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The Flicker of Coherence. Voices and Vices of Embodied Technologies

Binary coding of embodied social life is an arduous and laborious procedure. There is still a long tradition of binary gender coding or racist black/white distinctions—resulting in rigid, normative and usually hierarchied reductions of the grades and shades or the complexities and ambiguities of meaning and embodiment. Furthermore, the supposed 'realness' of bodies, stories, and histories has to be secured through naturalizations, which create 'truth effects' often with the help of visual or auditory devices. The work of Kerstin Honeit provides specific interventions into and subtle subversions of these powerful procedures of binary coding and reality construction through focusing on voice and the interlacing of contexts and bodies. While digital technology makes use of de-interlacing in order to produce coherence, in Honeit's work it is exactly the flicker inhabiting the digital apparatus of image and voice production that gains attention: It becomes a means of perceiving the flicker of coherence in the social world.

The video installation *Junost Bang* {2007} focuses on technology and voice. It chooses as its protagonist a GDR TV set brand-named 'Junost', which has the dubious honour of presenting the US B-movie *Dead Bang*, one of the first movies shown after 1989 in both Eastern and Western German cinemas. Honeit asked four women from a seniors club in Adlershof, the main GDR TV production site, to lend their voices to the film. In dubbing sequences of the film, their voices subvert the supposedly male embodiments of the film's protagonists.

Since they are reading rather than declaiming the text, they misperform and thus undermine the reality effects of dubbing. It becomes obvious that coherence between voice and body is not a simple given, but has to be produced—socially or technologically. The audience is invited to ask itself: Why is it that I perceive a voice as male or female, as old or young? Has social history a chance to intervene in the stereotypes of mainstream culture? What happens if different stereotypes clash?

Voice and contextualization are two moments that would allow for polysemic and nuanced embodiments. Yet, despite possible resistances to binary coding, powerful technologies of dichotomizing take hold. So how is perception regulated accordingly? Honeit's interactive video installation Read my Lips {2009} asks this question and invites the audience to create new answers instead of repeating established cinematic models. One could say it draws conclusions from Kaja Silverman's critique, who writes that Hollywood 'identifies ... the male voice with the cinematic apparatus, but always situates the female voice within a hyperbolically diegetic context.'[1] Thus, cinematic strategies of embodying or disembodying the voice produce the opposition between the restricted interiority of psyche and narration versus the highly valued authority of a position exterior to or transcending the narration. This opposition is most useful for securing hierarchical gender orders.

Honeit's video sculpture On and Off {2010} stages and yet undermines such hierarchizations by not fulfilling the expectation of coherence of voice and body. The video functions as a miniature stage built in a white cube in the gallery setting. Five similar, yet different performances show the artist herself as an ambiguous figure dressed in a black suit entering and leaving, and while on stage narrating in different voices incompatible stories about his or her father's funeral. Since the subjective and personal stories are told in so-called female voices and intonations, this disrupts the neutral authority of the black suit's seriousness. The figure on stage simultaneously performs fathers transcending their own deaths through the voices of their daughters, daughters inhabiting their fathers' bodies, or daughters claiming the transcendent performance of the undertaker. On and Off uses the seduction of the voice as much as the power of context. Its white cube aesthetics provide clear contours to the person in the black suit entering and leaving the stage. The impression of an embodied voice is underlined while fictionalizing it, thus claiming and making ironic the abstraction of a universal cycle of life and death.

The flicker of coherence is even more powerful in Honeit's photographic works, Becoming 10 {2007–2010}, portraits of nine people of different genders, ages, and class performances set in urban residential areas of East and West Berlin. A continuous undecidability between similarity and difference applies to the figures depicted as well as to the setting of grey apartment blocks, balcony plants, public greens, and parking lots. Each of the figures resembles a character: The unshaven guy in a dressing gown out on the snowy pathway, the elegantly dressed office worker walking her dog, the elderly guy with a plastic bag full of cheap shopping, or the salaciously defiant look of a young woman with beret and leopard-print blouse. The topic of the work, namely the presentation of Honeit's search for her nine half-siblings, makes the beholder look for family resemblances and consanguinity: Yet what one finds is that there is no 'natural family.' If there is family, it is the product of 'doing' family, including doing sex, doing gender, doing class, doing age. Since all the characters of Becoming 10 are performed by Honeit herself, consanguinity is indeed given. Yet it becomes obvious that family geneaology as much as kinship trouble depend on contexts—animate or inanimate—as much as on technologies of production and perception. Becoming is not an inner-subjective process but a question of the context's socio-technological setting, staging, and display of accessories.

Honeit's videos, installations, and photographs display established binarizing reality regimes such as the street or the workplace, like Hollywood cinema, or the family. In order to understand their functioning, the artist employs the necessity of performative repetition, but allows dysfunctions, deficiencies, or disparities to take the stage. The norm of coherence starts flickering and the disambiguating power of the audience is disrupted. Through creating settings—installation designs or photographic scenarios—a space of possibilities, potentialities, and becomings evolves. Here, embodiments may appear as multiple and polyphonic, while simultaneously claiming the singularity of their stories.

1 Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema {Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988}, 45.

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