

## SPEECH 1

**Flora Watzal**

### In my name

I've known myself for quite some time now. I've been following my ideas and have thought about many of them. So it was the obvious choice to ask me to write a speech about myself and my work. I accepted, although I do find it difficult to speak in my own name. Fulfilling this request also means commissioning myself. And I have difficulty taking on assignments from others. But I am curious what will happen to me in this process.

I want to speak about my working methods in particular, because hardly anyone knows them as well as I do:

I always try to extract spaces of possibility from every exhibition situation. A location is never just a receptacle for a concept. I also want to get something out of the venue, to extract something from the context and infrastructure. The fact that the representative structures become part of the work happens inevitably, almost incidentally. Ultimately, I want to gain something, not just to show my work. I allow my thoughts to flow until something structural gets caught in their drift. Listening, I often get caught up myself. I think about one thing and then speak of something else entirely. I unexpectedly return to a previous point. I require a certain amount of time in order to figure out what the issue is right now. Leaps and gaps are essential. I also let myself get carried away.

I see myself primarily as a videographer, though I do make forays into all kinds of media. What all the formats I use have in common is that forms of temporality play a central role, partly as a direct transference of cinematic thought. My drawings, installations, and performances are also spatio-temporal studies, attempts to make processes legible with the assistance of temporally based techniques. These techniques include serialisation, deconstruction, transmission, and omission. To disassemble a space with a succession of constantly changing perspectives (projiziertes heim [projected home], wand in hand [wall in one's hand]), to measure a space in backward steps (runaway ), to chronologically rearrange a movement through space (satellite me )... There are always arrangements that can only be understood temporally and spatially and that set the body into motion—the body of the producer as well as that of the recipient.

One of my favorite works is the video 170 cm from 1999. I even gave that to myself as a present. A camera was set up at a height of 170 centimeters and aimed directly at a wall above me. I jump up and down as often as I can until, at some point, my face no longer makes it into the image. With the stationary camera, what happens is a gradual change of physical perspective which, at the end, leaves us with only the sight of the white wall.

At this point I perhaps must admit a slight lack of detachment. I value myself and my work very much.

One final comment in conclusion: I too would like to exhibit at the Secession some day.

As if, or: if I should some day...

One hundred points

One of my greatest wishes is being fulfilled today. Illusion and reality meet prominently in this location. A zone of representation is located between illusion and reality and can constitute reality by way of wilful misrepresentation, among other things. The condition of "as if," the great performance, the staging, all are part of the ever increasing importance of representation through communicative and visual techniques. Ensuing from the issue of wanting, I asked myself about the symbols of recognition within the art system: an exhibition at an important art institution, one or more art prizes, and a sprawling studio increase the value of art on the exhibition market. Beginning with a deficit, the desire for recognition determines the constitutions of subjects. In my work *erster Preis* [first prize] for the magazine *Parabol* (# 6, autumn 2011), I turned this principle of dependency upside down: I was a competitive gymnast until the age of seventeen, trained twelve hours a week, and won many trophies and medals. Physical performance and discipline were rewarded. But what does a person do with the trophies and recognition years later? Pass them on. I took on the position of the awarder, adopted the representation of the symbolic order, and gave first prizes to institutions, critics, curators, commissions, etc. for the appreciation of my artistic work. The value of recognition shifts across different levels. Acclaim for the athletic performances of my childhood lost its value, the symbols of recognition passed on and awarded the recognition and esteem of my artistic work: first prize, one hundred points.

So, one hundred points for the Secession— but not quite: I was invited to exhibit in the *Grafisches Kabinett*, not in the Main Hall, which I naturally would have preferred even more. The question "How do I get into the Main Hall?" virtually begged to be asked. The process of appropriating the Main Hall in the form of staging an exhibition speech likewise represents a mechanism of changing position: I leave the structures of dependency/powerlessness behind me and represent the position of the powerwielding authority. I create access to even greater accolades, represented by the presentation in the Secession's larger space, on an imaginary level. The exhibition speech will be filmed in the Main Hall and shown in the *Grafisches Kabinett*. The transient, fleeting representation is a strategy of self-empowerment and becomes a symptom of "acting as if." My desire to exhibit in the Main Hall becomes reality by way of this staging. A model for courses of action that is increasingly determining both private and public areas: reality is being determined by fictitious systems via representative staging and interventions.

