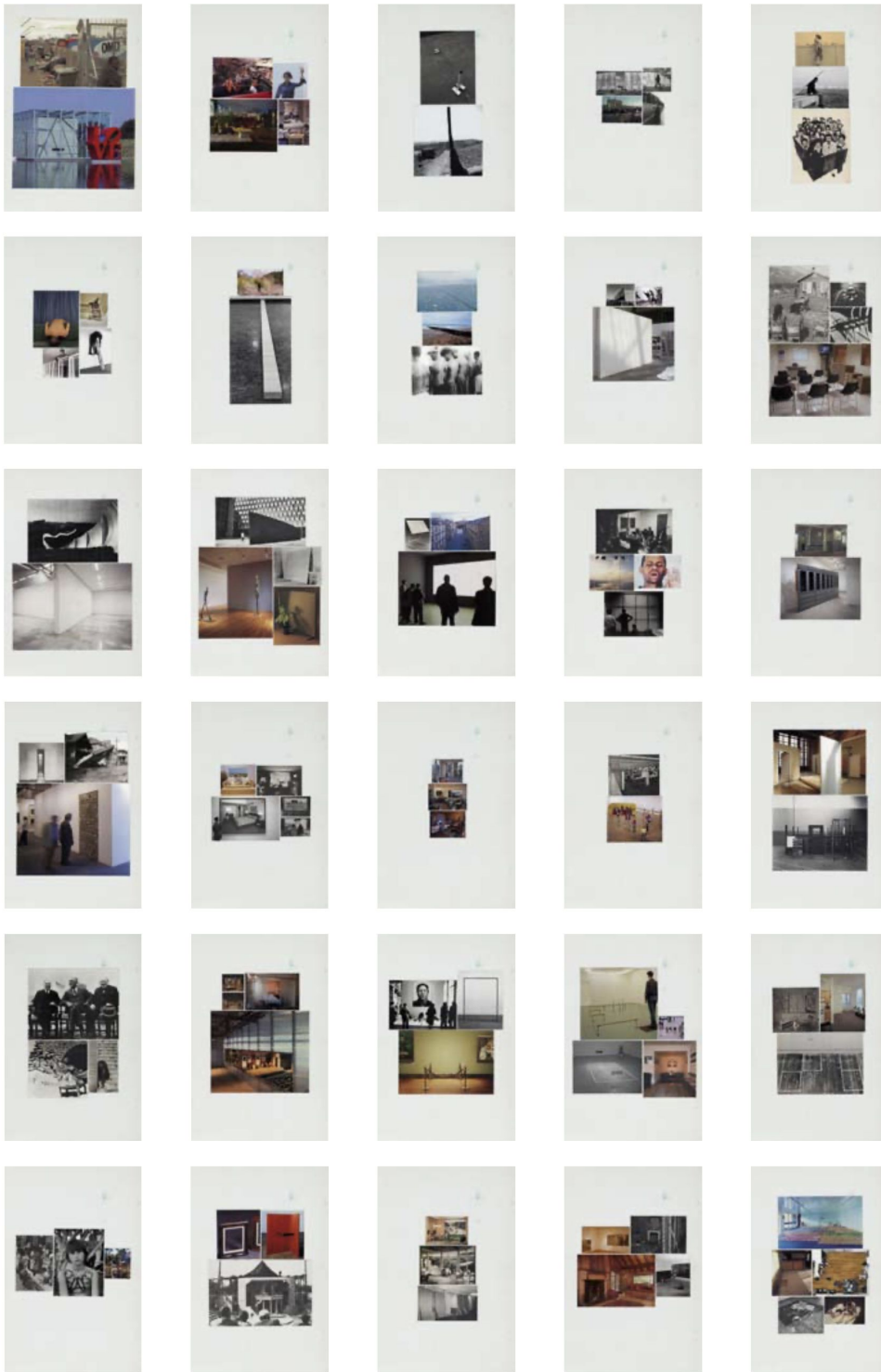


Reality as being Essentially Ambiguous

Meike Behm in conversation with Luis Jacob



At Kunstverein in Hamburg you presented two works: the installation *Habitat* (2005) and *Album VI* (2007), that was made especially for the exhibition. *Album VI* refers to the installation *Habitat* by dealing with subjects like interior and furniture design from the 1970s. Do all the parts of the *Album* refer to some of your installation works? You began work on the *Album* series in 2000. What motivated the first part of the *Album*?

