Doll games

Autor(en): **Schuppli, Madeleine**

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DOLL GAMES

The Hungarian customs officers look a bit puzzled. A young couple with Swiss passports want to enter the country and a cursory examination of their bags and suitcases does not reveal designer clothes but rather a selection of old, worn-out trainers: colourful one- and two-piece suits with stripes down the sides, the occasional logo of a sports society or some other provincial organisation, unisex cut and all of them 100% polyester, of course.

They're those seventies' gym suits that conjure up school athletics, holiday camps or days in bed with the flu. The kind of "casual wear" you couldn't feel more relaxed in – ready for such extremes as strenuous physical performance or sprawling in front of the telly. Sabine Lang and Daniel Baumann have no intention of parading around Budapest clothed in the contents of their luggage; the clothing is their working material. In the gallery space they stuff the trainers with remnants and transform them into figurative objects, finishing them off with gloves, socks – and towels for the heads. The suits define the dimensions of the body and create the illusion of human presence. L/B go a step further by giving their creations faces that are computer prints of photographs. A few stitches suffice to sew the cut-out paper faces to the towels. The realism of their physiognomy is disturbing in combination with the dolls' podgy, raggedy-ann bodies. The dolls are perceived as if suspended in a state of tension between animate and inanimate existence. Their faces are technically reconstituted while the absence of a vital body is underscored by the positioning of the dolls in the exhibition space. Their poses often contradict anatomical laws; bent and broken, they are manifestly manipulated in blithe disregard of the human anatomy. There is a certain helplessness intrinsic to dolls because they are subject to the arbitrary will of the persons handling them. As dummies they

have to come crashing into a concrete wall at 80 mph. Whether they are toys for children or erotic ersatz objects for adults, they must obey the wishes of others.

L/B first made these dolls for an exhibition at the Studio Gallery in Budapest in early 1997, and shortly afterwards for the exhibition "Quersicht" at the Museum of Art in Thun, Switzerland (figs. pages 20-23). The scenario in the exhibition space clearly indicates that the dolls are not treated as isolated sculptural objects. They always appear in groups and their impact rests on the way they relate to each other and to the respective space. A figure lies flat on its back and thereby defines the White Cube with its physical laws and spatial limitations. Other dolls are lying down and sitting along the wall - alone or in pairs. Athletes exhausted after remarkable achievements? The exhibition space is not unconditionally appropriated by these figures, which would ordinarily fill it as works of art and endow it with meaning. By staying along the edges, they contest their role as exhibited objects. They could as easily be interpreted as receiving subjects, thereby utterly obscuring the site of the "real" work of art.

The vital energy that fails to quicken the dolls' bodies enlivens their faces, which bear the features of their makers, Sabine Lang and Daniel Baumann. The artists are, therefore, not only symbolically present in their work but confront us more directly. Like cloned specimens, the features of the two individuals reproduce and multiply revealing an entire spectrum of human mimicry – from laughing to dozing, from astonishment to fear, from detachment to flirtation. Through their multiplication, Lang and Baumann are omnipresent, aesthetic phenomena, yet they elude closer examination. One is reminded of a labyrinth of mirrors in which the self literally gets lost among its own disturbingly multiplied images that deprive it of reassuring definition, i.e. a fixed locus.

In their third project using dolls – as part of the exhibition "Nonchalance" at the PasquART Centre in Biel, Switzerland – L/B went a step further and staged an installation. The dummies arrive in a huge coach, whose driver has missed the turn off for the parking lot. So there it sits in

the museum's front yard. Being stranded there does not seem to have dampened the spirits of these strangers in town. The front door invites viewers to enter; easy background listening – the Shadows – issues from the loudspeaker. We are confronted with an array of inviting, expectant, but also bewildered and scared faces. Can we take a seat? What curious company have we got ourselves into? Touring groups of travellers are oddly hermetic, instantly forming a brotherhood of mutual protection from the world outside, contact with which they are supposedly seeking. The coach is a mobile sanctuary that the traveller does not necessarily have to leave. It satisfies all the basic needs of its inhabitants, who play, read or sleep in passive anticipation of whatever may come. The impact of this entire group, their gaze directed towards us, suddenly inhibits our own ordinarily unabashed and voyeuristic look at art. The artist-viewer track runs in both directions and we're not quite sure who is looking at who.

The clothing neutralises the individuality of the figures, like a uniform, and emphasises the exclusivity of belonging. Trainers not only conjure up memories of youth but also invoke certain segments in the daily life of nineties' visual culture. Original seventies' gym suits from second-hand shops became the in-thing to wear at techno parties. L/B show an affinity with techno culture in other respects as well, such as visual design, the use of the computer and the choice of music. The Shadows, for example, are not only popular as background music but also belong to the current ambient repertoire. L/B have no qualms about touching base with what's fashionable; their oeuvre and its reception are clearly products of today. They once said, "Art is communication and, in this respect, the concept of "timelessness" is nonsense. Being able to ascribe a work – through technique or subject matter – to a definite time certainly doesn't invalidate it or make it uninteresting."

