

Heyer Thurnheer

Studio-talk about the book-object "Bilder einer anderen Moderne" 1988-2014

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D.B. (Dagmar Baumann)

I'm curious to get to know more about your work, maybe you can give me a little introduction, for it is not so easy to grasp the work by a first look, considering it consists of many different parts.

H. TH. (Heyer Thurnheer)

As most of my work this present work is cherishing complexity and has an extended history. It started in 1988 with the founding of an artist's run studio space in the Italian part of Switzerland, which lasted until 2002. During the whole period of time I was photographing scenes from this situations with a rudimental first hour pocket camera. The paper-prints I have made in the express laboratories of that time, I combined and mounted them in pairs and kept them in a cardboard box, where I left them for later use. I extracted 39 of those sequences later on and wrote texts as a legend that dealt with the question of self-education and the formation of society and world. Between 2011 and 2014 this resulted in the production of the book as it is on the table now. (wie es nun hier vorliegt....)

(The book-object consists of 9 parts: 1 = the containers from cardboard, 2 = the title-cover, 3 = the table of contents page, 4 = the preface-volume, containing the historical perspective that led to the initiative, 5 = the history of this artist-run-space, and followed up by 6 and 7 as the main parts = combination of photographs and corresponding text-legends and metaphors, 8 = text stacks with English translation and 9 = Index.)

I tried to bring something utterly complex into a very light-hearted form. The viewer shouldn't be overwhelmed by a multitude of object, - image-, text and comprehensive presence, but choose freely what to pick up and how much time to spent on deepening the understanding. The object should be readable as well briefly as more thoroughly.

D. B. : So this is in the first place about observations inside of this artist-run work and studio spaces and less about the exchange with the art -world or means of intellectual discourse, as far as I understand? Yes?

H. TH. : Yes, it follows the traces of the undertaking as a statement in the context of my work in general and of this book-object in particular.

D. B. : And what about the form? What is hitting the eye instantly are the different materials. Where are for example those papers with the diagonal grid in these three different colours from?

H. TH. : I got them in a mall in Rotterdam. They are wrapping-paper for gifts. The English texts are printed on brown paper for packing and the more explanatory texts are own newspaper-paper. The photographic images are printed on paper they sell by the kilo. Everything is consciously cheap in order to be read as an art-practice that is willingly part of a tradition of certain poverty in art. At the same time it is material that everybody is familiar with and could achieve easily. This socialistic link is important to me. The iconography of an elite build on hierarchy as connotation to art and society seems not interesting for me.

D. B. : Yes. It is absolutely transparent how everything is made, everybody could produce something like it. It is a simplicity that intentionally does without the pretention of glossy tomes, refinement of production and any kind of set up of masterly achievement in favour of, let us put it, the materiality of common realm.

And what about the choice of types?

H. TH. : It is Times, the standard newspaper-type. In the history of the written word the newspaper marks a point of time in the history of society when the idea of democracy and education for everybody rose. I didn't want any type that had a link with contemporary design. I wanted a link with everyday live and normality.

D. B. : Was it from that background that you found your way to Duende (artist run space in Rotterdam 1988-2011) where you had the opportunity to use a studio for two years?

H. TH. : Almost all of the time I have been working and living in collectives. Even privately, I had a family for two times and that also took place in a collective. Though I believe in the personal responsibility for the self as well as the self-conducted relation with processes in society, but not necessarily in the nuclear family as a primary organ of society. I look upon the human being, whether as a child or adolescent or grown up, as someone to unfold as global member of a community. (Everything else is nothing but narrow-minded delusion by which mainly the supporters of the financial institutions, globalized corporations and the status quo get enriched.)

According to this, it was natural for me whilst coming to Rotterdam as an 'artist in residence' to orientate myself towards initiatives and communities as in particular Duende, which added another practice to the local art-establishment. At the same time there is a role for coincidence, I came to Rotterdam more or less coincidentally anyway.

