

Stefan Wagner

## **Embedded**

‘Attention, danger of collapse!’ A warning sign with this message at the entrance to the installation ‘Inhale Exhale’ would seem advisable.<sup>1</sup> The sight of masses of rusty ceiling supports that are usually used in concrete formwork and now seem to be holding up the ceiling in the exhibition room induces in visitors the unpleasant feeling that by crossing the following meters, they could very well be stepping onto unsafe terrain. Or perhaps it is simply renovation work going on here and the fear of a collapsing ceiling is an overanxious misjudgment? What arouses suspicion is that when you enter the installation, your line of vision and your movements are restricted; you are forced to adapt your stride to the formations created by the ceiling supports. Which are not exactly conditions that induce you to accept the invitation to continue your walk. Perhaps what would help is to inhale and exhale deeply two or three times till an inner repose returns.

But all irrational fears of being buried and injured turn out to be pure speculation: the rusty-brown ceiling supports no longer function as underpinnings. They actually represent a forest-like scene. This interpretation is reinforced by an assemblage of rootstocks that lie together in a kind of clearing. Interestingly, from their stalks it is not the gnawing sound of insects that can be heard, but scraps of music that are interrupted by static, as if someone consciously and very tenaciously was searching for a quite specific radio program. Although the channel changes constantly, only one piece of music can be heard. At a closer listen, the sounds from the rootstock become recognizable: in a karaoke-like session, several persons are singing Frank Sinatra’s ‘My Way’. This song has for long occupied the pole position in U.S. charts for burial music – with its theme of a melancholic look-back at life. An essential quality of the singer may be the respective (in)tense relationship between a personal identification with the lyrics and the simultaneous arbitrariness and exchangeability of the text. The role model of a person who has gone proudly through life is a stereotype for a lifetime that actually cannot serve as an individual passage through existence. And yet these are precisely the stereotypes that are used as key references in an individualized society.

If we continue through the group of props in the direction of a second room, the light gets

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Inhale Exhale’ was shown as a solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen from 1 December 2007 to 13 January 2008. – Composition and performance of the drum solo ‘In Your Room’ by Pia Vonarburg.

continually weaker until, in the end, we find ourselves in darkened surroundings. From monitors on the right, a little light falls into the center of the room. On the screens we see different people writing short messages. As soon as our eyes have become accustomed to the obscurity, we can make out additional monitors that show people writing; yet we cannot determine if they are in contact with each other or are simply performing a finger ballet. Hidden behind wool blankets is a deserted bivouac that is lit by a table lamp. Above the camp bed a satellite dish has been installed, which has been robbed of its technical insides. It is here then that the short messages must converge, and could it be that the person who has settled in here coordinates all the communication processes? The demolished TV set that stands near the bed points to an outbreak of violence. Perhaps over these past weeks there have been communication problems that led to an emotional implosion. A somewhat closer look at the television set and the presumed violent situation is transformed into an almost touching scenario: the smashed TV casing contains a bird's nest that is lit from inside and looks like a Christmas nativity scene without any figures.

The most important part of the exhibition room is taken up by a half-circle of ceiling supports, at whose center we see an oversized video projection. Characteristically the title of this work is 'In Your Room'. We can look into the semi-circle, but not enter it. The video projection shows a woman playing drums under an overlarge burka. The camera captures the drum playing in a short video loop: it focuses at first on the eyes of the musician, then it pans back and shows the whole scene in a full shot. Parallel to this, the sound and the intensity of the drum playing is increased until the camera pans to face the audience at the climax of the solo piece and in this way assumes the musician's perspective. Here the pounding composition ends, and it becomes quiet in the room. This staging, at the beginning, recalls the logic of music clips, in which stars celebrate their ego; however, with the last panning shot, such an assumption ends in absurdity, leaving behind an ambivalent impression. The burka's cloth shell has hindered any approach to the concrete person. Thus the impression of a music clip is reversed and tends instead towards an uncertainty as to whether it is much more the archetype of a woman being staged here, an image that stems simply from the imaginative power of our own interpretative mindset.

With 'Inhale Exhale' Sonja Feldmeier has constructed an intricate complex, which is made up of an associational field – in the form of a metaphorical forest – and several autonomous works. The installative context allows the visitor to link loose relationships between the works

and then disconnect them. By this method the artist plays on communicative processes that, because of their open and always individual structure, never proceed linearly but, by meanderings and bends and skirting along abysses, then contribute to the development of identities and role models. Counter to widespread opinion, Sonja Feldmeier shows that, though identities and role models may have externally stable forms, the core of their content is always changeable and newly formable.