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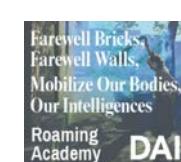
The emotional and its political infrastructures

31.05.2018 | REVIEW — Jack Segbars

First Person Plural: Empathy, Intimacy, Irony, and Anger, currently on show at BAK, departs from the frame of the emotional as the primal constitutive material from which societal and political forms arise. Rather than the ideological or philosophical, it is affect, or the working of emotion, that takes the lead in the realization of political forms. This particular exhibition is inspired by Sara Ahmed, a British-Australian academic, who argues that emotions stand at the root of cultural

practices through which bodies and ideologies are shaped. Ahmed works, among others, within affect theory, a school of thought that has become of interest in many academic fields such as gender studies, psychology, critical theory and art. As emotions are closely connected to perception, materials and bodies, they inscribe experiences into social and collective memories. These memories organize in turn the sense of community after which effects of in- or exclusion follow.

As both inscribing the passing of time through the experiential in the societal, and the



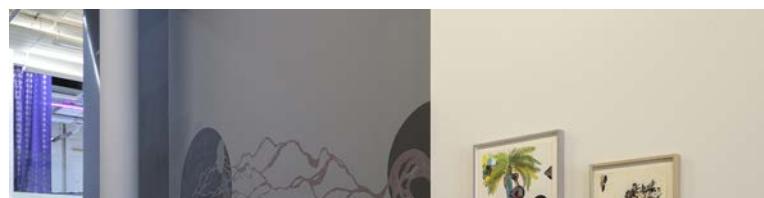
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societal re-inscribing emotions on subjects and communities, it becomes a natural and eloquent tool to consider and to engage with as artistic and aesthetic practice. Affect refers to the materiality and the experiential of subjective experience, as well as to the formation of the bigger scales of ideological forms and their developments. It may present itself as a necessary and welcome next step to the limitations that theoretical and analytical induced criticality brings, as can be found in artistic practices that follow institutional critique's form of analysis and expression. A persistent problem with institutional critique's approach is that it cannot leave the conditional frame of artistic production, as it formulates itself through what it agitates against. The formal assessment and mapping of the configuration of positions and power relations in the production of our conditions today may indicate how we got here, and are imbricated in our constellation, but it doesn't necessarily mean to say how we are here within them, and how to possibly be somewhere else next. It is precisely the inscription of the affective on the societal forms that Matteo Lucchetti, curator of the exhibition, expresses and operationalizes

throughout *First Person Plural*.

Leftovers (2017) by Otobong Nkanga, one of the works on show, is a woven tapestry in which mineral excavation sites are schematically depicted and threaded together by two chords. It resembles a necklace or bracelet and starkly contrasts with the imagery of exploitation through the excavations as individual adornments in it, represent. On the one hand, *Leftovers* fits the known critical narrative of colonialism, as a mode of capitalist exploitative production. Through unconsidered treatment of excavation sites, areas of habitation are scarred, emptied out and depleted, leaving the original inhabitants without resources or means to sustain themselves, furthermore it depletes nature and ecology as such. On the other hand, it refers to the material and tactile origins of inconsiderate exploitation as such, to the seductive nature of materials.



Utrechtse schilder
Jan Mulder in
Centraal Museum





Otobong Nkanga, *We Could Be Allies*, 2017–2018,
installation BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018.
Photo: Peter Cox



Otobong Nkanga, *Backstage*, 2015–2018; Otobong Nkanga, *The Leftovers*, 2017; BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018. Photo: Tom Janssen

