



Heather Phillipson interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter on 14 September 2013

abundance – how do I make the right decision? What is the right decision? Or even a right decision? On a formal level, this relates to the process of editing, which is crucial across my practice – the videos, sounds and texts, but also the physical structures, which proliferate, obscure and reveal one another.

If the installation and video were asking a single question it would be something like: What are we being plunged into? It's a smash-up of cultural references, from instructional, advertising and pop videos, to POV selfie spot-squeezing, the experience of being in supermarkets, hotels and galleries – these spaces that seem to represent arriving, passing through. Visually, it might have precedents in a bombastic Claes Oldenburg or Cosima Von Bonin installation, Jason Rhoades' hermetic environments, Franz West's painted bodily objects, and in the radical architectural movements of the sixties, people like Archizoom, for whom functional objects become de-functionalised – the drive to make things lose their use-value.

There's an attempt to represent, or to make or inhabit a site of excess, where there's too much going on to be assimilated, and within that, things are not coherent. Coherence is a tyranny.

EMDW: Language, image and sound come together in your videos but it never feels like you are narrating an image or illustrating a fragment of speech; they meld together to make something greater than the sum of its parts. Is there an order in which you conceive of these disparate elements, and how do you eventually bring them together into a finished work?

HP: When you're using digital media, everything eventually becomes homogeneous, whether it's image, sound or text. It all ends up in the same form – digital data. So how does one negotiate difference

and equivalence in this situation? I think of my videos in terms of syntax, with the possibility that every element might have an equal status but is deployed to different ends. A rhythm builds up on the level of punctuation and grammar – an image could act as, say, a noun or an adjective, and words and noises could be full stops, colons or inverted commas. There's an attempt to multiply associations between images, sounds and words, to build up a surplus of details, and, through doing so, to break established orders. I think of my videos always in terms of collage, so they don't start with a fixed plot or narrative. In fact it's the opposite of that; there's a resistance to closing everything towards a single point, like death, and instead the possibility of departing in any direction. It's the Situationist *dérive*, there's the simple shock of collision, the possibility that any element might spark off a new tangent. I'm trying to find the maximum tension between the parts, in order to get to a dynamic that can cause ruptures. There's a desire to make a video that, through these gluts, hurts your eyes or ears or brain, or even your feet if you're forced to stand up and watch it. But it might also soothe them, who knows. Jacques Rivette said the ideal cinema is one of ordeal – it's quite appealing.

EMDW: One of the themes running through this installation is the theme of hygiene, which brings to mind notions surrounding possible hygienes of life, language and art. Is this something you are thinking of in relation to your work?

HP: I'm interested in notions of shared space, both literally in terms of physical space, and metaphorically through virtual space, thinking and language. I feel like we're encouraged more and more to achieve an ideal of secluded privacy – there's this othering that keeps us in competition, which is very useful for economic flows. And, for me, the drive towards hygiene could be a metaphor for this othering, soap as a

distancing device between self and society – the perpetual incitement to cleanliness, the idea that you have to scrub off all contact through anti-bacterial sprays and washes. Barrier gels. We're both kept in a state of perpetual anxiety about the proximity of other bodies, in all senses, and losing all natural defences against them – it's a convenient way of keeping us apart.

So in the show, there's an invitation to constantly engage with things, objects and others, but also the suggestion of risk. To view the video, you have to share a bed that's also a door. Then, within the video, there's the recurring motif of the touch-screen, which seems to be the ultimate representation of this strange tactile/virtual space we inhabit, and a repeated instruction to wash your hands. The implication is that the video itself is a source of filth, and that you might need to rinse off afterwards. There's a continual slippage between virtual and physical worlds.

EMDW: Word play is central to much of your video work, and you also have a practice as a poet. Can you talk about the role of words in your work? And also of linguistic rules and breaking them, which is a strategy you often use to great effect.