Each *Album* is made using photographic images taken from various books and magazines, and assembled in a sequence of plastic-laminate sheets to compose braids of interwoven narratives that unfold from sheet to sheet. Many narratives are present in the *Albums*, making each one difficult to summarize. These narratives are created as viewers connect different images together, and create "visual rhymes" that give sense to recurring motifs.

Since 2000, I have produced various *Albums* related to specific bodies of work. *Album VI* was made as a companion to *Habitat*, although each is also an independent artwork. At the Kunstverein in Hamburg, the *Album* created an "image world" that corresponded in many ways to the "object world" that was presented by the *Habitat* installation. I wanted visitors to experience the exhibition from two different aesthetic registers: one governed by visuality and the semiotics of photographic imagery, and another governed by object-relations and embodied behaviour in the gallery. I understand "the visual" and "the behavioural" as different ways in which we are given over to the world. Both *Album VI* and *Habitat* depict this world as one that is constructed, and as one that we play a part in forming, reforming, deforming and transforming. Importantly, we are also in-formed by the world. We are shaped by it. This is what it means to be "in" the world, to constantly be giving ourselves to it.

Album VI begins with a series of images of chairs of various types, which inaugurates one image-motif in this *Album*: how objects and the built environment "anticipate" us. Objects and the built environment are shaped in advance by us – our bodies, our customs, our requirements, our imagination of what is possible and impossible. Anticipating us in advance, they come to shape us in turn. The built environment shapes our bodies, our

habits, our needs, and what appears to us as possible and impossible. Chairs figure in the *Album* quite literally as the ways in which we "take up positions" both in phenomenal space and in the social world. A throne is different from a stool, because a throne and a stool imply different manners of being-placed as a body in space, and as a role in the social world. In this sense, it appears that what we call "furniture design" is in essence the practice of giving objective form to embodied and socialized manners of taking up positions in the world. Furniture entrenches corporeal and social forms, blocking new forms as much as it permits new forms to come into being.

The „Albums“ are always based on images that come from other contexts. By eliminating the images from their usual context and placing them into a new associative order they begin to ask different questions. But I doubt whether it is possible to totally eliminate the original context, and think that subliminally it always influences the contextual meaning of each image in the „Album“. Would you agree?

Materials, artistic forms, exhibition contexts, and the people who participate there – are all complex. Every form or material present in an artwork, every context in which the work is presented, and every person who encounters this work there – is like a field where various histories, various social languages, various experiences and perspectives come together to encounter, but also to challenge and be challenged by one another. This coming-together is what gives energy to each "thing" – to each form or material, to each context, and to each viewer involved in a work of art. It is important for me to make work that makes apparent this coming-together of energies, this dynamic of confrontation of various, even incongruous histories, languages, and systems of value. When a work of art does this, we say that the artwork "shines". This is the kind of work that interests me.

So, yes: I agree with your observation that in the *Albums*, the original context of a given image – the original field of intentionality and meaning of a particular image, which that image embodies as a thing – is eliminated so that the image can be made to encounter a new context. This new context is created by the artwork (the totality of *Album VI*), by the exhibition

context (the Kunstverein in Hamburg), and by each visitor to the exhibition. In some sense, the original context of a particular image is eliminated in the *Album*, so that the image may be re-contextualized. But as artifact – as a "thing" and not simply as an "image" – each particular image carries this original context "in its flesh" subliminally, as you say. A complex field of referentiality is created in the *Album*, as energies are eliminated, are subliminally preserved, are recontextualized, are transformed by their new context, and transform it in turn. This complexity – which corresponds to the complex interpretive schemas that viewers bring to their experience of the work – adds dialogic richness to our experience of *Album VI*.