**Laura
Kaminskaitė
and
Antanas
Gerlikas**



work by 23
recent graduates o
f 8 art academies

Throughout her work, Nkanga develops the notions of 'glimmer' and 'shine' as the surface qualities of the materials around us, that attract and fascinate, and orchestrate social relations. The way we subsequently deal with the fascinations and attractions that manipulate us, creates our ethical position as related bodies. On metal plates, that in form correspond with the depiction of the excavations in the tapestry as layered concentric shapes, Nkanga presents examples of these mined materials as objects of attraction. One of these materials is mica, which she knows from the natural surroundings of her childhood as a material to play with, but which is also seen as very valuable as it is often used in industrial applications such as electronics and thermal insulator, as well as in cosmetics, as the ingredient that produces shine. The play with

opposites in the formal elements is combined with a personal narrative, as well as with a critique of a grander, global scale, Nkanga thus connects a bodily and subjective history via the material as the depository of global events and relations., These are in turn conveyed via art, as vehicle for this narration. The equation of criticality as a matter of abstraction and cognition gets redirected through the tactile processing of our bodies.

Besides this more conventional form of presentation, Otobong Nkanga is also connected to BAK in another way with her project *Carved to flow* whose objective is the production of a soap called *O8 Black Stone*. The project started in the context of *documenta 14* and is partitioned in three stages, set in three different locations and addresses the idea of production as communal work. The last phase is developed within the BAK-fellowship program, in which Otobong Nkanga participates. This in-house research-program provides artists the possibility and time to develop new work, which can lead to different conclusions: to be presented as exhibition or within different contexts. In terms of production the program thus extends the production for BAK and does not only include exhibitions, but expands its mode of producing as well.

The first phase, *The Laboratory*, took place in Athens where the soap was produced as a communal workshop-activity. The second stage, *The Warehouse & Distribution*, took place in Kassel where the soap was presented as a sculptural installation. And the last phase, *The Germination*, will take place in Nigeria, in the form of a foundation that is to be funded through the sales of the soap. This foundation

will be dedicated to the development of local products. As such Nkanga uses the context of contemporary art, in which production inevitably becomes an issue of commodification to escape out of, or at least point towards, these confines. The last phase is aimed towards a synthesis of art and life, and wants to leave the limitations of contemporary art as the prevalent and, still, dominant form of art production precisely through the use of its infrastructure. This division of stages eerily resembles the development in art history up to conceptual art, namely art as issue of distribution and of

information, to which Nkanga proposes a logic consequence: the exit of contemporary art. Her approach widens the scope in which art is operational and delocalizes it, decolonizes it from its own logic of production.

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Sarah Vanhee, *The Making of Justice*, 2017,
installation BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018.
Photo: Peter Cox

Sven Augustijnen's work *Summer Thoughts* (2012-ongoing) consists of a series of letters installed on the wall together with a video and some books. The letters are part of an ongoing conversation between Augustijnen and Marta Kuzma, curator of dOCUMENTA13. It started in 2012 when the Belgian art magazine *A Prior* asked Augustijnen to reflect

Augustijnen's letter to Kuzma on *dOCUMENTA13*. The exchange was triggered by Augustijnen's fascination for the tapestries by Hannah Ryggen (1894-1970) shown in that particular documenta, which was curated by Kuzma. These handwoven tapestries, drawn in a direct and personal style, depict politically significant scenes of Ryggen's time (mostly from the period between 1930 and 1940) and addresses the rise of fascism and the ensuing war in Europe. The exchange between Augustijnen and Kuzma, of which we only get to read Augustijnen's perspective, deals with the

persistent and renewed presence of fascism in Europe and beyond. In detailed fashion Augustijnen describes fascism as an ongoing phenomenon, via descriptions of World War II criminals that managed to escape to safe havens like Franco's Spain or South-America, and who have been taken up in the regular economies and administrations of post-war Europe, the US and Russia. The historic fascism that actually never ended, is connected to the recent past, and the present. Augustijnen retraces this ongoing legacy via nodal encounters where historical and art-historical events topologically meet his personal accounts as researcher. He does so through feverish associations and meticulously annotations in a style that becomes wedged. The geographical mapping of fascism in Europe is matched with the occasions of presentations of Ryggen's tapestries in European places. Cultural and political production merge, and the body from which these arise are actually the same communal body.