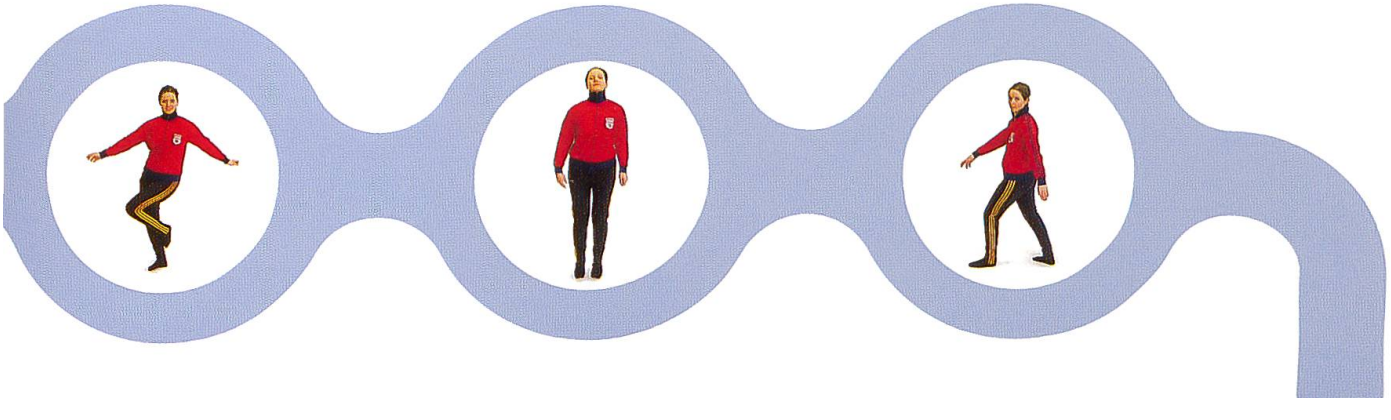
When they first started working together, L/B showed photographs of themselves, initially combining images and words, and more recently focusing on the relationship between figure and object [figs. pages 4-11]. They play their roles with obvious gusto against the backdrop of an empty beach or a shared bedroom. They twist their bodies into awkward

poses, reminiscent of the poses of their dolls: the dolls come to life like the brooms and buckets of the sorcerer's apprentice. The captured scenarios are like freeze-frame shots, like stills from a non-existent film. The result: a confusing segue of narrative snippets.

The renunciation of the object in favour of the representation of oneself and one's own body, characteristic of L/B's photographs, is a preferred artistic strategy of the nineties. But the two artists are not interested in analysing human existence as an aesthetic phenomenon. They themselves are simply closest at hand as models and function as their own extras in their staged scenarios: although they act as the subjects of their photography, they do not question themselves as subjects. The roles Sabine Lang and Daniel Baumann play are not concrete characterisations, as in the work of Anna and Bernhard Blume, but rather refer to their own role as artists. They work with ingrained expectations and the subliminal allocation of roles: artists as society's fools, as chaotic outsiders or as trend-setters who displace the avantgardists of modernism.

Although L/B always appear together in their photographs, they do not address their relationship as such but are primarily interested in exploiting the tension and dynamics of the couple as a phenomenon. By reducing their names to the logo L/B, Lang and Baumann signal the absorption of the artistic individual into the collective. The logo out of the initials also implies a half ironic, half affirmative imitation of trademark labels. The label cult, as well as its playful subversion, are firmly anchored in the everyday culture of the nineties.

Point of departure for the photo scenarios are objects placed in relation to the respective venue. Their accumulation generates an unsettling concentration of things around the protagonist. The double role of the artist as subject/object restricts direct control of the photograph, shot with a self-timer. The pictures are shot at a specific tempo; spontaneity is not feigned. A coke bottle, casually dropped into the sand, plays a role in the picture but it is not the product of elaborate, painstaking reflection and preparation, as it would be in the work of



staged photography's super-father, Jeff Wall. At a certain point, thoughts about composition come to a halt to avoid undermining the lightness of the scenarios. This appearance of chance also applies to the confrontation between picture and viewer. The photographs taken in the bedroom give us the feeling that we have opened the wrong door. The bedroom is such a mess that it can't possibly be intended for our eyes, but there it is, the most intimate room in an apartment, exposed to public view – not the four walls of the artists' own apartment but obviously furnished lodgings, as indicated by the commonplace style. L/B do not want to analyse the "genre" of an authentic, personal milieu but rather to evoke general sensations on a more abstract level.

The objects they amass, as in the beach photographs, are items of daily use, like blankets or boxes of crackers, combined with recreational goods, from plastic pistols to sports bags to a Hawaii shirt. The selection is motivated by function and aesthetic attraction; the photographs examine and rehearse the utility of the objects. At the beach we see a woman not very intelligibly demonstrating how an inflatable chair works. Official instructions are often equally unintelligible. But since such items – for instance, the "bed/tent" shown in the beach pictures – are of doubtful utility, the need and demand for them have to be created. The goods thus function as what Marx would call fetishes; things are perceived only as goods and their exchange value is no longer defined by utility but is rather linked to the promise of consumer happiness. Nonetheless, L/B do not have a social agenda; they merely zero in and point out. The mechanics of consumption are, of course, involved inasmuch as the objects had to be purchased, but the strategy that confronts us reveals a coming-to-terms with the flood of consumer goods. The unfiltered embrace of consumer goods and the non-judgemental attitude towards trivial culture are the legacy of Pop art, recently revived by a younger generation. L/B cultivate an unproblematic, though not unquestioning relationship with everyday culture. They address social reality with humour and light-footed irony.

Madeleine Schuppli
Translation: Catherine Schelbert