HP: First, it might be useful to say why I think poetry is important. We're constituted through language and language is continually co-opted by systems to inform how we think and behave. In different ways, much of my practice touches on accepted structures, attempting instead to get at substructures and to see what can be unpicked, and this includes, above all, language. Language is a key system for controlling information and knowledge – there's a lot of power bound up in making things easy or explicit, or in withholding the complex argument. In my practice, there's a fundamental distrust of the simple statement (the favourite of political rhetoric!), and instead a desire to

obfuscate or undermine, to somehow reclaim sensuality and autonomy through fucking with language, or hinting at communication but communicating nothing, or something wildly different. There's a nice Gilles Deleuze video interview in which he talks about the work of art being precisely not about communication, but something radically other, something which resists communication and information. And that's where poetry comes in. Poetry doesn't have a use value, because it can't be easily assimilated into a system of exchange. It's complex and explosive and potentially destabilizing.

EMDW: There is a lot of humour, sometimes verging on silliness in this work, which is in tune with the *trompe l'oeil* and cartoonish sculptural theatre you've created, as well as the surrealism and oneiric tone of the whole piece. Can you speak about the place of levity and the imagination in your work?

HP: Instead of the word 'silliness', I'd prefer 'absurdity', because absurdity relates much more to despair. For me, absurdity implies exaggeration – things being blown up to such proportions that they're revealed as they truly are, or so that we're forced to re-look at them. There's a quote from Hannah Arendt in which she says that lying is an act of imagination – that it comes from a desire to make things different to how they are. And perhaps there's a connection between the exaggerations in my own practice and this leap of imagination. My tactic is not exactly a lie, but it's definitely a pushing of things into potentially absurd situations. I guess this interest in absurdity is informed largely through literary figures, like Thomas Bernhard, whose writing I keep coming back to. Bernhard is like the limit-point of absurdity, his version of it is bleak and absolute: all human endeavours are pointless. But he's also very funny. And I think the failure of accomplishment he identifies is compelling at a time when everything is about success

and goals and measurable achievement. Trying to find projects that are useless, or to deny use-value through miscommunication, or refuting meaning, is a sort of resistance to this 'progress'.

In terms of the physical flow of my installation in the gallery, I've been thinking about it as a multi-purpose site, almost like an open-plan department store, in which, in one place, you pass through lots of different places – like the bedroom place, the washing place, the beauty place, the dining place, the weapons place, the love place, and you momentarily inhabit each of these, or maybe several of them simultaneously. I'm interested in the 'experience economy', which is a business model in which everything works together to produce a particular experience for the consumer – it's the dematerialisation of the object to the degree that it's the *experience* that's for sale. But what happens when you throw things into such an experience that undo it, or rip its surface, that stop it being coherent, so that it can't be consumed in that way? In my show, there's an attempt to produce something that draws attention to its own mechanics, so that you can see the spectacle but also everything that underpins it, which leads to the impossibility of buying into it as a believable whole. I wanted the experience of inhabiting the place of the gallery to be the physical equivalent of viewing the video – so the spatial enclosures of room and screen produce an event that unfolds in time but is, as much as possible, non-linear. It can be viewed from multiple perspectives. And there's a rhythm to moving through the space, in the same way as there is to watching the video. It's like being in the middle of something you can't see the edges of.



Ellen Mara De Wachter: Can you describe your new installation, *through the flesh-tone scenario, the imported combi-boudoir*, and mention some of its influences and source materials?

Heather Phillipson: This question highlights for me the problem of describing a sensibility, as opposed to an idea, or ideas, and emphasises that perhaps the show is actually refusing to convey a specific idea, or to be easily describable, or is at least attempting to not be visible in a straightforward way. Physically, what's encountered is layers – cardboard planes, paint, household detritus, and the multiple collaged layers of the video – the continual awareness and distraction of something else *just over there*. But really what's experienced is perhaps the state of upholding multiple, often contradictory, positions simultaneously – being not in one mind, but several. And multiplicity always suggests the onus and responsibility of choice, the necessity of selection in the face of

Artist's presentation

Sunday 27 October, 12–7.30pm, drop in anytime. Heather Phillipson will introduce a screening of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's epic 7 hour film, *Hitler: A Film from Germany, 1978*

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Reverse:
Heather Phillipson, sketch for *through the flesh-tone scenario, the imported combi-boudoir*, 2013

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