

Barbara Auer

Face to Face

Veronika Veit's installation "eye to eye" at the Kunstverein Ludwigshafen

For many years, Veronika Veit's artistic work was concentrated solely on the simple objects we use in everyday life. Her sculptural repertoire was made up of the diverse articles that surround us every day; things which we take in our hands and use as a matter of course without paying much attention to them. These objects often accompany us for only a short time before disappearing into the bin, as is generally the rule in a throw-away society. Veronika Veit, however, has never merely created decal images of reality; rather, in her earlier sculptures, such as a carpet rucked into wrinkles, a pillow, a drain or a radiator, she undertook subtle alterations. She minimized and alienated nondescript objects in such a way that, owing to this changed aspect, they sometimes developed a curious life of their own: for instance, a peculiar, pulpy mass oozed from between the ribs of a radiator as if it had over-heated and brought itself to bursting point. It is not without irony that objects come apart at the seams, become alive and dissolve the borders between reality and fiction. However, the person who uses these objects on a day-to-day basis is never seen. That is, not until two years ago. "The moment of absence" remarks the artist, "functioned for a long time in my work. But then the issue was no longer to thematize something that was absent, and I had the feeling I could no longer avoid including people in my work." If one views this newly begun body of work in the light of work from past years, the decision to include a human figure seems logical and consistent. What has been so far a conscious absence now forcefully takes centre stage. Again, the artist confronts the viewer with very ordinary and familiar scenes which have recently developed into large, space-encompassing installations. A narrative approach, which up to now was almost hidden from perception, now manifests itself openly; the artist has begun to tell stories.

For the large-scale exhibition hall of the Kunstverein Ludwigshafen, Veronika Veit conceived a multimedia installation comprised of a number of elements. The walls of the hall remain empty, the action takes place in the centre of the space. Forty small, roughly one-meter high, human figures are grouped around five structures scattered through the exhibition space. These structures are self-contained, stage-like cubes of varying sizes made of wood and cardboard. Four of them have windows, doors and stairways while the fifth, which is open to the front and equipped with a bench, reminds one of a bus or tram shelter. In some places, small monitors hidden in the wall show short film loops. The proportions of the architecture as well as the integrated constructive elements are so arranged that when visitors enter the hall, they land – like Alice in Wonderland – in a dream world, as if turned upside-down. Like giants they tower over the little sculptures. Shadowed by the structures and in proportion to the surrounding 5.5-metre high exhibition hall, they appear even smaller than they actually are. The whole ensemble can not be seen all at once when entering the hall; the cubes are always in the viewer's way. At first sight the cubes appear to dominate the scene, but retreat more and more into the background when one enters the installation. The walls, a monotone grey and brown, are nondescript. Similarly unspectacular are the video loops. They are small, poetical, marginal notes of everyday observations: a piece of paper or fabric flutters soundlessly and gently in the breeze; in another place, the picture projected onto the floor is of a water droplet falling from the ceiling – accompanied by the monotonous sound of dripping. Together, architecture and film make up a consciously inconspicuous backdrop which makes the sculptures emerge all the more clearly. Without a doubt, they are the main characters in the scene and magically draw the gaze of the viewer.

Generally one can say that sculpture, with its spatial dimension and in contrast to two-dimensional art, allows for a closer contact with the viewer. When, as in this case, the theme is the reflection of one's own appearance, the sculpture enters immediately into a relation with the body of the viewer. The body is the single form that we all have in common. It is familiar to everyone – and one's own authentic experience correlates to the artefact. The eye of the viewer carefully scans the body, makes inevitable comparisons, and ponders, confirms, doubts or negates. Nowhere is the contact between viewer and work so intimate and familiar and, therefore, also so emotional. Veronika Veit's depiction of the human figure lends it a suggestive closeness and a great physical presence. The viewer's gaze remains inexorably fixed on the faces, hands, hair and eyes that have been executed with great detail and enormously skilled craftsmanship. What is very conspicuous is the extremely precise texture of the skin: the treatment of the surface and differentiated colouring make the sculptures almost tangibly lifelike. In no other feature can the age of a person be deduced as easily as from the skin. It has been rendered, corresponding to the age of the figure, as either young and smooth or wrinkled to a greater or lesser degree, in some places a bit shiny, slightly reddened or with moles. Blue veins on the neck, hands or legs shimmer under the skin with varying clarity. In spite of the realistic depiction of the human body, Veronika Veit has achieved a decisive artifice. As in her earlier works, the artist has altered the criterion and given ordinary things an extraordinary appearance. Thus, the viewer is never a prey, as is the case with the life-size, hyperrealistic figures of the American sculptor Duane Hanson, to the illusion of seeing a living person. Rather, the eye swings back and forth between the uncanny naturalism and the permanent disillusionment based on the obviousness of the artefact. It is an open game between proximity and distance.

