

ANNETTE HOLLYWOOD with Stephanie Buhmann

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SB: Although you are a German artist based in Berlin, many of your films have been predominantly in English. Is there a specific reason other than trying to reach an international audience?

AH: I grew up in West Germany and I was raised with the products of the American cultural industry, especially in the form of TV series and movies. Though these were dubbed and screened in German, they still belonged to an English-speaking culture. As my work explores pop-cultural phenomena and mass media at large, I prefer using the language of the original context, English or German.

SB: In fact, you have focused on this theme for almost two decades. Have you witnessed certain developments in the mass media landscape that have directly impacted and even shaped your work?

AH: Yes, absolutely. I belong to a generation, for whom Television as a medium was still incredibly relevant. However, I think that for younger people today it is not as important anymore. In fact, they hardly watch TV. Most of what they do along these lines can be done with their cell phones. My earlier works, in which I interacted physically with films, reflected my desire to overcome the role of a passive media consumer. I call this "Performing Found Footage" – it's a strategy that I have used over and over again in my work in different ways. Today, it seems that the media already offers possibilities of interaction. Any person can access and post film footage or music on YouTube. People have become very interactive with mass media outlets on multiple levels; you can like, forward, or comment on things constantly.

SB: Has mass media become more democratic, because everyone can engage with it, curate their experience and use it as an outlet for personal opinions?

AH: Yes, I would in fact describe it as a kind of democratization. However, the question is whether it just creates surface rather than depth. It is certainly faster to add your name to an online petition than to be really politically active, for example. I think it remains to be seen what the lasting effects will be. I feel that a direct political engagement is important. This is why I have been active in cultural politics for years now.

SB: You just mentioned surface and many of your films explore various superficialities that exist in society. One project specifically deals with the art world.

AH: It is a feminist stance. What is personal is also always political. As an artist I work within a certain system, whose boundaries I constantly brush up against. I am definitely aware of a glass ceiling and mechanisms of exclusion, that's why I examine this so-called art world that I am a part of, trying to define what that actually means. I observe how I work and live within this context.

SB: How about the role of the female artist, is that a particular focus?

AH: Yes, that's one of my concerns. My work addresses the fact that women still receive less than men, which is a wider sociopolitical problem. In Germany, women still earn less than men, for example, which is absurd. Furthermore, I explore various power structures, such as dependencies between artists, critics and curators. I am curious about all of these relationships and how I fit into this context. I conduct my research with a healthy dose of humor, which is essential to keep going.

SB: You write a lot of your own dialogue, including rap lyrics, which you performed in the work "Sorry Curator" (2008). What comes first, text or the concept for the film?

AH: That varies. I usually avoid artist clichés or rather, I usually deconstruct them - but in the case of "Sorry Curator", I was 'suddenly inspired' when I woke up early in the morning and had this idea of a battle between an artist and a curator. After this initial idea, the text developed really fast. In general I enjoy rhyming very much. It was a work that I developed within a few days. Meanwhile my film "Bigasso Baby" (2014) refers directly to Jay Z's film "Picasso Baby" and so it was rooted in my desire to react to that piece directly. It took a very long time to write that text, which I found very challenging. It deals with the meaning and politics of art production in an ever more commercial and market-oriented system. I found that process very complex, especially as I was also conscientious of me being a white person battling a black rapper in an art form that I had appropriated. However, the wonderful thing about Hip Hop is that it allows transgressing certain boundaries.

SB: Did you exhibit "Bigasso Baby" along with Jay Z's work so that there was a sense of call and response?

AH: Yes I did. I projected "Bigasso Baby" onto a large and fat exhibition display as centerpiece of the installation, while Jay Z's video was shown on a small display screen nearby. The installation further included various research materials referring to the debate around poor pay for performance artists with statements by Yvonne Rainer, for example. Other sources reflected reactions to Jay Z's video. It became a small archive, which helped to contextualize the project.

SB: What are you currently working on?

AH: I just finished a film, which is called "Der Grenzenlose Schlagerwettbewerb" ["Hit Song Contest without Borders"] (2017). It explores the unique historic phenomenon of hit-song [Schlager] cultures in divided Germany. It contrasts Schlager in West and East Germany, the GDR, during the 1950s through 1980s. I perform and interact with both of these worlds, using old television clips. Through this footage, I examine the influence that the two political systems had on the cultural landscape and this particular genre of music. In the West, Schlager was part of a large industry and driven by its own economic ambitions, but in East Germany it was strictly controlled by the regime. The latter's agenda had been largely defined in 1959 at the Bitterfeld Conference [Bitterfelder Weg], which had aimed to form a socialist national culture by connecting the working class with contemporary artists of all fields. So you can find these political ambitions reflected in the music of that time. "Der Grenzenlose Schlagerwettbewerb" consists of a 30 minutes-long film and is part of a comprehensive installation made of newspaper articles, memorabilia, autographed pictures of the singers, and records, among other materials.

