

HOME-LESS-HOME

Six Fragments on the Artistic Work of Ha Cha Youn

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I.

Since the mid-1980s, the multimedia artist Ha Cha Youn has focused her art on themes such as “nomadic migration/flight” and “cultural identity,” on “society of superabundance” and “social injustice.” So featured in the artistic agenda of her videos and documentary films, sculptural works and space-encompassing installations, conceptual textual works and performances (presented by the artist herself) are not least of all political themes which, over the course of neoliberal globalization during the last forty years, have been constantly acquiring more and more (asocial) explosiveness.

II.

Repeatedly characteristic of Ha Cha Youn’s artistic work is the fact that - as an artist born in Korea who studied first in France and then in Germany, and who now is living once again in France: more specifically, in Paris - she is herself compelled, as paradoxical as it may sound, to “authentically” experience being “unauthentic.” Being at home without being at home: it might perhaps in this way be possible to describe a state that is many regards alienated and “hybrid.” The life circumstances of the homeless, precariously rootless nomad is most often due to two things: to migrations of various sorts - with a spectrum ranging from compelled flight to more or less self-chosen “relocations” - and to a “moving out” (Auszug¹) caused above all by economic “imbalances.” In her lifetime, Ha Cha Youn has been permitted and also compelled to experience both aspects, because in addition to leaving her “homeland” of Korea, she was also confronted, first as a student of art and then as a young artist, with the (existential) problem of financial hardship. None other than this authenticity experienced day after day is dynamically legible in this art; but also characteristic of Ha Cha Youn’s approach to working is the fact that this quality of proximate immediacy is counterbalanced in her works by a well-calculated, sometimes almost minimalistic conceptuality.

III.

An eloquent example of Ha Cha Youn’s artistic production is offered by her both sensitive and galvanizing work „Consigne“ from 2005. This photographic series shows documentary photographs of trees in which homeless persons have stored cases and bags. In this way, the „vagabonds“, as they often call themselves, formulate a self-affirming designation of their “wandering” status quo (among other things, the Latin word *vagabundus* stands for “wandering” and “inconstant”), symbolized by these cases and bags in which the vagabonds store their few remaining belongings and protect them from being removed by the

¹ “Auszug“ is also the title of the catalogue of Ha Cha Youn for her exhibition of the same name at the Kunstverein Böblingen, Germany, in 1995.

police or stolen by some of their fellow human beings who find themselves in likewise precarious circumstances. This soberly objective and simultaneously committed work also alludes with only seeming casualness to the extremely difficult living conditions of refugees, who often also use similar bags during their flight. The fact that these sorts of bags can in the meantime be found throughout the world bears witness, by the way, to the monopolistic power of capitalist production. What is more: some of the pictures from „Consigne“ could also be considered at a first glance to be almost poetical compositions: for example, when on one photograph from the series, stuffed-full bags appear in their light-blue coloration like “daubs of colored paint” amid the melancholy gray-brown of the winter landscape in which stands the photographed tree. Thus contaminated beauty appears here with almost furtive secrecy.

IV.

Let us take a closer look at the installation „MAT, BOAT, CARPET—my mat, a boat for family, a larger carpet for all“ from 2021. In two adjoining rooms, more or less rectangular mats are spread out across the floor; they are made of around one thousand plastic PET-bottles, and the mats are tied together with thick cords. Furthermore, there are two flatscreens along with loudspeakers, upon which the ocean’s waves can be seen and heard. At a first glance, these mats—inasmuch as the flatscreens bring the sea into play and the word “boat” is mentioned in the title—are reminiscent of the small, quite unsteady boats and rafts with which more and more refugees are currently leaving their homelands. But the size of the mats and their location on the floor simultaneously allude to carpets - this word as well is included in the title. The precarious situation of a voyage across the ocean stands in stark contrast to having a secure home - in something like a living room. Finally, as a proverbial “flying carpet,” the installation calls to mind the fairytale-like fulfillment of the wish for an unopposed, rapid and successful journey - a dream which, however, is spun on to the point of absurdity through the aforementioned allusion to the fate of the boat people. A comparable ambiguity is evident with regard to the subject of “ocean” itself, inasmuch as the sea on the one hand stands for a space of yearning held in high esteem by tourists even as it has on the other become, for a long time now, a mass grave for refugees.

„MAT, BOAT, CARPET - my mat, a boat for family, a larger carpet for all“ alludes to an additional catastrophe, namely to the worldwide destruction of the environment, which is being caused not only in the oceans by the plastic garbage produced by neoliberal turbo-capitalism. But the PET-bottles not only concretely symbolize this catastrophe that in the meantime has become part of daily life; they also harbor a moment of hope in that, as a “ message in a bottle,” they hold out the promise of possible rescues.

Finally, all of these contradictory narratives are recounted not least of all with the help of intertwined textiles, namely the mats and cords. As is so often the case in the art of Ha Cha Youn, this installation is semantically charged in all its parts: as a textile, the literally “enmeshed” mat stands likewise for “text.”

V.

Back to Paris: or more precisely, to Ha Cha Youn’s film „Journal d’un Campement / A Camp Journa“l from 2008. This almost 48-minute film presents an action of the citizens’ initiative “Don Quixote’s Children” that extended over several months. During the winter of 2006/2007, the group had set up along the Saint-

Martin Canal in Paris little tents in which homeless persons could spend the night for free and hence became able to survive the winter in spite of the cold. In a slow tracking shot, the artist shows the succession of tents extending for the hundred meters; it also becomes clear how extremely these have been exposed to the wind and the weather. The persons who live in the tents are also to be seen repeatedly in „Journal d'un Campement / A Camp Journal“ - at one point a man hopefully shapes his fingers into a sign of victory in front of the camera. But the camp on both banks quickly became a much-discussed issue of contention in Paris; supporters and opponents made sure there were ongoing debates, about which there were reports on television news channels, as is shown in the film of Ha Cha Youn by inserted images from the media. The fact that more than a few of those seeking accommodations here did not have a residence permit for France did not exactly make the situation easier; homeland, nationality and the right to a living space continue to be a precarious trinity. The action was ended in April 2007, as Ha Cha Youn informs viewers near the end of her film through simple text-inserts.

In similarity to most of Ha Cha Youn's works, „Journal d'un Campement / A Camp Journal“ is from a formal perspective a hybrid, so that it cannot be assigned unambiguously to a single genre. The fact is that the film is more than mere documentation; with its empathetic depiction of the problem of homelessness, it is also a committed agitprop film characterized by its interest in solving the problem through information. And once again, there are extremely poetical moments, as when a plastic bag drifts idyllically in the Saint-Martin Canal.

VI.

Again and again it is public spaces - for example, the Parisian metropolitan area in the case of Consigne, or the expanse of ocean in „MAT, BOAT, CARPET - my mat, a boat for family“, a larger carpet for all—that repeatedly define the contentual context of the occurrence. In the sculptural interventions of „Sweet Home“ from 2004–2013, public spaces serve to frame the work in a quite a concrete manner, inasmuch as in subway stations of Paris, the artist furtively covered benches with foam-rubber mattresses so that they could be used by homeless persons as a place to sleep. “Art as service provision” and as Minimal Art thus makes its calculated appearance in the aesthetic masterplan of the artist. Outside of the White Cubes of art institutions, these interventions, which are subsequently shown in photos and videos, attain their power as foreign bodies both in the operating system of art and in what is supposedly “real life.” But in the latter, this foreign body finally and definitively comes to make sense.

Translated by George Frederick Takis