D. B. : I sum up, that you are interested in communities that are independent from any institutions and who initiate, build and generate processes in society as a self generated history that defines itself as a parallel world to the stencils of the official cultural institutions, and who operate independently from the market and it's prefaces? True?

H. TH. : Yes, the self-conducted, civil action and connection attract me tremendously. I want that at any cost. This is what always fascinated me in theory and practice of civil sciences. Individuality versus community was a huge forming theme of investigation during the years of the artist-run space on which this book is based.

D. B. : This sounds holistically, sustainably and like a complex system. In a community of people this would mean a supportiveness that is build on reciprocity; yes indeed, especially reciprocal support in the context of the right relation between art-production and everyday live.

H. TH. : The basic question of supportiveness has a high value for me, yes! How can a practice evenly support for somebody else? Unilateral powering of overvalue is nonsense, especially in the formation of personality, which is thinkable and to hold up as concept and goal for the actual 8 milliard global shareholders, isn't it? And more so whilst everybody is responsible for himself, to mention self-support and self-care.

D. B. : I rediscover this aspect of care and support in the book as well, because it provides something very structuring in a very complex entity. It is about movements between intertwined phenomena, which seem to generate each other through the perception and recognition that goes on vice versa.

H. Th. : I think I am interested in an attitude as a mentor, also towards myself. Of course also towards others, one shouldn't distinguish that. Self-determination, after all, means to be capable to ask questions to yourself, for example where and what you want to conduct yourself to, in other words, what you intend to achieve from the palette of possible capabilities. This and the whole field of self-regulation, including what you ask and demand of yourself; I find this extremely thrilling.

D. B. : What you are saying has some familiarity with the work of Wilhelm Reich concerning political sociology. He speaks about this self-determination as well and describes the self-mentoring, which implies that I formulate the laws I want to follow to achieve the highest possible individual and social-ethical unfolding myself. Those should be the maxims to make a global society work out. To learn how to deal with the self, to support and develop it is probably the goal of true mentoring. The focus is on the reflection and judgement of the own actions.

In this account it seems essential to me that you, as initiators of this artist run and study space, made it possible that there was time and space available to actually deal with this basic premises of self-determination. You actually secured the time to work on these issues. We all experience how difficult this is on itself and you might look upon this aspect as a revolutionary part of the project. The possibility to slow down in opposition to the speeding meritocracy and in favour of reflection, creation, determination and realisation of the self in daily live and community. Of course the dominating priorities are others....

H. Th. : It is not so much the criteria of performance that is held up high in popular society as the criteria of value and quality. One of the credos of the artist-run-space was: the fact that something is happening is nothing, that you know it, is everything.

For course time is a precondition to make that happen. Considering the present focus on information-flow I would go so far to say: That you get to know something is nothing – that you know that you got to know something is everything.

D. B. : What is striking with the text-material of the book-object is, that it does not appear as a wall of information or a homogenous mass that you have to enter with tiring effort. The differences in size, the accentuations, the multi-coloured stripes and the unusual structures of the surfaces and underlayment work so well by their stunning simplicity. I also like the fact that it is wrapping-paper for presents, on which the introduction, the index and the historical overview are printed.

It makes it enticing and the words that I read seem so open, as for example 'structural coexistence'. That appears as an invitation to enter an area, where the language, as performed here, allows something titillating and at the same time analytical. It is a language that likes to take detours, to withdraw from a too fast grasp and an easy accord with quick conceptions. It prevents you from congratulating yourself with understanding too easily. It is quite something to work with metaphors and other layers of language. For example here: What is imagination as such? - Just like that, expatiating with some medium-sized rhythm of live.

H. Th. : Actually I grew up in a technical surrounding. I was determined for the industry in the field of engineering. But I eventually almost suffocated there. That was a matter of language as well, but with the essential difference, that in that field you needed to pass over the information in an optimally reduced amount of time and as precise as possible with data that were secured to be conclusive. In certain aspects of live this is a very important competence. But in terms of language as such it is a very limiting attitude, which diminishes the value of language as something shaping and communicative for a great deal and does not serve the medium adequately.