The stand-ins

Who speaks, who acts? The speech for the exhibition is based on four texts written by friends from the art world in my name, in the first person. Their subject, external perception, is stylized into an emphatic process. The writers' task was to identify with me, to view the work from my perspective for a brief moment as the artistic subject. Is that possible? Through the first-person form, the authors step into my shoes, adopt the position of stand-ins. Conversely, I widen my first-person position and allow other perceptions and ways of seeing into my subject-zone, and in so doing forego authenticity, self-determination, and, if you will, control. Or is it not exactly this illusory process that makes visible the coherence of the subject status? Constitutions of subjects can be viewed as the results of being embedded in various structures and systems, characterised by historical, cultural, social, empirical, emotional, etc. conditioning and conditions. By admitting other ways of viewing and thinking into my first-person domain, I attempt to subvert dependencies and systems of rule in order to strengthen those subject areas that are bound to my own identity through consciousness and self-recognition. Subject status is first made possible through recognition of symbolic orders. But is that really the case? Who remains outside, who comes inside? The person who finds their language in the system? And what happens at the moment in which everything becomes representation? The curtain rises, the stage as such becomes visible, the artistic subject is represented by an actress, the address has been written by others. I allow myself to be represented, and I stage my representation.

Good evening.

I was somewhat surprised at where the opportunity to write the speech on my exhibition led me: from harlequinesque projections to sheer fury, from self-doubt to the fierce determination to ignore almost all expectations, including my own. Except for the expectation that I would be surprising, or bold, as it is often called; but it's actually much simpler: I find my narcissism so entertaining that I don't have it under control, nor do

I want to. And I should add that the revelation of this manifest self-affinity is every bit as refreshing to me as my song of self-praise itself.

I've thought about fetishism and am intrigued with the sheer number of different relationships this term can be invoked for, even within those of my works that are on show here. I'm saying all of this now—please don't interpret it as impolite—with sentences which I received as gifts. The names can be found in the inevitable footnotes, as in every undertaking that is still clear about its uncertainty. Nothing can better capture the almost compellingly heuristic character of this speech. Conceal? Never. Mitigate? Maybe.

Thus I say to you: fetishism is an expression of a corrupt object relationship. First appropriation (1). And, since I don't wish to repeat the word "corrupt", I will speak about these relationships. In this I find myself neither particularly neurotic nor at all contradictory.

However, I do not plan to categorise my own work, or even legitimise it, or offer to you a point-blank interpretive reading of it; in other words, I have no intention of taking away your ascriptions. I am not so altruistic, I am quite content to be forced to idly watch how you, in your unspoiled understanding of experience, make "me" your agent of your idea of provocation. Except that in doing so you forget "me" and decide for me what my conscious and unconscious intentions are, what my scope of action is, and what IN ME is assigned to your sphere. In the name of discursivisation. Because as readily as objects are "made subject" in the act of fetishisation, there is also an opposite tendency: I am constantly being degraded to an object, or else the objects I create are incessantly intermingled with my assumed "subject". Last but not least, I, I as a synonym for the artist, am even blamed for evoking your displacements—which, since they're based on a concept of accommodation, are inevitably uninspired. This is really enough! I simply refuse to accept them. (That I'm using them yet again, or rather, not "I" but some sort of passive construction of "me," is a different kettle of fish.) Even if I were to lend out my "I," surrender it, temporarily replace it, I simply wouldn't be able to escape this logic. And what would be said thereby? That this is not about the "I," as desirable as this idea might be for us? Essentially, we are reunited by this longing, or at least by the way we encounter it: sloppily and thoughtlessly. It's no wonder that the "I" denies itself to us when we leave it like this to lay claim to uniqueness even in the acquiescence to the situation. No wonder. I will forgo the imposition of the next dispute about authorship. It's all imposition enough already. Or rather, not IT, but our concepts. We are all prisoners in a certain way— a platitude in the text is always satisfying—a network of self-promises and self-legitimations, an ongoing fetishism; apologists of the nineteenth century. Now I'm getting hysterical. But that too is actually a necessary and connected element.

And now that we've arrived at psychoanalysis, I have one last thing to say: the pattern is never repetition in and of itself, that's much too simple-minded; the horror of repetition is in the trauma of interpretation. Second and third appropriation (2):

And you? You'll do with this speech what I want you to do with it, namely, whatever you please (3).

