

Person and observation in medial transition on PHESBUK by Bernhard Frue(wirth)

It is a well-known fact that changes in technology and mechanical conveniences alter our behaviour deep into social structures, that media changes confound temporal processes or accelerate them, and that this does not occur without influencing our conception of place, person, body and individuality. Boundaries between the individual and society, and between the public and private, continually shift and demand constant reassessment.

Social and medial transformations and their effects on person, space and time have preoccupied the artist Bernhard Frue(hwirth) for more than a decade. He takes his own biography and perception as his starting point in order to engage in observations in his surroundings and capture them in conceptual works, which occasionally have something absurd and obsessive about them as well. A fetish-like fixation on an object or observation – be it of people from newspapers, prostitutes, patients or strangers in rooms observed from the street – consistently inspire new groups of works which are placed in a scenographic context in the artist's exhibitions. Over the years this concentration on certain core themes has become recognisable. A figure which recurs in his oeuvre is that of the voyeur. Whether furtive or unabashed, Bernhard Frue(hwirth) takes this role seriously when creating a work, even for questionable observation practices, and places his own person as the author under discussion.

Voyeurs and other furtive observers

A voyeur is somebody who secretly engages in observations in the private sphere of another person without that person's knowing about it. This activity can be most explicitly characterised when it involves the intimate zones of others: sexuality, the feeling of not being under scrutiny, of being at home. The rule of law has delineated boundaries in this area that cannot be crossed without penalty: protection of personal rights, privacy, protection of the sanctity of home, protection against stalkers, etc. Conversely, there is a large demand precisely within the media of a democratic society for openness and transparency which is inconsistent with these rights. It is precisely the new media that permits glances into the privateness of others to an extent previously unknown.

Another complex moment in this area is the need exhibited by people in the public eye (politicians, stars) for concerted dealings with the media. Art producers also belong among them. Their work needs publicity, public awareness. It is precisely along these very interfaces of the private and public that the works of Bernhard Frue(hwirth) constantly move. Or, more properly, Frue, which I was able to confirm during our last Skype conversation. The artist often carries out research in private spheres which, although it does not compromise or injure anyone, it does encroach upon

this boundary and question it. In the work *Samthansen* (2004) he photographs the ephemeral, tent-like dwellings of prostitutes in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, where they receive their clients. There are no people to be seen. The photographs are presented as negative colour prints so that the tents appear in a pink-violet colour context more like arte-poverasque objects in the wood than locations for a blue profession.

An early photographic work *OLYMP* (1998) was dedicated to a patient the artist met while working during his civilian service. The severely disabled man was photographed by the artist with the assent of his relatives. Nonetheless, the artist had already taken a photograph of the patient at an unnoticed moment while attending to his care. In it the man lies naked in front of the artist with a still open nappy between his legs but with his back turned to the spectator so that his face is unrecognisable. This secretly taken photograph was the most penetrating and haunting photograph of the series. Should such a photograph be exhibited or not? What boundaries would be infringed upon? To what extent is the voyeurism of an artist inoffensive? Does he harm a person's intimate zone?

Bernhard Frue's voyeurism is also repeatedly directed towards his own biography. In this way he subjects himself as a person to the same rules as his subjects. In his graphic works from 1997 to 2000, transforming, redrawing and tracing things and spaces belonging to his own youth played an important role. He drew living spaces – his former teenage bedroom, his mother's bedroom and other interiors he had associations with – from photographs. This retroactive approach to drawing created a kind of reflexive, interpretational level on which the real is depicted and annotated simultaneously. The sobriety of form through drawing in outline makes the view neutral and unsentimental, even in the case of his teenage bedroom. In this way Bernhard Frue distances himself from the incongruities of his biography. Moreover, he deliberately calls the inviolability of people into question in his works. Nowadays biographies which display themselves on social networks are too public.

The term persona and the media

The title work *PHESBUK* in Bernhard Frue's exhibition at Kunstverein Medienturm in Graz began about ten years ago in New York with a private sketch book, akin to an exercise book, which the artist had initially filled with personal notes and sketches, and then, from 2008 to the end of 2011, he filled it from back to front like a sticker album with pictures of people from the media – heads torn and cut out of various printed media which, in part, completely cover his personal notes. Now and again the scribbled words, lines and drawings in pencil or felt pen appear in the background of the now packed and bulging sketch book.

The artist collected these faces from an enormous heap of media products he sieved through, with the selections being made on an intuitive, or rather a reactive level. The faces were so heavily circled in ballpoint pen that they detached from the newspapers like peel-off

stickers. In contrast to a Panini album, the artist is more concerned with the various combinations of faces rather than completing a collection, with a secret chronology of the encounters on facing pages, that is to say, with a reading system of perceptions from which the stuck-in people have been prised.