D. B. : As well as the mere exchange of information and a conversation are to very different things. A conversation includes to a certain degree of self-revelation in terms of involvement of feelings and experiences. It evolves between two or more persons. What do you expect from this book-object? Our conversation, okay, set, that is a creative forming process that is caused by this book-object.

H. Th. : This question rises with every work of art naturally. How should it meet the eye of the public? In this case I will show it in an installation-like setting, in which the contextual and the formal parts of the work are communicated separately via a screen. Apart from that there is a booklet to be examined, in which the texts and the images are organized in a more democratic structure, than again, there is the book-object as a sculptural element and more so via tables, which I want to use to zoom in on parts

of the texts in a printed form. Maybe I am going to add some artefacts as a wheelbarrow or other tools and material, that figures in the photographs. Or possibly I am going to add some indication about the time the 'policy-maker' is willing to spend for the viewing.

D. B. : Again I find the sober poetry remarkable. You talk about the facts in an analytical yet evocative language.

H. Th. : Yes, actually it is about the poetry of the specific. If we would talk about food it would be the calories and minerals in contrast to taste as a sensual experience. I think of the sense of warmth, touch, taste and odour, which is involved. And just like that language provides something sensual next to her function that oscillates in the performing and the body of the language. More poetic, more specific – yes, I could embrace that, it meets the matter as I want and think it, sure.

D. B. : All of this is highly loaded with association as an invitation to an extended moment. As for example the choice for courant-paper embodies a fancy historical impact. What about the photographic images?

H. Th. : They are drawn up as intertwining abstract visual material, which is at the same time figurative and loaded with narration. They should be recognizable as of a pre-digital quality, which blinked at the emancipatory history in the foreland of the 21st century.

D.B. : The book shows a community of artists and non-artists in an explicitly nature-dominated surrounding of a rural mountainside, isn't it? That might involve that nature was the field of discourse and intervention, right?

H. Th. : Yes, we were constantly dealing with the question what is permitted in terms of ethics and law, the rightfulness towards nature and of course the regulations about building. We were an international community, though small, but with an international audience. Yes it was as a mega-project in the sandpit, a moment of incredible free space beside official limiting regulations.

D. B. : All of this does not particularly sound like the pop-star alike careers that were common sense in the 80ies. "Images of another Modernity"! Isn't that meant to be another notation of history as well? Making history outgoing from another focus on values? The execution of modernity with a different content?

H. Th. : The title refers to the fact that the occident has pledged unmistakably for a society with the right for self-determination and democracy as a desirable goal to vision for the world. Nevertheless reality tends to be endangered by centralistic tendencies, which are justified and launched via the necessities of economics, finance and security. It's a structure that is organized centralistic and based purely on functionality. "Images of another Modernity" in contrary, holds up high the competences of an ethical self-determination and self-regulation and self-guidance. The aim of every kind of education is 'learning how to live'. Self-determination is a process that is still at the very beginning and that needs to be carried along into the 21st century. This is the credo of "Images of another Modernity". There is a book of Wilhelm Schmid, published by Suhrkamp. 'Philosophy for the Art of Living - A Foundation'. This book refers to the term "other Modernity", it is borrowed from there.

D. B. : Well, I have to admit that I highly appreciate the whole concept and the visual materialisation of this book-object. That it is unique. That it mentions the aspect of support and mentorship. It embodies spacious thinking and the aspect of reflective competence. It is the question of the benefit of profound thinking as such – where grammar gets lost, the thinking impoverishes. The vocabulary of war starts to resemble the economized vocabulary of the civil education in a disturbing way.

And in the end in the back of the book, the register of the participants and literature who are the force behind this work, that opens up the impact of the book immensely. I think this is a vivid part of the book. It delivers arguments for the formation of society and is in that sense politically motivating. Thank you for introducing me to all of this.