Participation, waste, pose: On Silvia Kolbowski’s "Unposed" project

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Participation

In several of her projects, Silvia Kolbowski develops intellectual and aesthetic contexts involving specific groups of people asked to respond to a set of conditions. Through the framing of place, time, image, and text, she enables a view of the structures of consumerism, value, desire, and economy. She draws up a script-like sequence of events for the project and then processes and devises a form for participant respones.

For "Unposed,“ Kolbowski set participants in the yoga classes at Y8 the task of providing photographs that were taken spontaneously and show activities in their daily lives that are in excess of the energy expended on the everyday processes required to maintain life. The photographs provided by the participatns in the yoga classes form the material aspect of the project as images projected during routine yoga classes in the space, with those who make them available playing a role in the artist‘s project. This participatory extension of the individual artistic process has in recent years changed conventional definitions of art. We - once spectators, viewers, visitors - no longer stand in front of a work produced in a studio, but are a formative part of a project and thus of a process that involves a longer period of realisation, one that sometimes does not have an end product. It is not only the photographs provided to Kolbowski, but also each yoga class with its individualised group execution of the prescribed asanas, that extend the project, as the rhythm of the photographic projections and the movements of the practitioners intersect.

Participatory projects intervene in our thinking about time, process and communication. For a certain period of time, people come together to produce a product under conditions set by an artist. The experience of process and participation are not limited to artistic production, they exist in numerous social and economic circumstances, but concept and participation as part of an artistic work act to question the economic conditions of aesthetic production and consumption. Atypical conditions for communication and the production of art are introduced and the participants themselves can experiment with unusual forms of interaction, and reflect on the work involved.

According to Kolbowski, the content or motif of the photographs for the "Unposed" project, showing actions or movements that result from "surplus bodily energy", could also include violence and war in addition to socially tolerated and accepted energies such as sex without reproductive aim, sport, dance, holidays or other leisure activities. However, with one exception, none of the photos have violence as their theme. Only photos of peaceful and sociable activities were submitted to Silvia Kolbowski:

Sports, games, singing, dancing, celebrating, laughing, reading, hugging, masquerading, demonstrating, hiking.

Waste

The concept of "surplus bodily energy", including erotic and violent energy, that Kolbowski engages for this project, leads us to Georges Bataille's theory of waste. In the 1940s and 1950s, the French philosopher developed ideas on the relationship between prohibition and transgression, rules, law, violence, sacrifice and Eros in the tradition of Nietzsche, and presented them primarily in his book "L'Erotisme". From an idiosyncratic interpretation of archaic prohibitions and transgression rituals, Bataille sketches an anthropological conception of human beings as participating in the expenditure of energy in certain excessive and violent rituals, through which they experience continuity, fusion and ecstasy in rituals that are frowned upon in the context of religious commandments and social rules. The painful experienceof „discontinuity“ in individual beings is temporarily cancelled out in such rituals.

Bataille also transfers these insights gained from archaic societies to later societies and sees Eros and war in particular as two acts of transgression that are geared towards wasting life energy and bringing a sense of the „continuity“ of being through proximity to death. Bataille first developed his theory of waste to challenge the rules of industrial society regarding the limiting of life energy as exclusively as possible to the functionality of work. This demarcation can hardly be maintained today, as everything is wasted in the global economy: energy resources, materials, human lives, practically everything. No activity escapes economisation and consummerism. In this context, the photographs generated by Kolbowski’s request, displaying movement and play, are highly ambivalent, as they are always both non-functional, wasteful expenditure of energy and at the same time can hardly escape the functionality of commercialisation. This is evident in Kolbowski’s own description of the project, which points out how play is connected to profit.

Pose

The title of the project is "Unposed", no pose or without pose. What can this mean, because, as Roland Barthes says in his book "Die helle Kammer. Remarks on Photography": "What constitutes the nature of photography is the pose." The pose is neither an attitude of the photographed object nor a technique of the operator, but the term for an intention in reading: "When I look at a photograph, I inevitably include in my contemplation the thought of that moment, however brief it may have been, when something real was motionless before the eye. I transfer the motionlessness of the photograph I have before my eyes to the shot taken in the past, and this pause forms the pose."

The pose is therefore a pause on both sides oft he lens, that of the viewer, who sees the immobility of a person and, in pausing, imagines their pose in front of the lens, and the pause or stillness of the person photographed in a moment long past. The pose is thus something like a past moment of filled time, a full presence both when looking at a photograph and when holding still while being photographed. It implies stillness and immobility.

An artistic project that names the negation of the pose in its title and at the same time includes photographs thus places itself in the context of this theory. Pausing visualises the pose, movement destroys it, according to Barthes in the course of his text. The photographs, which appear in different rhythms of movement sequences due to the projectors' clock, therefore come close to film, resulting in a restless here and there of motifs, which in most cases were also taken as snapshots, in passing, so to speak, by chance.

The movements in the photographs being projected create a juxtaposition to that of the yoga exercises in the yoga studio, in relation to which the project was developed. They form a counterweight to the asanas, to their calm, concentration, and unified group expression. They also create a juxtaposition to the special demarcation that the Yoga Centre has created from the outside world. In this way, the artist’s intervention through juxtaposition produces a permanent shift in rhythm, a dynamisation, even a disturbance.