

Semiotics of Conspiracy. A conversation between Cristina Ricupero and Eva Grubinger
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CR: Many of your projects seem to address questions of free access and direct confrontation with the audience, involving its active participation like, for example, 'Lemon Incest (girls vs. beuys)' (1998). Yet, some of these projects such as 'Cut-Outs # 1-3' call for participation and at the same time deny it or make it somehow difficult. Could you define this *relative interactivity*? Is this a subtle way to question current attempts to democratize the artwork?

EG: In the age of infotainment, exchangeability of signs and a flattening of hierarchies are constantly being suggested. In front of the screen everybody is supposedly equal. My pieces have never been located within this ideological framework. It takes more than just a mouse click to democratize art, life, social relations. In the 'Cut-Outs' series for example, movable signs are attached to the figures with Velcro. They can theoretically be repositioned by the viewer, but practically they only make sense on a specific spot. Social relations cannot be exchanged like a dirty shirt.

CR: When looking at more recent pieces like 'Life Savers' and 'Operation R.O.S.A.', one gets a feeling that *interactivity* is not at stake. Is direct participation no longer relevant to you? How did this shift come about?

EG: The moment of interaction between a piece and a viewer still is a driving force for me. The murals in 'Caught In Flux: flexibel.org' for example relate to the physical position of the viewer in the space. Or I might offer something that other people might like to *use* – e.g. 'Resistance Say It Loud And Proud', a protest song I composed on the occasion of the empowerment of the right wing government in Austria – but I think that participation in art should not be an end in itself. 'Life Savers' reflects the social use or *function* of art in another way – by asking: What can one expect from an apparently pure formalistic artwork? Can art save lives or is that asked too much? 'Operation R.O.S.A.' puts up similar questions from a different angle: What is the relation between abstract signs, ideological formations and the biography of a person?

CR: Following this line of thought one could say that your work makes direct comments on

society and its current economical, political and social mutations. One of the oldest avant-garde gestures aims at the reconciliation of art and social praxis by abolishing artistic autonomy. Do you actually believe in art's direct impact on society, on life?

EG: In my opinion artistic production can contribute to a certain understanding of both social conditions and the self, but there is no need for simply becoming a reproductive service or a rival for any commercial services of the leisure industry.

CR: Throughout your works you have addressed topics such as social conflicts, gender relations and collective utopias. In many pieces (i.e. 'Cut-Outs 1-3' or 'Sacher Torture') you use signs, symbols to express the underlying dynamics of communication, principles of inclusion and exclusion, authority and power. How does 'Operation R.O.S.A.' relate to that aspect?

EG: Representation, coding and game rules are functions of authority and power. That's why I'm interested in the social meanings of signs. 'Operation R.O.S.A.' is about conspiracy, reflected in its visual representation - the rattle, consisting of coded elements.

CR: You are dealing with serious issues in a playful manner through the use of slapstick video scenes ('Life Savers'), games ('Hype!, Hit!, Hack!, Hegemony!'), comic-like images, cut-out dressing dolls etc. The work appears both generous and demanding, serious and playful, committed and distanced. Could you comment on this ambivalence?

EG: In Austria people never tell you straight on what they really think, they always use a certain kind of humor called Schmääh to tell you the truth. Job served a similar habit with the British, they call it irony. My theory is that that's what the heirs of old empires – once big, now small – have in common: both strong sensors for social control and humor. Without just being ironic, I try to capture this tension.

CR: Conceived as a serial, consisting of a video and a sculpture and based on a narrative 'Operation R.O.S.A.' has a number of formal similarities to 'Life Savers'.

EG: With 'Life Savers' I started to intensify the concept of serialisation, a story that goes on,

beyond what you can see for the moment, and I became very interested in the dialectic play between narration and abstraction. With 'Operation R.O.S.A.' I further explore this relation. I have been working with narration before, e.g. each of the games is drawing the gamblers into a particular story, a setting. Or 'Sacher Torture', originally conceived for a book – 'group.sex' – where the images can almost be read.

CR: You have been a pioneer on the internet – starting your non-institutional art programme 'C@C - Computer-Aided-Curating' in 1993/94. 'Netzbikini' was made in 1995. What has been your artistic interest in technology?

EG: On a practical level one can use technology, i.e. the computer, as a tool for everything – drawing, printing, video editing, writing, communication. Intellectually I am both fascinated and horrified by its psycho-social and economic effects, how technology is used ideologically.

