

Artist's Statement

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Today's artists want and have to write. Since the 20th century, language and texts have played a crucial role in relation to works of art. One could even venture to say that works of art are no longer independent of their discursive environment. Texts not only articulate the concept or an intention, they also have performative potential, they function as acts of speech in relation to the artistic work.

Another source of potential worth mentioning is harboured by forms of writing which accompany the artistic process and thus have a reflexive function for the author which can be shared in this way. On the following pages I would like to share some thoughts which have come up in the context of my own artistic practice and which illustrate certain aspects of my work.

I would like to start with a description of the work *Performance-Partitur für eine Fotokamera* (Performance Score for a Photo Camera). This work is a screen print on a thin white polystyrene panel. In exhibitions it is presented on a shelf accompanied by a sung version of the printed text. The work is subtitled *Selbstportrait* (Self-portrait). Its text is not a description of my self or an image thereof. It is, as the title suggests, a performance score for a photo camera. Instead of focusing on the performance of a person who presents him or herself to the camera as an idealized self, the camera itself becomes the performer and creates this self as an image in the photographic act, which is defined as a performative act. This idea implies a questioning of the self which precedes its linguistic and visual representations and stems from poststructuralist subject theories. I have read the subject theories of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan and explored the question of what this means to me as an artist and as the author of a work, an artistic product. To what extent is this work based on preceding subjectivity? Or is this subjectivity created through the work itself? This is also a question of authorship, if you will, and how to comprehend it. The work is called *Selbstportrait* in order to ask: "What if we considered the self-portrait the performance of a camera instead of the performance of a person for the camera?" And this question is especially relevant for me in connection to the self-representation of artists. This performance score calls into question the logic on which the self-portrait—or, more precisely, the manner in which it is to be read—is based, which is exactly this connection between the artist and his or her body.

I am also interested in examining another connection in this context which is present or constructed in the self-portrait: the relationship between the artist and his/her artistic practice and its representation. This is particularly evident in the deliberate presentation of the artist as an artist. Throughout art history, such references to artistic activity have been the brush, the easel, the pipe or the camera. Self-

portraits do not depict a neutral self, but always an artistic person representing herself as handy with tools, wild, border-crossing, lonely or headstrong. Nowadays, for example, artists like to portray themselves as politically-minded, or intellectually thoughtful. One could even view artists' websites or Facebook pages as self-portraits in the broadest sense. I believe that it is possible to read certain tendencies into these self-representations about how the function of artists is currently defined in society. Artists reflect these tendencies in their self-portraits and self-representations, and simultaneously challenge them—some to a greater extent, some to a lesser.

My artistic practice includes working with the present body (which mostly is not my own body) in performance situations as well as with the absence of a speaker created by printed or projected texts. What is interesting about absence is that it can generate a feeling of intimacy as much as a present body. For example, the moment in which a text is read can harbour a sense of embarrassment. The reader gets the impression that a particular sentence or poem reveals something about the author, so about me personally. This conveys a feeling that the reader has touched something deep within the author (me), which is indeed very embarrassing. Here is an example of such a sentence: "In my texts I dance sometimes, and the texts with me." Or: "The text loves me as much as I love him." The title of this work is adaptable. It can be "the performance said", "the author said" or something else. The intimacy that arises at the moment of reading is caused by the reception of the word "I", which seems to point directly towards the author (me). This intimacy has less to do with the relationship the author (I) has with these sentences than the fact that a relationship is established between the text and its readers. Intimacy does not precede this work; it is the effect of playing with presence and absence marked by the word "I".

It is important to me that the texts—by which I mean artistic texts, which in my case are poems, single sentences or dialogues—reflect or

question the authority of the written word. Aside from its cultural context as law, the authority of the written word is also expressed in the connection to the author addressed here, or in our perception of this connection between the author and his/her texts or art works.

The spoken word has different qualities in performance situations and written texts. In its spoken form—and here I am referring to my own performances as well as to performance in general—a sense of ephemerality, which one may interpret as aloofness, is perhaps most clearly revealed. (Now, this would be the opposite of intimacy.) A performer can be present, but the text which he or she speaks remains at a distance. This moment fascinates me because it only works if the performer does not identify with the text and the audience cannot identify with it either. The text must remain distinctly separate, detached. It is located in a place between the author, the performer and the viewer. That is why it remains inaccessible. This place is radical in that it is not identical with any of these three positions. It questions these positions in their interrelationship at the moment of reception. This is incredibly important because it means that this place belongs to everyone equally—which, for all intents and purposes, can also be interpreted politically. Though I must admit that it may also be possible to conclude that in order to belong to everyone equally such a place cannot belong to anyone, and that, for this reason, it is a lonely place.

In the course of reflecting on artistic practice I am sometimes overcome by a feeling of doubt. Expressing doubt about artistic speech (*künstlerisches Sprechen*) means at least two things: a challenge to the artistic self as an institution. An actual negation thereof is impossible or uninterpretable. It would mean to cease being an artist. Artistic speech that expresses doubt or criticism of the self—understood as a position from which one speaks—is therefore always an action, never absolute refusal. The second thing that interests me here is marked by questions about the relationship between language, the body and identification. The question of how identification is even possible in

practice has long been on my mind. Why is it not possible to cease being a subject? Why do people identify with images in the first place, with words or categories and gestures? And why is the body the basis for this identification? Why does one identify with one's own figure, with one's own speech and actions? How is it possible, and why is it necessary that I always identify with myself and that an author identifies with his or her text?

It is easy to confound or deny an existing or expected image. However, an utter rejection of self-representation in the sense of a negation is not possible because it depends on the gaze of the other, in whose eyes the identity is created. This also pertains to the artist's identity, including the one behind or after this text.

Lilo Nein

Text #4 in "We Write, Right?" a project by gold extra.

For further reading see: "Conversation between Renate Bertlmann and Lilo Nein. Paths to the Self and Back", published in: Self-Timer Stories, ed. Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein, Schlebrügge. Editor: Vienna, 2015.