Individual faces are not only selected but also treated, worked, drawn over, painted on, scratched, maltreated or lovingly circled out. This reworking often has an almost psychically motivated reaction underlying it: between rapture and absolute repugnance.

Consequently, the face-level has its very own function in the project *PHESBUK*. The reaction to the faces becomes a notation system of an observation of mental state. Which faces does the artist react to? From which of them does he scratch the eyes out? Which of them does he maltreat to oblivion with fluorescent marker? No coherent system can be gleaned from his approach. Instead he works spontaneously and influenced by the way he is feeling on the day so that the faces inscribe themselves upon Bernhard Frue's personal perception and his daily media consumer behaviour. The face book filled like this over three years also tells a story about the perception of people in the media: politicians, stars, sports personalities, victims and perpetrators involved in misdemeanours or other unusual events which wash Mr. or Ms. Unknown to the surface of fame for varying periods.

In addition to this, the face level can also be read as a construed surface which characterises our "person" terminology. *Persona*: this term in Latin not only means distinctive personality but also mask or role. This amalgam brings with it the idea that we regard the individual to be something changeable and, according to the epoch or times, as something unstable and vulnerable. In our age of the internet, mass emails and online publishing on everything possible and impossible, the person is affected by it anew. It displays itself either exaggeratedly as a cliché, a stereotype or a star on medial platforms or, as a presented construction, it remains something artificial, an abstract addressee or sender of signs to another person.

It is Cornelia Bohn's belief that, as the individual has been lost to it, society will become all the more active in the installation of social addresses. Traces of the individual have to be fixed as addresses that can be found again. "With the pluralisation of reference systems for participation in society, communication is succumbing to the pressure of abstraction in the typification, identification and fixation of being a person. Datification, official descriptions, passes, identifications, anthropometric processes, dactyloscopy and DNA analyses are only ostensible methods to produce a faultless source of determining an individual by referring to their unquestionable uniqueness."

The collection of images of people from newspapers and magazines by Bernhard Frue is actually characterised by this abstraction. Although we are dealing with individuals with these heads from the press, we are not able to recognise or conceive of them as such in medial circumstances because we have no personal connection to them in many cases. We only know them through the

media as a medial projection screen.

Medial transition book: manuscript – folio – album – Facebook

It is significant that Bernhard Frue not only takes up the subject of identity in the media age in his work *PHESBUK* but also the medial transition linked to it. The original folio called *PHESBUK*, bound in black synthetic leather in Moleskine style, is reproduced and present in many ways at the exhibition in the Kunstverein Medienturm Graz. Medial, user-friendly, inapproachable. A room almost sacral in appearance displays the original *PHESBUK* in a show case. The 150 facsimiled copies of *PHESBUK*, distinguished with its black binding, are rowed upon a shelf, back to back, and emphasise in turn the bibliophile nature of the artist's book with the deep embossing of the title. In this sanctified room of the manuscript and the original there is also a multimedia presentation of the sketch book: the scanned and animated copy of *BUK* (2012). The facsimile is shown page for page in a simple page turn animation. Just as with an old manuscript, digital scans are created for the user which can then be viewed for research online or at a terminal in the archiving research library. An unequivocal reference to the purported preciousness of the original sketch book. The more valuable or singular the unicum or original is, the more attention is paid to limiting reading access. If the community is to remain small and exclusive, the library itself has to be visited and the digital version can only be retrieved in the reading room or via pay-to-view access online.

What does the sanctification of the artist's book mean to Bernhard Frue though? In the context of art, every work which achieves value through the high profile or fame of its author is an original. Walter Benjamin was the first to attempt defining this phenomenon in his essay on the reproducibility of art works with the term aura. His theory was that the more technical reproductions of a work exist, the more aura it loses and consequently value.

What kind of aura does *PHESBUK* possess? Can this term still be played out in an age of unending and unendingly fast reproducibility? Is a term like original or aura not already long since obsolete in an age of media art, where copy and sampling appear to be on an equal footing with the unicum, the original work of the artist? It is exactly this state of affairs that Bernhard Frue attempts to counter with conceptual aspects in his exhibition at the Kunstverein Medienturm. The aura as a heavily charged term had already challenged the artist in his earlier work as "Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie auch sein mag". In his installation *CREME* (2008) at the artfinder Galerie in Hamburg, Bernhard Frue displayed in a room lit with ultra-violet light various panels with fluorescent neon colours which had concepts such as *ANALMENTAL–BANALCREME*, *STATE HOUSING*, *EATANIMALCUM–NO FATHER* arranged in crosses and underlaid with black. Behind the panels, which were leaning against the wall, a bright neon light radiated, providing the hard edges with a veil of light. Dissipating sharp boundaries and edges with light or other means is a common phenomenon of auratisation. Reflections in space, theatrical lighting and florescence

belong to the recurring repertoire of the visualisation of the aura in Bernhard Frue's work.