Within your work, the „Album“ series plays an important role. Your installations and works in public space deal with de-hierarchization, with interaction and utopian ideas for living. May the „Albums“ as well be read as a metaphor of an order not dominated by any hierarchy?

I have described the *Albums* in terms of complexity; the complex referentiality of individual as well as clustered images in the *Album*; the complex energies present in artistic form and in the institutional contexts of presentation; and the complex interpretive schemas that viewers bring to their experience of the work. But it is important to mention that all of this complexity exists in the form of something incomplete. The original context of each image – but also the new context – is experienced "subliminally", which is to say that these things are experienced incompletely, or consciously only in part. This incompleteness allows for the work to "come alive".

A particular viewer is only partially aware of all the energies embodied by the images in an *Album* – it is impossible to imagine a viewer who will recognize and understand every single image – just like such a viewer is only partially aware of all the energies that the viewer him- or herself embodies as an individual person and as a social being. This partiality, this incompleteness, can be described in terms of need; and within the *Album* we may say that each image "needs" the others to give it sense. No single image is prioritized as possessing a special key. Part of the enduring pleasure of looking at an *Album* lies in the ways in which a previously

insignificant or overlooked image can definitively alter the meaning of other images around it, or even of images that are placed quite far away within the Album. I agree that these qualities of individual incompleteness, of mutual dependence, and of definitive value present in any single image, amount to a kind of de-hierarchization.

To look at an Album entails giving free play to connecting images together and making sense of them according to one's own individual disposition. I believe this sense of free play makes the Albums inviting to viewers, even in the case of the Albums that at first impression seem "too demanding" in their scale, because free play can act as an occasion to experience one's unique and individual disposition. However, I must also emphasize the ordered, narrative quality of the Albums, and the directed character of our free association when looking at them. The images are fixed forever in their plastic laminate sheets, and it is no longer possible to physically recombine them; and the sheets are arranged in a specific order with a beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, permeating this order is my own disposition, with all its idiosyncrasies, insights, biases, prejudices, sense of humor, and gaps of ignorance – which I imagine some viewers may experience as a kind of dominance. Many viewers would be able to educate me on the significance of images I have included in an Album, images which perhaps I appear to have included ignorantly, even recklessly, without fuller awareness of their original meaning. For me, it is significant that the Albums allow radically different perspectives and "readings", which nonetheless can come together (or not come together) in moments of mutual yet always partial "completion". I experience something utopian in this.

The installation „Habitat“ consists of six different areas that refer to different possibilities of living, borders of space and firm systems. In a review about the work an author wrote that the combined elements transform “Habitat” into a dreamlike place that invites the visitor to interact. But I doubt whether the term “dreamlike” describes well the atmosphere that “Habitat” provides, because this term suggests an alternate world that lacks any relation to reality. Would you call “Habitat” a dreamlike space?

My curiosity in being-in-the-world is

fairly secular, and in that sense does not extend to "other worlds". *Habitat* is installed in a darkened gallery space, and perhaps this reminds some viewers of nocturnal environments. Also, the installation is permeated by different types of mood-inducing lighting, and by various segments of music and soundscaping. All of this adds up to something that, if not exactly dreamlike, can be described as theatrical.

