth going to the opening of an exhibition when it is unclear who or what is behind the invitation. To the artist, on the other hand, it may offer the freedom to place special emphasis on the exhibition itself rather than on the marketing of the name,” as the press release stated. Confronted with a bold title and a broad range of references, from Milos Forman’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) to *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars van Trier, hints at Kaspar’s friends and collaborators, new series of works, such as *The Japan Collection* (2018), hordes of teddies, and the silver-colored robot dog AIBO, the international press published a variety of comments.

The magazine *Artforum* from New York picks up the exhibition’s title and wonders about the claims involved: “‘Independence’ is a loaded exhibition title. It evokes a certain kind of gallerygoer’s cliché fantasy of art and artists, and it immediately raises the question: Independence from what? With its nondisclosure of the participating artist’s name, this show’s title and press materials proclaim a break from art-world convention while posing a paradox: a declaration of independence from a tradition of independence. [...] In recent years, Kaspar has become known not only for researching the trade routes of the aesthetic economy but also for establishing his own merchandise—a magazine, a line of jeans, and now, the plush toy. Here, he also deploys architectural typologies that seem to riff off the aesthetics of institutional critique in their revelation of labor conditions in the art industry. Half-built walls and suspended frames with gallery labels on their backs guide visitors through the space, where one finds champagne flutes from a hotel-room service set directly on the ground, and a film set constructed after the hospital in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. These scenarios—the comforts of a well-heeled jet-setter and Ken Kesey’s account of the search for personal freedom within the strictures of a totally controlled environment—are imbued with a yearning for independence, while also emphasizing the material culture upon which they depend.”

The Bern newspaper *Bund* would like to know if “the art system [described in this exhibition] as a mental hospital of sorts where many a person reaches the borders of insanity and the withdrawal into anonymity opens up new freedoms? [...] A lot comes together [...] in ‘Independence’ the inner coherence of which remains mysterious. [...] And the proclaimed declaration of independence? For the visitors, it is also the freedom to cuddle a teddy bear and treat the AIBO dog to verbal and other caresses.”

Ambivalence about the show is voiced by the magazine *Frieze* from London, whose review starts with a question: “Was the artist siding with market enthusiasts? Was he mocking them? As with so many things in this show, there was no clear answer.

[...] Kaspar is a paragon of what could be called an embedded artist. Disenchanted with the myths of the artist as a prophet, hero or sage, yet still an adept of criticality, he dives into the world of consumer culture, even launching a still-ongoing blue jeans line. [...] Kaspar’s ambiguous aesthetic is rather one of interestedness in the sense of its Latin roots, ‘inter esse’ — ‘being in-between,’ navigating the boundaries like a trickster, jester or pirate.” *Frieze* finds one answer to the title in a work included in the exhibition: “Perhaps the easiest work to overlook was a tiny bottle of Chanel perfume that stood on a radiator ledge (*Boy*, 2018). It was also one of the most important ones. Whereas the assembly of objects contributed to an overall impression of openness, fluidity, pervasiveness and performativity, the flacon, which contained an ephemeral fragrance, remained firmly closed. Andy Warhol wrote in his *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975): ‘[A] way to take up more space is with perfume.’ Kaspar, however, chose to take up space with a sprawling *parcours* of art and almost-art objects, ultimately showing how the air between these objects remained as pure as the air in an art space can be. Maybe this undefined space, within a maelstrom of visual signs, is what ‘independence’ stood for in this show.”

Current debates about identity, the associated politics, and the social structures of the artistic field are brought into focus by the Berlin-based magazine *Texte zur Kunst*: “A recent monographic exhibition at 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. [...] 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.” In the end, the title is applied to the artist’s work environment: “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.”

The Swiss online platform *Brand-New-Life* links macro- and micro-structures of the artistic field to considerations on issues of authorship: “What is traded and black-marketed on an international level—artistic

practices as well as jeans and other products—basically applies just the same to the personal and professional environment. It is a constant exchange that is focused on the give and take but, in doing so, not only dissolves the boundaries between one and the other, but aims precisely at rendering authorship in terms of authorization irrelevant. The legitimization of a particular decision is countered with the balanced relationship, and that has more to do with the refusal of authority than with, say, deconstruction. As a result of this somehow always present symbolic zero value that ‘Independence’ also is, one important thing that is lost is the dependability on the significance of reference—‘communicability’ as it is called in the press release—and then it becomes necessary to carve something like freedom for all out of the affirmation of permanent movement of all those desires.”

The Zurich-based *Kunstbulletin* is rather dissatisfied and feels that there is too great of a gap between aspiration and realization. Its author feels misled because of a confusion of custodian and artist: “At the Kunsthalle an exhibition was opened that was designed as a declaration of independence and played with the anonymity of the presented works, yet ultimately mutated into a re-enactment of market logics and attention economies focused more or less on the artist-subject. [...] ‘Independence’ is an exhibition spectacle chatting about (in)dependencies in art, fashion, film, life, and insanity, a show conceived out of the inner circle of the art system and decidedly produced for that select, discourse-centered circle of the happy few—something the press release also has [...] a considerable share in. [...] All possible and impossible readings have been anticipated here. Mission accomplished. Long live copy/paste.”*

* International press review of “Independence,” Kunsthalle Bern, September 22–December 2, 2018. This press review has been compiled by Hannes Loichinger.

