Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi

UNDERWORLD CLASSIC
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In her first institutional solo exhibition, Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi deals with the often-addressed tension between art and the public sphere by staging a large-scale spatial intervention in Heimo Zobernig's *schwarzescafé*. Zobernig's work decisively defines the exhibition space as a permanent, multifunctional conceptualisation that evokes the coffeehouse (in particular in its Austrian manifestation in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna) as a paradigmatic location of bourgeois publicness in the Modern era, translating this locus into the here and now where the café has evolved to become one of the core topoi of an economy geared towards the exchange, communication and circulation of ideas, as well as epitomising the arena of work insecurity per se. In this sense the predominant deployment of the colour black in the work can be read not only as a formalistic borrowing from the history of the monochrome and of minimal art, but equally as an allusion to their commonly lamented demise.

Ghaznawi's intervention comprises the replacement of Zobernig's tables and seating with a large, centrally placed platform. A line of roses running along all sides separates the outer edge – which similarly invites the visitor to be seated – from a large reflective expanse in the centre, which in turn evokes a water surface and contributes to the overall impression of a fountain, such as is to be often found as an urbanistic device on public squares. The work is conceived as a public sculpture, to be erected following the exhibition in the rear courtyard of the Löwenbräu-Areal complex. While the exhibition is still ongoing, however, it assumes what is commonly understood as a contrary function, namely to act as an exhibition seating bank from which to view the hybrid collage drawings by Ghaznawi that are hung on the walls. As an element of classic exhibition architecture, the bank serves as a paradigmatic model of an aesthetic focused purely on the contemplation of autonomous works of art – one that by providing the greatest possible ease of visual experience is intended to establish the ideal of disembodied vision. This initially seemingly polarised dual-functionality of the play between heteronomy and autonomy embedded in the sculpture is similarly repeated in the small-scale drawings. In them abstract compositions are given expression by means of applying various materials, such as nail polish, sellotape and pieces of jewellery, on to photographic paper.

This question of the role of art in public space and its instrumentalisation within the framework of urban development programmes, as well as the issue of the construct of the term "public art", is comprehensively dealt with by the US art historian Rosalyn Deutsche in her collection of essays *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*.[1] In her treatments she reflects upon the euphoric appropriation of public space by lead government officials and urban planners, flanked by an accompanying rhetoric that accords the process pronounced democratic-egalitarian qualities and that equates the public sphere with consensus and harmony. Posited upon radical democratic theories that define democracy and public space as being anchored in the negation of all ideas of a positivist, substantial basis of the social, she instead advocates a fundamentally antagonistic[2] and conflict-laden understanding of the public sphere. By tracing a genealogy of various different influential ideas of publicness, her criticism is above all aimed against what she describes as "agoraphobic" concepts characteristic of the mournful decline of the public sphere. As an alternative she adopts the proposal by various authors to describe this "public sphere" as "phantom". As Deutsche writes,

"traditional public space is a phantom less because it was never fully realized than because the ideal of social coherence, for which the term *public*

has always stood, is itself irremediably deceptive and, moreover, oppressive. The ideal of a noncoercive consensus reached through reason is an illusion maintained by repressing differences and particularities."[3]

The traditional idea of public space is predicated upon a strict divorce between a universalistic open area and a private area determined by particularist interests. Deutsche follows Thomas Keenan's suggestion that the public sphere be understood in analogy to language. In a similar manner to psychoanalytic theories of subject constitution concerning the gateway to language, this proposition allows the strict opposition between public and private spheres to be overcome. According to this line of thought the public sphere is structurally dislocated, and as such cannot be self-characterised either by its loss or the urge to re-establish it. Instead, if anything, it is distinguished by a resistance to absolute presence. "It emerges", writes Deutsche, "when society is instituted as a society with no basis, a society, as Lefort writes, 'without a body ... a society which undermines the representation of an organic totality.'"[4] This presence minus a substantial foundation or positivity makes it a powerful instrument in the quest for radically democratic politics.

Ghaznawi's work can be read as a memorial. Nevertheless, the roses that encircle it do not mourn for a lost public sphere that has, at best, to be recovered. The phantom of a democratic publicness and its melancholy appears in the mirroring surface – an affective prevailing mood that similarly pervades much of Ghaznawi's previous works. This impulse pulls her praxis far closer into the orbit of the feminist critique of what Sara Ahmed terms "The Promise of Happiness", and which she figuratively describes in the personality of the "feminist killjoy", the "unhappy queer" and the "melancholic migrant"[5] – all of them figures that have no place in the descriptions of a vanished, uniformly imagined public sphere.

1 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Practice* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1998).

2 Building on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Deutsche conceives of antagonism as the "relationship between a social identity and a 'constitutive outside' that blocks its completion." "Agoraphobia", in ibid., pp. 269–327, here p. 274.

3 Here, Deutsche paraphrases an idea by Bruce Robbins. Ibid., p. 320.

4 Ibid., p. 324.

5 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2010).