Unicum, camouflage, names, identity

Bernhard Frue initiates his very own disentanglement puzzle by alienating names and words. Seemingly incoherently combined words and fragments of sentences – applied to cross-shaped batons – distinguish many of Bernhard Frue's script-image works. Anagrammatic rotations of letters and inaccurate spelling, obtained through the transcription of orally transmitted English words, are also reflected in the titles of his works. *PHESBUK* in place of Facebook, *Tschicken* instead of Chicken, *Ket* for Cat. From the start of the exhibition at the Kunstverein Medienturm, so since 27.1.2012, Bernhard Frue signs with his shortened name. For the time being this shortened name is an artistic statement, a pronouncement, a pseudonym or artist name. His letterbox does not carry it nor is his telephone registered under it, not to mention his bank account, passport or his health insurance. Will it remain "just" a pseudonym, a privilege that is granted to the artist as a practice anyway?

No, says Bernhard Frue, it will become his proper name. The change of name is a reality. This artistic manoeuvre will therefore affect the identity of the artist, the person. Once more, behind all this is a long personal history of the artist, who has been toying with the idea of changing his name for quite some time. It all started about ten years ago when he changed his name from Frühwirth to Fruehwirth.

SO: Why? What is behind it?

BF: There had always been problems with spelling the name. I developed a disaffection towards my name and, simultaneously, a need to fashion it as well. Surprisingly there is an entry in my New York sketch book, which is the basis of *PHESBUK* now, in connection with this need to change my name. While preparing for the exhibition at Kunstverein Medienturm, I decided to drop the "hwirth". That makes things simpler. I used this name officially for the first time at the exhibition in Graz. I do not intend to continue as Fruehwirth but as Bernhard Frue instead. It is not that important to me with which name I pay my bills. But the intention is that Frue stays as my pseudonym in the art context.

SO: Hans Blumenberg wrote in his book Die Arbeit am Mythos (Work on Myth) that everything knowable in this world starts with names to which stories can be told. Is the change of name something of a new beginning for you?

BF: Of course I want to work with it in the future. My preoccupation with my name is a fetish. Just like I have always worked with elements from my life story, openly or masked.

Bernhard Frue as an artist is thus both a voyeur and a transformer who does not boggle at shortening his own name. A final distance still remains, however, from the unknown neighbour in the big city. In the three-part video projection *Exercise in Proportion and Cut* (2012) in the Graz exhibition, which is in the same room as the video animation *BUK* (2012), the privacy of others / of

strangers is the subject. Although the title heralds a purely formal study of window shots on the façades of apartment buildings, there is more to this video work: it is of hundreds of windows filmed from the street for one or two minutes with the camera held in the hand or on a simple tripod, zooming in on the window as far as the position of the camera allows at up to 150 meters away. The artist produced more than nine hours of video material like this. The short sequences were merged into three three-hour films so that the contents during a threefold projection are slightly out of sync but the same chronology is run through about three times. The windows the artist chose to film are at first an abstract graphic surface, a simple rectangle, betimes lit, betimes in the black of night. Occasionally what is behind it all reveals itself, suggested through the putting out of lights, the opening or closing of windows. People emerge in outline. The mystery lies in the hidden and not in the medially exposed.

Detachment, alienation, dissociation: these are the strategies that provide the spectator of Bernhard Frue's works with a continually new setting of medial manipulation, and so today it can be claimed, 80 years after Benjamin, that the aura is the result of medial alienation and detachment.

Skype meeting, 3.2.2012

Cornelia Bohn, "Individuen und Personen", in: *Person/Schauplatz*, Reihe Interventionen, Bd. 12, published by Jörg Huber, Zurich Vienna New York 2003, pp. 161–181, here p. 179.

Bohn 2003, p. 181.

Altogether different to the times when writing and reading were activities reserved for an elite educated by the clergy and which were oriented by the rhythm and energy of the writing hand, working with text has become nowadays a reproducing phenomenon which can (not must) occur at high speed and with comprehensive globality. The modern technical possibilities of reproduction lead both to the ubiquity and mobility of an art work. His historical testimony begins to totter and it loses its authority: "Was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura (What withers in the age of mechanical reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura)." Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 1939, p. 477.

Aura: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie auch sein mag (Aura: singular appearance of a distance, irrespective of how near it may be). Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. II, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 378.

Skype meeting, 29.1.2012

Hans Blumenberg, *Die Arbeit am Mythos*, Frankfurt am Main 1979, p. 41.

Personal meeting, 13.2.2012

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