

It's not the way it stays

Anna Oppermann, one of the most important German artists of the 70s, is being rediscovered. The first show since her premature death in 1993 is opening in Berlin today, and a large retrospective of her work is to be held in 2007.

Anna Oppermann, born in Eutin in 1940, left more than sixty so-called "ensembles" to posterity. More than half of them consist of several hundred parts. Their genesis often stretched over many years. Even after the artist's premature death in 1993, the work of the Hamburg conceptual artist cannot be seen as finalised.

In the case of Oppermann's productions, one is dealing not with completed works, but rather with long processes of an ever-expanding and changing search for material and arrangement. They transform exhibition rooms into three-dimensional note books and sketch pads, and cover walls and floors so densely that it sometimes becomes impossible to decrypt details displayed towards the back.

The result is a confounding competition between visibility and legibility. "An ensemble is what I call the documentation of a certain method of proceeding in perception or cognition practice" claimed Oppermann. At the beginning of the work process there's a real object, a plant, perhaps, a privately found object or a quotation, always absolutely subjectively posited, which then triggers copious philosophising through other means. As a rule the ensemble begins in one corner of the room and is created out of various elements like canvas, photographs, drawings, objects, sculptures, architectonic elements and written signs.

The artist maintained that she worked from the simple to the complex, the private to the public. And in so doing, the ensembles develop from one presentation to the next. For example, the third exhibition of an ensemble may include a reflection on the previous one, which in turn may have been an analysis of the first one. The material is arranged in nested constellations and associational threads around the question of the subject currently concerning Oppermann.

The great human themes are all part of the debate: love, eroticism, money, truth, falsehood, mythology, art; not one is missing and every work contains each of them at one stage or another. Works such as "Problem-Solving Assignment for the Artist" (Spatial Problem) "Being an Artist (Drawing From Nature, e.g. Lime Blossom Petals)" or "Substitute Problem by Way of the Example Beans" contain the mark of the artist as scientist.

The titles indicate methodical approach and planned order whilst the ensembles confront the viewer with a chaos of purely subjective correlations and references. Intellectual surrender allied to disinformation. In view of the overpowering mass of material, the viewers processing capacity is in any case exceeded – and cognition is overtaken by experience.

Anna Oppermann described the ensemble as "forensics and experiential assistance for psychic processes at various consciousness levels and within various referential systems," and she always emphasised the openness of the arrangements.

The utterances of the artist relating to her works, like their titles, are obviously in part ironic commentary, i.e. criticism of the rigid academic attitudes of the 1960s, something she was familiar with from her studies of Art Pedagogics and Philosophy at Hamburg University. Then again, they correspond to a dictum of Modernism according to which thought in modern, relativistic times diversifies into the infinite to such an extent that only the work of art can pursue it there.

In 1968, Oppermann moved to Hamburg to concentrate on art. That very year she was given a German Academic Exchange Service stipend for Paris. In 1972 she exhibited her first ensembles in the Hamburg Kunsthalle and in Trier and Berlin. The works caused a furore, quickly received international recognition, and were the subject of much controversy. The conservative German art world, irritated by Oppermann's obsessive approach and the interlacing of personal content in her compositions, derogatively dubbed it "confused confessionalist" work. From time immemorial, women have been given short shrift for employing creative narcissism or indulging in public self-portrayal. Oppermann's manner of dealing with her own biography, at the same time, is no mere self-aggrandisement. On the contrary, the process of production, with all its false trails, diversions and dead-ends is made public, and the cult of the genius artist is thereby exposed to implicit criticism.

It is only in the light of such differentiation that relations to newer approaches, such as those of Jonathan Meese or Thomas Hirschhorn, may be established. This was in evidence at a 2004 exhibition of the Harald Falkenberg Collection in La Maison Rouge, Paris, where three specially adapted rooms respectively housed an installation of Oppermann's, "Problem-Solving Assignment for the Artist (Spatial Problem)" and works by Meese and Hirschhorn.

Approach and aesthetic are shown to be related. In Thomas Hirschhorn's monuments, or in Johnathan Messe's spatial collages, similar associative, cultural, pseudo-intellectual and autobiographic pictures and word elements are DIY-ed into the unit. When Anna Oppermann was invited to the 1980 Venice Biennale, it was in the capacity of one of the most important artists of 1970s Germany.

Subsequently, her works were to be seen at numerous international exhibitions, including the Biennale of Sydney, New York's P.S. 1, and, on two occasions, at the documenta. In 1982 she was appointed at the Bergische Universität/Gesamtschule Wuppertal, (The University of Wuppertal,) and, in 1990, she became a professor of painting at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin's art academy. Now, for the first time since her death, she has been doted with a small retrospective, which is to open today at Berlin's Kienzle & Gmeiner Gallery. Apart from reduced ensembles and individual canvases, it is showcasing "The Economic Aspect".

An extensive retrospective featuring five ensembles is being planned for 2007 by Stuttgart's Württembergischer Kunstverein. An exhibition of Anna Oppermann's work is hard to plan, partly because of the multitude of elements involved, but more still, because of its need for openness and processual conception, factors which in turn involve the problems of production and representation so central to art itself. The installation of the ensemble in the absence of the artist is a highly complex and creative task requiring the hand of an expert. Each mounting is an interpretation.

“The construction of an ensemble is the presentation of many efforts to grasp and consider a piece of reality or, equally, to ‘get a (conceptual) handle’ on a problem.” Justice is not done to these works by museum curation – they require utilisation. It is not a question of reconstruction here but of mise-en-scène.

The hundreds of individual items are stored in a range of boxes, drawers, portfolios and painting storage facilities. They are being re-assembled by art historian Ute Vorkoeper and Anna Oppermann’s partner, Herbert Hossmann. During her lifetime, Ute Vorkoeper assembled works together with Oppermann and wrote a series of art-historical pieces on her.

“The Economic Aspect“ ensemble that is being re-created as of late September in Berlin was developed between 1979 and 1987 from the massive “Being an Artist” ensemble which was displayed across two rooms at the documenta 6. There it was initially presented as a sub-theme. In the late 70s Oppermann addressed the theme of self-marketing and made a work specifically relating to it. She offered the following commentary on the issue: “The individual’s capacity to make judgements is being increasingly undermined. In the realm of speech and communication, behaviour is being characterised and deformed by career pressures, the glut of stimuli and, above all, the typical information transmitted by advertising and the mass media. Specialist knowledge from the various academic and scientific disciplines, if available to the individual at all, comes only in the form of material that has been reduced, selected, simplified and filtered to sit with the ideological and economic agendas of powerful interest groups (money – politics).” Finally the ensemble displayed in Sydney and London in the early 80s took up a central position in the canon of Oppermann’s work. It is a precursor to the “Pathos Gesture“ ensemble that Oppermann exhibited at documenta 8 in 1987. Oppermann developed her specific approach in the late 60s and was influenced on the one hand by such current streams of the zeitgeist as Pop-Art and Arte Povera, and on the other by processual-, conceptual- and narrative art, the fruits of which were often exhibited and discussed in the Hamburg art scene of the day.

The era was characterised by debates, the question of art autonomy and the issue of artist authorship. The conceptual approaches presumed the active participation of the addressee who, by the act of perception, determines and completes a work. No work is complete or exists independently - such was the school of thought. It has lost none of its validity and increases its standing periodically – as it did during the 90s in the form of institutional critique or as an opening in art practice relating to the discourse of academic and scientific knowledge production. The confrontation of a production aesthetic with a value aesthetic, the propitious location of Anna Oppermann’s work, is of current significance and still produces productive debate and discourse.

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