Forty adults of different ages take over the exhibition hall. Each is unique in his or her appearance, possesses quite personal, individual features. The individual personalities are accentuated by clothing which has been carefully designed for each figure. Without exception they all seem carefully groomed. The clothes are tasteful but not extravagant. Many of the men wear a jacket, the women are dressed in fashionable, closely fitting ladies' suits or slacks, the outfits complemented with numerous and diverse accessories such as stockings, shoes, handbags and jewellery. In spite of the great disparity in age, the group makes a homogenous impression, nobody is particularly conspicuous. They are average people who seem familiar, almost as if one knows them from somewhere. By putting emphasis on special characteristics such as physiognomy, physical characteristics, clothing and accessories, the social status of those depicted can be discerned with relative ease. They are all well-situated in life and doubtlessly belong to the middle classes. Although the sculptures stand as a homogenous group within the context of the installation, each figure is still isolated in itself. There are no couples or little groupings. The body posture varies only slightly, gestures are restrained, the arms are held alongside the body or are crossed on the breast or folded behind backs, sometimes hands are put casually into trouser pockets. But nowhere is there an indication of communication: even when they are sitting next to each other on a bench, everyone remains self-contained, their eyes do not appear to meet. On the other hand, the facial expressions are very lively, are attentive and concentrated. Some of the figures seem to be thoughtful, pondering and mulling things over; some give a more self-conscious, insecure impression. The heads are usually tipped slightly back as if the figures were examining with interest the walls, windows and doors of the architecture. Sometimes they simply gaze into the distance. Gesture and facial expression, as well the generally similar physical characteristics make one think that they all have the same occupation. But what does their presence here indicate? What was the reason that they have gathered here? It is only gradually, when the viewer focuses on his or her counterpart, when his or her gaze meets that of one of the figures that a vague premonition creeps into one's mind. Who is actually the art object on exhibit and who is the viewer? A slight uneasiness permeates the atmosphere. It is reminiscent of the feeling when one inadvertently catches sight of oneself in a mirror and is startled. One feels unavoidably caught in the act. Suddenly, these small, hitherto rather harmless figures are very close to the viewer. There is a difference to the figures of Duane Hanson, whose figures depict average Americans, looking like foreign bodies in the museum in their working clothes or carrying shopping bags. Veronika Veit holds a mirror up to us from which there is no escaping. Because she means us, we are eye to eye with these figures. A dissociation is not possible. The artist is playing a bewildering and underhand game with her public. It is just this ambiguity of the situation that makes us feel insecure, is supposed to make us feel insecure. And who is not familiar with the everlastingly same, almost ritually rigid, procedure on exhibition opening day, when everything except art is talked about, when the social event is more important than the art itself and shoulders it into the corner? Carefully, Veronika Veit hints at questions without offering any answers to them. Ultimately, she is not directing this play, the viewer is. It is up to the viewer to make the decision of whether to stand with his or her back to art.

It is only when the viewer is quite alone in the hall, surrounded only by these forty figures, that the sculptures begin to grow larger than life. A melancholy mood pervades the scene. With disconcerting calm, the figures linger in the poses of people waiting, stand in the tension between the existentialism of Sartre and the absurdity of Beckett. They are indicative of either those condemned to freedom and to independent action or those despairingly regarding the senselessness and hopelessness of life and slipping into lethargy. While with a monotone assonance the sound of the falling drop of water resounds through the hall like the ticking of a clock, we become conscious of the loneliness and forlornness of human existence, the temporal limitations of our own lives. We see ourselves reflected in the waiting figures and finally ask ourselves the question instead of directing it at them, what are they waiting for?

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Quelle: „Veronika Veit Auf Augenhöhe“, Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg (ISBN 978-3-940748-47-8); 2008