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Theme and Variation in the Work of Thorsten Knaub

Since at least the early years of the 20th century the issue of what it is that artists can or should do in order to produce "art" has been open to a vigorous but productive dispute. It is well known that the work of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) radically disrupted ideas of artistic behaviour in which manual dexterity and the employment of traditional craft-based methods of making had been central. Duchamp's contention, that it was the artist's idea or concept that was important over and above any degree of technical skill helped to determine a shift in artistic practice that has now itself become something of an orthodoxy. Today, much artistic activity is "conceptual", which is another way of saying that any form of media - any method whatsoever of publicly presenting an idea or concept - is recognised as valid behaviour for the artist. Freed from what might be termed the tyranny of "correct" methods and materials the artist occupies today a position of exquisite liberty. Such freedom is not, however, without its problems, raising as it does the question of what it is today appropriate for the artist to do. How might the artist, caught in the flux of endless possibility, choose an appropriate or valid artistic approach to his or her work? If art can now be anything, and employ any kind of material or process, then surely questions regarding meaning, validity and pertinence become of central import.

Thorsten Knaub's work addresses this freedom but also the dilemma faced by the artist today, when such a plethora of possibilities often leaves the artist not free but tightly restrained. At times of great openness art becomes introspective and analytical, and artists have to attend to the matter of what art is, what it has become but what it can also be in future. Knaub approaches this state of uncertainty by examining the very conventions and contradictions of contemporary art, playing with them, pulling them apart in order to reassemble them from a fresh perspective.

What exactly does the artist do to make art? Is there, today, a specialised set of skills that the artist needs to know and use in order to make something worthy of the name "art", or can anything be, if produced by someone we call an "artist" thus considered? Taking as one point of departure received notions of artistic skill Knaub's videos and installations focus our attention upon, at one extreme, the artist's body as a potential metaphor for manual dexterity, and, at another, upon the intellectual manipulations, the mind and ingenuity of the contemporary artist.

By offering, in the images collectively labelled ***What does the artist do when he doesn't do art?***, a set of staged "snapshots" of the artist seen when he is engaged in quotidian activities such as sleeping, jogging in the park, or even, most strangely, lying in the road, Knaub projects a picture of "correct" and "incorrect" artistic occupations, points up the amusing, but perhaps also frustrating way that the artist might be read by "non-artists" today. It is an ambiguous social position, with both the social function of the artist and the skills necessitated by those who practise this role occupying an ambivalent status in society, seen as either its shamanic, existential "other" or as layabout, freak or fool.

Thus in certain works Knaub documents in detail the disparate elements of the body, marks out its extensions as recorded in a carefully disposed relay of video screens. In the video-installation ***Manufactura***, the hand of the artist, conventionally the most important tool he or she employs, is dutifully recorded and displayed in all its pliable complexity and yet the means used to do this are unremarkable. Video, which may have been an avant-garde medium in the 1960s when first taken up by artists, is today a common, "naturalised" technology, carrying virtually no specifically artistic connotations. Its accessible, democratic aspect adds a further layer to Knaub's analysis of the artist's practice, or rather, of the conditions for such a practice. Yet the overall effect is not a representation of technique so much as a consideration of the mind behind the method, the role played by the intellect of an artist fully aware that today art might be made of anything, and in any way whatsoever.

One of the most direct ways in which Knaub foregrounds intellect above mere technique is through a sustained consideration of human language. His titles, often thought up before the work is made, may act as a trigger to the pieces produced (a condensed instruction or proposal), a label, as in the conventional usage of such devices, or may be an inseparable component of the work, not a supplementary naming device but an intrinsic element of the overall mix, e.g. ***Rehearsing Remembering Something You Thought You Had Forgotten And Looking Subsequently Surprised And Slightly Terrified***.

His interest in language and here in particular the spoken word is also evident in the works ***Meaning*** or ***Maybe - Never, Never - Maybe***, which involves the repetition of one word to the point where its ostensibly clear, perhaps even "anxious" meaning is shot through, dissolved, rendered as "mere" sound without attendant reference. Such examinations of word to thing, language to world, are also to be found elsewhere in Knaub's practice. At one level amusing and absurd, at another intensely serious and interrogative, such pieces render problematic many relationships which we often take for granted. The normal artworld hierarchy of image over linguistic supplement, is reversed or rendered ambivalent, as is that of the

everyday world we inhabit and the means we employ to negotiate it. Knaub takes Conceptual Art's linguistic sophistication to a new level, points to it whilst refusing to be constrained by its now established patterns and "rules".

Knaub acknowledges his debt to the "classic" actions and acts of Conceptualism - one is reminded, for example, of the repetitive gestures of Vito Acconci and the self-documentation carried out by Keith Arnatt. But Conceptual Art's history is reframed by Knaub's work, not merely repeated or too-simply restaged, and this in spite of the artist's interest in repetition and in the kind of "dumb" skills marked out as aesthetically feasible procedures by this earlier generation of artists. Such processes and pains of repetition are clearly evident in Knaub's ***Activating the delayed shutter release and then throwing the camera above me into the air with the intention to take a picture of myself standing on the ground***. Literally a novel "take" on the tradition of the self-portrait, we see here the artist developing a new technique of image-making, one which involves judgements of timing and throwing, as well as a reconsideration of what it might mean to quite carefully document a pose. As with other of his pieces the artist has taken an ordinary, easily available piece of technology and deliberately "misused" it in a productive way. The results are both comical and curious, as though we have stumbled across a hitherto secret ritual or game.

In this and other works Knaub presents the viewer with what look like odd anthropological encounters or the scattered fragments of a lost cultural convention or art. It is as though the artist is a new type of anthropologist, looking beyond the restraints of established behaviour, digging for clues as to what art, or perhaps our memory of art, might be or have been.

Knaub's disarming directness of execution, the broad, intelligent sweep of his address gives us an entertaining artistic practice which wittily focuses attention upon the choppy waters of aesthetic propriety, on those limit points at which art, the artist and the everyday engage in an endless act of redefinition, refinement, and display.