SB: In other words, in this case you are working primarily with historic materials.

AH: Yes. Through "Performing Found Footage" and the technique of the greenscreen, I and my cast interact the historic material. The main source material with which we interfere are film stems from the song contests hosted on TV in 1968 both in West Germany and the GDR. However, I also use all sorts of archival materials from that time, such as newspaper articles from both sides of the wall covering the same story of a musician, who escaped from the East. The tone of these articles couldn't be more different. While one side is applauding the escapee as heroic, the other is condemning him as a traitor. So I work with these contrasts and contradictions – they drive much of the story.

SB: There must have been a lot of research involved. How long have you been working on "Der Grenzenlose Schlagerwettbewerb"?

AH: The film took a long time, partially because I had to raise money for the music and television rights. Instead of pirating materials I wanted to make sure that everything is covered. In the end, the administrative work took much longer than the creative process. To keep complete control of the project, I even became my own production firm. That required that I had to organize all the financial support myself, fortunately I received funding by the BKM (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien / Commissioner for Culture and the Media). Overall, it took about two-and-a-half years until the film was completed.

SB: Do you imagine the film as part of an installation of memorabilia and newspaper clippings, for example, or as something that can stand on its own?

AH: Both. It is a film that could be shown on its own and which does not need any additional context. However, it is also part of an installation, where the film plays in the front room, as if running on a living room TV, while a backroom gathers all the background material. In the film there is a fictitious artists collective which interacts with the original footage, hijacking the broadcast. So, the backroom functions as their research laboratory.

SB: Do you have an ideal forum or exhibition space in mind?

AH: Yes, I do have some particular spaces in mind, but nothing has been determined yet. Ideally, it would be a place where this part of German history is of particular interest. Of course, in a way you could argue that this could be anywhere in Germany. I like the idea of an exhibition space with windows so that the outside world can look in. It is somewhat of a living room concept, meant to encourage people who aren't familiar with art to visit. To address an audience that doesn't only consists of highly cultured individuals is one of the reasons why I work with mass media to begin with. I would hope that some people would view the exhibition, because they simply love Schlager music or because they are record fans.

SB: Did you come across anything in your extensive research that was particularly surprising or inspiring to you? Were there certain singers, whose stories struck a personal chord, for example?

AH: I have to say that I found a lot more material than I had space for in the film. There are so many Schlager from the GDR that were not known in the West. However, those few, who made it to the West and were taken on by the record industry there, sometimes also became censored. Lyrics about building new beautiful homes for a brighter future in the GDR, which can be read as so-called "Aufbaulieder" [GDR construction songs] for example, would not be reproduced.

SB: It's interesting that censorship played a role on both sides of the wall. Most people would assume that this was mainly an activity practiced inside the GDR.

AH: Exactly, although censorship might be too hard a description. However, these were certainly things I noticed. There also are many fascinating stories about musicians on both sides. There were several, who left the GDR for West Germany, but there were also a few who went to the East. One example was the singer Rica Déus, who had an emerging career in the West. She fell in love with another musician and followed him to the GDR in the early 1960s. There she became a Schlager star. Another example is James W. Pulley, who was stationed in West Germany as a young G.I. but deserted to

flee to the East. Like Déus he also became a star in the GDR and stayed there. What's interesting is that although he was well known in film and TV, he was still not allowed to release his own records. The music industry was strictly regulated by the government, which would grant specific licenses. It wasn't possible to just get on a stage and perform.

SB: Meanwhile, some artists were able to translate their success from the East to the West. Manfred Krug, for example, had been a successful musician in the GDR, before becoming a beloved TV actor in the West.

AH: On the other hand, there were also many performers, who came to the West and soon became forgotten.

SB: When did you discover film as your primary medium?

AH: I came to video after focusing on sculpture, specifically wood carving. It became clear to me that it wouldn't be that interesting to work with a medium that I was already very skilled at. I liked that video was immaterial. In fact, dissolution and immateriality were two themes I was especially interested in at the time. Soon, a curiosity about text developed and I started to make rhymes, for example about my own creative process early on. This was my entry into video as a medium.

SB: Would you say that your background in sculpture has influenced your interest in contextualizing film with installation? In sculpture, you contemplate the object from all angles; it seems to me that you still give careful thought about how your films are being presented. Along these lines, I wonder whether it is important to you, on what kind of monitor your films are displayed or whether they should be simply projected onto white walls?

