

EXPRESSION IN CRISIS. REFLECTIONS ON ANNA K.E.'S "TEEN FACTORY", AT SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY, NEW YORK

*La expresión en crisis. Reflexiones sobre "Fábrica adolescente"
de Anna K. E. en la Simone Subal Gallery, Nueva York*

DEVI DUMBADZE*

devi.dumbadze@gmail.com

Expression is not reducible to a mere combination of signs that can be deliberately orchestrated; rather, it results from a universal experience that one must partake in. Expression contains a certain *intension* –itself not identical with a specific content– which not only surpasses individual sensorium but forms it. Expression is a social element in works of art. An artwork, as a transient composition of gestures, has a language-like character which enables it to enunciate what neither empirical objects –in the nexus of commodity exchange– nor subjects can bring to speech. Works of art, if successful, set out to express a more, a domain between things and subjects that itself, however, is not an entity.

A performance may seek to grasp precisely this in-between, in a double sense: as an artistic presentation, and as an achievement which perhaps would not succeed elsewhere, in the sphere of labor. Yet as such, performance is bent on failure. In the best case, it can only engender a semblance, which might come about in its contemplation. But how to participate in an experience, if the intention of a particular group of sculptures –that presents itself as part of a performance, accompanied by a *selfie*-like video and a reciprocal live stream of a parallel show by the artist in a Berlin gallery– consists in nothing but making explicit that the semblance it wants is a deception: a play of seeking, but not of finding?

Doubtlessly, this is what Anna K.E.'s works intend. They aim to conceal sense-luring nonetheless with their specific mode of existence as illusion devoid of expression. They stand as open secrets, bereft of any possibility of a solution. They're not riddles, not even assuming the artwork's character of a riddle itself. On the contrary, they just play-being, contradictorily, convinced of the impossibility of any conviction.

* School of Visual Arts, New York.

A plexiglass board, in anthropomorphic scale, impersonal, hangs fixated with metallic clasps on a white aluminum stand. Its surface reveals a text, carved out with a stencil. An enlarged text-message of sorts; perhaps the holed letters signify precisely its casual unbindingness. In it, K.E. retells an "anecdote" –a school joke– from her Tbilisi childhood around 2000. A man, in a big car of a *petit bourgeois*, is chasing down some highway a dashing chicken, who is astonishingly evading his grasp. *She's our best*, the dispirited chaser is told by the farmer in whose barn the chicken finally halts. *Though we'll never know this for sure; for no one was ever able to catch her.*

If the only propositional statement in the arrangement of the "sandwich boards" appears as an infantile bagatelle, it nevertheless comments on the whole composition. Its attitude is characteristic of the indeterminateness on behalf of which quite a few artworks of today eagerly rescind their affinity to language. The chased will never fall into the trap. Yet –and this is K.E.'s own emphasis– it's not worth pursuing either. He who was no longer a hero in a film—in Michelangelo Antonioni's distant *Blow Up* –once ran out of the concert hall, agitated, and, having snatched a useless use-value from the performers– a piece of some instrument–promptly tossed it away as garbage outside. This motif of enlarging, yet of not seeing; of taking a curious look behind something, but beholding nothing determinate, relates in K.E.'s works to such a film scene. Perhaps it even relates to the film as such – except her artworks may intend a different organization of time than is usually possible in a film, even a non-mainstream one by an Antonioni. For in her case, one can assume that the synthesis of the aesthetic material by the power of imagination would be less predetermined by the structure of the apparatus, which is socially conditioned. Nevertheless, the artist wants to achieve a certain effect: that there is none.

The geometric billboards form unclosed triangles, at times quadrangles with tapered ends spreading upwards. One of them protrudes higher than its companions, and more openly. Parallel aluminum foil strings cover the inner sides of its wooden panels marked with curvilinear cut-outs. A tight combination of letters in a black plastic, hanging down from the vertex, builds the name of the artist. It is a momentary discharge of libidinous impulse otherwise kept in check, for one does not know what that proper name may denote. It functions, to the contrary, as its own opposite, insofar as names, in their Adamic notion, serve precisely the purpose of making the irretrievable singularity of non-identical qualities of an individual object –or subject– graspable.

But, this particular sign seems to indicate, the artist knows full well that such denotation is impossible. Indeed, she secretes the meaning of any name, and thus, that of her own proper one as well –at times, also corporeally: as the symbolically unliving materiality of feces and urine, which are brought to release in her videos.¹

Is this a side effect of the so-called social networks, then, in which supposedly one does not know who oneself truly is –due to all the meticulous performances of the self? Yet the crisis of expression in K.E.'s works is much more determinate. Another sculpture, with a convex curve protruding from its white plank, besprinkled unevenly in dark rose, is filled on the inside with porous light-green brushstrokes, akin to those found in children's coloring books: It is an expression of a broken memory. Such a break is not to be comprehended in a biographical sense, although Anna was fourteen when she left Georgia to move with her artist parents to Germany and study there, never to return, until after another fourteen years for a visit. Rather, the rupture is a universal, and that is a social one. That's the trace that pervades her works.

The art market lives on the insatiable appetite for pinning down an artist to her identity: a former Georgian; a proponent of utopian, modernist architecture—a handful of tokens more, added together. That the artist is fed up with all this can be sensed in her works. Yet such discontent is still not what, in art, expression amounts to. What K.E. is indeed dealing with, perhaps unconsciously, is the social crisis, a crisis that renders even a mediated expression in art unreliable. And this crisis is what also makes it impossible for one to be different without fear—perhaps, also, to feel oneself as a Georgian, not as alien; as oneself, whoever one may be. And because this non-identity is denied to the individual socially but all the more veiled with the disguise of the self, it can be daily performed in a play. The manufactured objects can allude to individual memories; however, they will remain cryptic. It does no matter if anybody understands them.

The limits of the possibility of experience also delineate those of K.E.'s entire composition. Indeed, one must only lean down slightly to see that all boards stand at one level: as if something in them did not want to grow any further. Their chosen materials are always profane, industrial, though manually reworked with mechanical tools. If a color is used, it has the same status as a metal bar –not a means

¹ Noemi SMOLIK, "In Focus: Anna K.E." Frieze. http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/in-focus-anna-k.e/. 16.03.2013

of mimetic expression, not a form, but part of the material. Multiple bolts fixate the lightly irregular beams, softly chiseled. All are typical materials, applied, ever since anti-minimalism, to break with the material's purported purity.

The crisis of expression is the crisis of society. What one perceives in Anna K.E.'s works is an experience of being dragged by the relations of an economy which became independent of its agents –and to the movement of which Marx paradoxically referred to as the “automatic subject.” This perception is possible not because, for example, the artist is a migrant; or that alienness would transhistorically constitute a fundamental structure of the human existence. K.E.'s art is alien in a determinate way: Her works are alien in themselves –partially evolved, and then again arrested, stabilized as triangles; elevated on a white platform of a couple of inches, with a few biomorphic inserts– a piece of grass, some water in a blue basin, a synthetic imitation of a fried egg. What is not comprehended is being imitated– and expression fails to occur.