We seem intrinsically capable of experiencing something (a pair of gloves, for example) as significant, that is, as pointing to something else: to my lover's habits of orderliness, or to my poor blood circulation, to my friend's act of betrayal, my own sense of stylishness and social currency, and so on. This symbolic dimension, which is never simple and univocal, constitutes our experience of any thing. It is not related to the "thing itself" like an extraneous attribute, like an envelope (or glove!) that wraps about the thing but does not in-form it. Rather, interpretive schemas structure our experience of things so that they are immediately and obviously meaningful to us. Our interpretive schemas – our intentions and projects, the social and historical world to which we belong – exist "obviously", which is to say that these schemas take the form of things immediately encounterable in the world. At the same time, and for the same reason, our interpretive schemas exist in veiled form, as motivations "hidden" beneath things. We are incomplete to ourselves, and our intentionality is both ours and not-ours. Our motivations are not-ours because they were not all consciously chosen by us – and yet they are no-one else's. In this way, the schema that determines for us the significance of things exists as in a kind of dream – both explicit and hidden, both personal and anonymous.

Does the title of the installation “Habitat” refer to the concept of Habitus that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu thought as being adopted through upbringing and education. The concept means on the individual level “a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment... as well as being the organizing principles of action.” Does “Habitat” negotiate these issues in a subliminal way?

I hold Bourdieu's writing in very high regard. In particular, I value it for the tools it provides for articulating a level of "belief" that is deeper than belief,

and a level of "understanding" that is deeper than understanding. I see aesthetic experience as operating at this level that is both personal and profoundly anonymous.

Bourdieu's research is an attempt to describe how meaning happens – how we experience some thing in the world (some object, some person, some choice) "meaningfully" as being right or wrong, valuable or worthless, desirable or disgusting, possible or impossible, for-me or not-for-me. This framework of experience materializes not only in beliefs and opinions, but most powerfully in embodied phenomena such as comportment, behaviour, and "taste". This framework is called habitus, and it manifests itself in the form of what is obvious, in what needs no explanation as "this is just the way it is", and "this is just the way it's done". Its obviousness is what makes habitus such a powerful thing.

What Bourdieu has described so clearly as the "system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment... as well as being the organizing principles of action" – I alluded to earlier when I spoke about our interpretive schemas, which I take to be synonymous with the symbolic dimension of things. Habitus, our interpretive schemas, and the symbolic dimension of things are both explicit and hidden. What is so interesting about these things is that they are hidden precisely in what we call "everyday life", where they appear in the form of all the obvious things we encounter, and all the obvious things we do. *Habitat* is a scenario for experimenting with this within a theatricalized setting. The installation is created out of several "living-areas" that are partially separated from and partially interpenetrate one another. Visitors may become absorbed in an activity (for instance, watching CNN News, reading a book, or playing the keyboard) while they may become objects of attention for others present in an adjacent area. The theatricalized space of *Habitat* is intended to create the possibility of experiencing the obvious quality of "absorption in things" as if this obviousness were a strange and mysterious thing, in an environment that symbolically evokes the 1970s and 1980s because most of the objects in the installation were produced in this time period.

In the 1960s Michael Fried criticized

American “Minimal Art” for being theatrical, because it positions the object in relation to the viewer in a totally different way than sculpture was supposed to do. Both the artwork as well as the viewer do not represent themselves anymore, but would share a common stage presence. In Fried's view, this aspect of theatricality is a negative aspect of Minimal Art. The installation “Habitat” as well claims a certain “stage presence”, but a different one than Fried refers to. Maybe it is more precise to talk about a situation than a stage?

Any performative work plays upon the distinction between the Real and the Symbolic. Actually, this play is present in any work of art, but a Minimalist sculpture that heightens performative plays with this distinction in a more clear way when compared to other sculptural forms.

The Real (everyday experience) is always infused with the Symbolic (meaning structured by habitus). Theatre, sculpture, and artistic practice as a whole, are ways in which we elaborate this infusion. The relationship between the Real and the Symbolic can be usefully described in terms of the relationship between figure and ground. On the one hand, we have the Real whenever the Symbolic "hides beneath the surface", habitus and our interpretive schemas function smoothly (which is to say unobtrusively), and we take the significance of things for granted. On the other hand, we have the Symbolic whenever the Real agrees to take a back seat, so to speak, we are called to make sense of something, and we experience our meaning-generating faculties as if for the first time. The theatrical appears then, as the self-detaching of the Real from itself. Michael Fried was quite perceptive in recognizing that what was then called "Literal Art" was actually not literal at all, but rather had more in common with the ambiguities of theatre.

