

Personal Army

Claudia Spinelli

In a costume – a mixture of Robin Hood, Punch and Captain Cook – the protagonist (Sonja Feldmeier herself) attempts to get her guards to fall in line. She rants, stomps and scolds in an incomprehensible idiom. In vain: the soldiers do not stand to attention and – even worse – take no notice of her. The people in front of whom she paces back and forth have been randomly picked out of an urban context – or even recruited. They haven't a clue as to what is expected of them. The artist has made her selection according to the motto that it is their tough luck if they happen to be wearing camouflage clothing. And it is their problem if they forget that wearing such a pattern in a civilian environment does not make them invisible but – to the contrary – highlights them. Seen in this way, Sonja Feldmeier's course of action is only logical: she thinks through to the end about what her fellowmen quite obviously didn't bother to think about when standing in front of their closet that morning. And, with merciless humor, comments on the superficiality and thoughtlessness of a society hyped on fashion.

Similar to a whole series of other works, Sonja Feldmeier in 'Personal Army' draws on the frictional force that results from the single steps in the work: recording, montage and final presentation. With her video camera these past years, she has filmed countless people in camouflage dress. In the streets of Manhattan, in Tokyo, but also in Europe and Switzerland. And as if these images were not significant enough, she incorporates them into an invented narrative.

The installation recalls an animated collage: in the background a line-up of narrow film strips with the soldiers who have been extracted from their original context, while the artist in her disguise is mounted in the foreground. She moves from film strip to film strip. We only take in over time the fact that during the course of this walk her hair gets shorter while the furry trophies that grow like tumors out of her coat proliferate. Little by little we are struck by the fact that the martial generality increases in size. The process begins quasi with David and ends with Goliath – admittedly with the far-reaching difference that neither the small nor the large figure succeeds in gaining respect or a hearing.

The fact that an artist presents herself in the dress of a pantomime general strikes us at first as strange enough. But in fact the motif is anything but arbitrarily chosen: the recruitment of soldiers is an apt metaphor for the act of artistic appropriation. Seen as such, the narrative context of 'Personal Army' thematizes nothing other than Sonja Feldmeier's own strategy. In conversations, the artist has again and again stressed the importance of the artistic recontextualization of her documentary video sequences: Sonja Feldmeier works with carefully and elaborately produced enframed scenarios. For example, with her video camera in 'Neverending', she stages her filmed scenes of everyday situations in a specially reconstructed elevator cabin. If we interpret the motif of recruiting a 'Personal Army' as a fundamental statement on her own way of working, then we not only watch how Sonja Feldmeier deals with found images, but also observe how she makes art from the everyday.

It is admittedly hard to overlook the ironic undertone that is tangible in the unwillingness of her personnel and her own quite absurd costume. The military metaphor has been taken to extremes. In association with the description of artistic practices, paraphrases with a military touch are very popular, such as 'strategy'. In the end, however, they are just as out of place as the use of camouflage patterns in peace time. Sonja Feldmeier focuses on the ubiquity of military codes and with convincing proliferation shows it to be the product of thoughtlessness.

Despite, or just because, of her sharp wit, 'Personal Army' is a thought-provoking work. Contrary to the military theme, it all functions without any battle scenes or stunts à la 'Kill Bill': the installation lets art and war meet up and clash, shows them both as a fundamentally incompatible combination. No wonder then that the actual battle, the showdown finale, fails to materialize. When Sonja Feldmeier slips into the role of a general who furiously and desperately struggles to command the attention of her troops, then the possibility of failure is in the cards. Whether it is the failure of art or that of society remains open: the artist consciously delegates the end of the story to the fantasy and imagination of her public.