AH: In the beginning, I approached film through performance in the sense that I interacted with selected film footage. In an earlier work entitled "Snowworld" (1998), I entered into a love scene between Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon in the film *The Hunger* (UK, 1983). My performance, which was staged between two projections, reflected my attempt to conquer the screen for myself. On one side, the actual film was being screened, while a camera recorded my interaction with it and that footage was being projected onto another screen. It was a closed-circuit-installation. So in that case it really did matter how the concept could be presented in space and material form. In some early works the old bulbous TV sets, which Nam Jun Paik had used for example, also played an important role. I used them almost like a helmet so that their screens only showed heads, pondering the entry into and departure from the video-world. Yet, technology is in constant flux. In the past, a 4:3 display format was standard and now, it is 16:9. It's almost impossible to find the old monitors. So in a way older films, which were conceived for the 4:3 are now outdated.

SB: What is the solution? Do you collect old monitors so that you can screen older works in a manner you had originally envisioned? Do you need a technological archive?

AH: I have kept some equipment from earlier works when they are a relevant part of an installation, such as the bubble TVs. My works are often reflecting the medium and its formats like the 7" Vinyl Single in "The Art Song Collection" (2013). The accompanying installation, where I reinterpreted love-songs to art-songs on records that are installed in rebuild Jukebox, is an homage to the analog world and therefore a huge and heavy sculpture itself. In "Der Grenzenlose Schlagerwettbewerb" I play with the different formats of the old footage 4:3 and the actual 16:9. I used footage formerly conceived for the 4:3 format, but turned it into a 16:9 film, every time the different worlds of the GDR and West Germany encounter each other. In those moments, the pictures shift and turn into 16:9. It was a way to both refer to the past and the current moment at the same time. These are all important contemplations for me.

SB: Do you consider your oeuvre in the larger art historical context, perhaps relating it to American Feminist films of the 1960s and 1970s by Joan Jonas and Carolee Schneemann, for example. Are there any particular sources of inspiration?

AH: These are certainly works I have gotten to know, although I would name other artists, who were more inspirational to me, such as Laurie Anderson, Andrea Fraser, Valie Export or the Guerilla Girls. Les Reines Prochaines, the Swiss band and women artist collective, who work in music, video and performance were very important to me. Muda Mathis and Pippilotti Rist were early members of that group and certainly sources of inspiration. It is my belief that not everything pours out of oneself or originates within oneself. Therefore, I reflect the artist role in my work and play with the context in which the projects are presented. I showed "The Art Song Collection" (2013) at Galerie Throre Kriemeyer in Berlin, where one room housed only one vitrine. Inside, photo albums from my childhood were on display, helping to explain why I started to collect records. On the one hand, this served as an ironic comment on the concept of the artist as a child prodigy. On the other, it did help inform visitors about my motivations and interests, and influences.

Of course, I soak up information all the time and react to it, that's really the core of my work.

SB: It certainly adds another layer of personal history. Would you say that in addition to serving as a commentary on set social structures and limitations, your work also manifest as self-exploration? The fact that it is you, who performs and interacts with outside material rather than another individual you instruct, also implies an intimate relationship to the subject matter.

AH: It is not diaristic and not spontaneous, especially as the scripts for each project are

very detailed and have to be developed over long periods of time. The only work that resembles a diary is "Real Artist Life" (2006), which was conceived as a docusoap. In this project I looked at myself within the art world and vice versa. In the beginning, I just saw myself as a placeholder, who still had her own motivations. In "Snowworld", I wanted to enter into this world of longing that was established through this particular love constellation. However, I also meant to discuss the fact that most of the portrayed love scenes are heterosexual and that what I desire is hardly shown. So in that case, it made personal sense for me to be the performer who interacts with this footage. What is so thrilling about art is that it allows me repeatedly to find out what's very important to me. "Bigasso Baby" also reflects my wish to critically and personally respond to what is being propagated in Jay Z's film and so that had to be performed by me. However, there are other projects, such as the film "Hit (By Great Art)" (2011), which examines a particular art world through different characters, such as the collector, the gallery owner or the shooting star. Here, there are many performers and I only have a small supporting role in the film. My newest project is a mixture of both approaches. I would say that it is the work itself that determines who will be the key performer.

SB: Is there a concrete project, which you would like to pursue in the future or a topic you hope to examine?

AH: I really want to see "Der Grenzenlose Schlagerwettbewerb" through and am currently thinking about how I would like to present it. I look forward to its completion and to look at everything I have done thus far. I also plan to work on an extensive publication of my oeuvre. I am curious to see what kind of developments I can trace. That being said, I do have an idea for a next project in mind, which would be around the topic of conflict. I am thinking of a sound-art based long film.