I agree with you that the theatricality of *Habitat* involves a situation rather than a stage – although the installation does include a meeting area arranged on a low platform. The installation allows for a fairly complex situation where each act of "doing" also becomes an act of "performing", and where every experience of immersive absorption in an activity also becomes an act of theatricality. This becoming-theatrical includes the experience of being absorbed in that act of watching the

actions of others inside the installation, since in our absorption we may also become objects of perception for others unnoticed by us. This way our habits, which are usually experienced as the background behind our actions, may for a moment become foregrounded as figure for us, and we may fleetingly witness in each other our own acts of spectatorship in the gallery.

I value much of the artwork understood under the rubric of "relational aesthetics" because it shifted the discussion of the visual arts away from the idea of representation towards the idea of intersubjective situation. I do not shy away from discussing some of my work in these "relational" terms, even during the current backlash against this type of interpretation. But I find fault in how frequently the uncanny dimension of relational practice is overlooked both by critics and (often) by artists themselves. Perhaps it is right that relational practice has been almost completely killed off, so that we are finally able to look at it again in its proper strangeness. It is no accident that artists and curators have recently been so interested in forms of theatricality and re-enactment. We look to art and artifice as being more real than reality not because they offer us "another world", not even because they "bring us closer to reality", but because they allow us to perceive the foundation of reality as being essentially ambiguous. Reality is always determined by our intentionality and our projects, which are fundamentally uncanny; both familiar and unfamiliar, both ours and not-ours, both immediate and obvious, and also hidden and strange.

In your lecture that you gave at Kunstverein in Hamburg you start with a quote of Adrian Piper about the music of Funk: “Whereas social dance in a white culture is often viewed in terms of achievement, social grace or competence, or spectator oriented entertainment, it is a collective and participatory means of self-transcendence and social union in black culture, and is often much more fully integrated into daily life.” How do you relate the installation “Habitat” that as well can be read as a social structure and a viewer-orientated work in relation to that quote? Maybe as a hint that social competence is not much integrated into daily life?

Perhaps it is better if I relate my answer

to the *Flashlight* project, rather than to *Habitat*. For our habits to become foregrounded as figure, and for us to become witness to our own acts of spectatorship, a kind of decoupling must take place in reality, leading to a momentary inversion of everyday experience. I first found out about this during *Flashlight*, which theatricalized the activity of having fun in public space, and rendered as performance the collective interactions associated with relational aesthetics.

The decoupling of the Real and the inversion of everyday experience could occur outdoors, as in *Flashlight*, or it could take place inside the space of an art gallery, as in *Habitat*. What was unique about *Flashlight* was its reference to Funk. Piper's characterization of Funk seems to contradict some of the things I have been talking about, since she describes the black dance culture associated with Funk as being immersive (rather than performative), and white dance culture as being theatrical, as oriented either around the achievement of competence in the eyes of others, or else around watching an entertainment event. In these terms, one would expect *Flashlight* to be more concerned with immersion rather than with performativity.

I agree with Piper's observation that Funk music and dance leads to an immersion in rhythm and collective pleasure. This immersion is experienced joyfully as a transcendence of isolation, and it can be a deeply transformative experience. What is striking to me is how grotesque – how joyfully grotesque – Funk posits this immersion. Especially in George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic, subjectivity is presented as being weird and far-out, while togetherness is not a melting-together into oneness, but a togetherness of the most variant and incongruous identities. The grotesque aspect of Funk is enacted through costumes, make-up, and the adoption of exaggerated personas – in short, it is theatrical. If Funk presents an antidote to capitalist solipsism, then its collectivism is understood to be anarchist rather than socialist.