CR: In the installation Rosa – the narrator – reveals that her parents used to work for Robotron, former East Germany's computer trust. Finland is geographically in a position where both East and West meet, in a somewhat in-between zone influenced by Swedish and Russian culture, capitalism and communism. When you first spoke to me about 'Operation R.O.S.A.' I immediately thought of its connection to this specific context. Can you speak about this East-West relationship and how it operates in your piece?

EG: In 1975 Helsinki hosted CSCE – the famous Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This was a very important event, especially for the GDR, because in the Helsinki Final Act all participating states, East and West, undertook, among other things, to respect each others' sovereign equality and self-determination, to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought and religion, to facilitate personal and professional travel, and to cooperate in the development of computer and telecommunication technologies. The American businessman with a Finish-sounding name – Mike Makkula – who Rosa remembers to have met as a child in 1975, can be read as a tribute to this. By placing the plot both in East and West, I wanted to counter the cliché of capitalist individualist freedom versus socialist egalitarian control. The story is more complicated than that.

CR: The voice of Rosa is impersonated by Berlin Punk heroine Nina Hagen. You have been referring to pop music in other pieces ('Hit!', 'Music Non Stop'). Why did you choose her?

EG: Of course I have been admiring Nina Hagen and her music since I was a teenager, but the reason for asking her to speak this particular text in 'Operation R.O.S.A.' was more because she literally embodies this East-West story – growing up in the GDR and becoming an internationally known popstar. With her great voice and her slightly teutonic English, she is the ideal cast.

CR: I have been thinking about the shapes and colours of the rattle. They include not only black, red and yellow which are also the colours of both the East and West German flag, but white and silver as well. A connection could be made to alchemy and the secret societies who have been practicing this secret science – the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons. In Freemasonry alchemy is not to be understood as a technique of making gold, but a spiritual process of transformation, rebirth. A method of self-perfection, to realize the homo maximus in oneself through an analysis of the unconscious.

EG: The colours reflect this transformation process from dark to light, from lead to ash. Silver refers to the philosophical Mercurius, which is not only mercury, but a secret substance of transformation, male and female, who can transform in any given shape. Alchemy has been very strong in Freiberg, an old silver town in Saxony, close to Dresden, headquarter of Robotron. Freiberg is also the headquarter of LDS– The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, an American religious community also known as the Mormons, who will play a certain role in one of the next pieces of the series.

CR: Mercurius is always shown as a little baby boy, so I see something like a female mercurius, a *mercuria* projected on the wall in the installation. How did you come up with the shapes of the rattle?

EG: A common peculiarity of all secret knowledge is how signs and symbols function as code. The semiotics of conspiracy are especially fascinating to me, since they are paradoxical: In the symbol, the significant operates as an *image*, which at the same time

reveals and hides its meaning, the signified. They include those who know, and exclude those who do not, without hiding anything. I wanted the shapes on the rattle to be abstract, coded, but at the same time I wanted to create some kind of archetypal forms, that everybody can associate meaning to: perhaps about science, community, individuality, spirituality.

CR: What makes this fascination with conspiracy?

EG: In a conspiracy the group, the rituals and the goals of its members remain secret. This makes its members more threatening, more powerful, since you do not know whom you are dealing with. If you look at the current discussion in Germany about how to deal with the Stasi data (the files and dossiers collected by the East German secret service) this becomes very obvious. The authors of these files have disappeared, but their authority has not. The power of their authority still is the power of conspiracy.

CR: When Rosa finally exclaims "The rattle is me," she realizes that, during her development from child, teenager to adult woman, she has not been following her own personal impetus, but had unwittingly fulfilled a *higher plan* already made when she was born, as manifested in the rattle. Has the story anything to do with your own personal life experience? Do you identify with Rosa?

EG: Rosa is a piece of art, a piece of fiction, but yes – I am about the same age as her and yes – I am asking myself questions like: how did I become what I am today?, How free am I to decide about my life? Where exactly does ideology take control of the individual? One of the most important decisions I made, totally against my parents' will, was to move to Berlin in the summer of 1989, to become an artist. Coming from a small, socially highly controlled, conservative city like Salzburg, I felt extremely free within the West-Berlin enclave, and I was fascinated by the GDR. Three months after my arrival the wall collapsed.