1 See Hartmut Böhme, "Fetischismus im 19. Jahrhundert. Wissenschaftshistorische Analysen zur Karriere eines Konzepts", in: Jürgen Barkhoff, Gilbert Carr, Roger Paulin (eds.), *Das schwierige neunzehnte Jahrhundert*, Niemeyer, Tübingen, 2000, pp. 445–467.

2 Adapted from Barbara Johnson. Thanks to Johannes Porsch, who introduced me to this text in the first place.

3 Marguerite Duras, *Green Eyes [Reflections on Film]*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The "I" is sometimes Miriam Bajtala, and sometimes it isn't. The "I" is continually reaching its limits when it attempts to write from a perspective that isn't its own. This creates an over-determined image. It is an image that speaks to the audience—to you—from different standpoints simultaneously. This is because the paradigmatic "I" is a zero point in the coordinate system of subjective orientation. "Everyone can say 'I' and everyone who says it indicates a different object from everyone else; as many proper names as speakers are necessary [...]"(1) She once said that she finds some conceptual positions difficult: "Especially when everything merges in language. That is why I always try to find a correlate in the material world."

However, bringing language into form is not that simple. It isn't an easy endeavor, neither for her nor for the "I." We, as the lowest common denominator different subjects can have, are thus faced with a challenge. The reason for this is that "[i]n all language and linguistic creations there remains, in addition to what can be conveyed, something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolises or something that is symbolised."(2) Having options is reassuring—whether one uses them or not. I once wrote this about her. "Creating new tools for oneself helps open more possibilities," was her answer.

"My mind is clearer when I know I have a space available in which I can work. There are projects that necessitate real space; other projects require inner space." The "here" of this speech, the fleeting moment of its phonetic articulation, contributes to the genesis of a new receptacle for narration. A vessel is created as language comes into being, a site that can be crossed in a multitude of ways and that you, as apprehending subject, attribute meaning to.

"I'm not interested in the perfect time interval, I'm interested in repetition. Time is always important to me. I became acquainted with time through sound." The "now" of our being together, ladies and gentlemen, is manifested in the transient sound of the actress's vocal apparatus and is nevertheless not unequivocally determinable because the "present [exists] only as the intersection of past and future. What we describe as a visible point isn't a point at all, but a minimal surface. No matter how we twist and turn it, through examining the use of language we arrive at the ontological statement that time in and of itself and in its dimensions of past, present, and future does not exist, is not."(3)

"I want to learn through my work. Either through an answer to a particular question or by way of a new question that arises from it." She is aware of herself. She is aware of her self. But she is also aware that a "remaining sign that only references itself and is thus completely subsumed in the category of firstness [would be] an oxymoron. When a first thing references itself, this reference posits a relation and thus necessarily a second thing. Therefore the self-reference already constitutes a difference between the sign and the object that it represents."4 In conclusion, the "I" only has the possibility of again falling back on something that she has already said: "I am happy that I have methodological freedom in the visual arts." They are Miriam Bajtala, you are Miriam Bajtala, we are Miriam Bajtala, it is Miriam Bajtala, she is Miriam Bajtala, he is Miriam Bajtala, you are Miriam Bajtala, it is I: Miriam Bajtala.

Thank you for listening!

1 Karl Bühler, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, the authorized translation of the German original (Gustav Fischer, Jena/Stuttgart 1934/1982), John Benjamin's Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 2011, p. 119.

2 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," translated by Harry Zohn in: Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (eds.), *Theories of translation: an anthology of essays from Dryden to Derrida*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 80.

3 Constanze Peres, "Jetztzeit – Erlebniszeit – Kunstwerk. Was heißt es, von der Gegenwart des Kunstwerks zu sprechen?" [Present time – experiential time – artwork: what does it mean to speak of the presence of the artwork?], spoken original of a lecture as part of the *zeitraumzeit* [timespacetime] symposium, Künstlerhaus, Vienna, 17 October 2008.

4 Winfried Nöth and others, *Mediale Selbstreferenz: Grundlagen und Fallstudien zu Werbung, Computerspiel und den Comics*, Herbert von Halem Verlag, Cologne, 2008, p. 13.