The letters are accompanied by a 1983 video-recording of *La Clave*, a Spanish television-show, in which the convicted Belgian Nazi-collaborator Léon Degrelle can be seen. Degrelle was able to remain a free man in Spain. Next to the video is some additional documentation among which the publication '*Hanna Ryggen*' by Kuzma, part of the discursive *100 Notes-100 Thoughts* she wrote for the documenta series.

The work emphasises memory and recollection as never-ending activities. The recognition that Degrelle continued a normal life, through the insular semi-seclusion of Spain in regard to Europe, separating and obfuscating histories into different territories,

is attested by the video-registration -a live document to this painful fact. The simultaneous closeness and farness of Degrelle, as fellow Belgian, is perceptible and tangible for Augustijnen. The endlessness of the work, which warns for the perpetual rise and current closeness of fascism, and the equally unending recognition of it, is hard and functions only as an affective work. The absence of work in a regular sense, -there is neither imagery of the documenta nor of the tapestries- stresses the importance of reflection as a generative and affective work.



Sven Augustijnen, *Summer Thoughts*, 2012-...,
installation BAK, basis voor
actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018.
Photo: Peter Cox

The work of Doug Ashford in this show, functions in a similar fashion, binding the intimate space of the personal to the larger realm of the communal and its politics. *Six Moments in 1967 and Some of its Bodies* (2010-2011) is a series of six paintings in which photos from newspapers or magazines, depicting significant moments in the civil rights and anti-war movements in 1967 and featuring people that embodied these moments in protests, are framed by geometric and abstract shapes. It is a moment in time that is of importance to Ashford personally. He has vivid memories of one of these demonstrations, the October '67 Washington demonstrations, as his mother took him there. The use of abstract visualizations speaks of the possibility of abstraction as a communal language. At the same time abstraction is also the material of financial and cognitive capitalism and its technological political mediation which counters these ambitions

and pressurizes subjective space. The tactile nature of the paintings, visibly handmade and roughish, amplifies the paradox of the subjective and the general, the concrete and the abstract, between which our society and the subjects in it, alternate.

In *Nocturnes* (2017) another series by Ashford, of, again, six paintings, photographs of such historically significant moments, are manually torn out of magazines, printed and juxtaposed with painted images of star constellations in the sky, that were visible at the precise moment in time of these events. Ashford connects the specificity of events to a general and collective perceptibility, to convey that these moments in history have been inscribed onto subjects, affecting the subjects as global narrative and enforcing senses of political belonging.

The grammar of these paintings refers to abstraction, tactility and figuration as combined art historical components, that are condensed into seemingly conventional painterly objects. But considering Doug Ashford's personal history as a member of Group Material, a group operational between 1989 and 1996, these are not simply objects on display in a white cube context. Group Material deployed a wide range of materials in its installations and presentations, including profane and mass-cultural objects, existing historical objects, and media and fine art, which were non-hierarchically presented and democratically chosen. Group Material's strategy and ambition was to consider the mediation of art via its installation and its context, as both public enterprise and political activism, thereby resisting art's commodification in its conventional mediated (market) settings. The history of Ashford's artistic position, re-inscribes his works as carriers of the legacy of the link between activism, life and art. The subjective and personal nature of these objects which record the affective inscription of the social onto the artist enhances art's role as an affective mediator of the social.





Doug Ashford, *Six Moments in 1967 and Some of its Bodies*, 2010–2011, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018. Photo: Tom Janssen



Doug Ashford, *Bunker 2*, 2017, installation BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018. Foto: Peter Cox

It are these kinds of qualities present in the work of most artists and projects represented in *First Person Plural*, that relate art production to its bigger span and scope, as an issue that concerns life as a concrete given beyond art's context. This can also be observed in Sarah Vanhee's work *The Making of Justice* (2017), that documents the process of an intensive two-year collaboration with inmates of a Belgian prison, convicted for the crime of murder, with whom she produces a film through a conjoint developed, fictional narrative of crime and guilt. *The Making of Justice* does not only address the societal issue of justice as politico-ethical question of retribution or of healing, it is rather about how we can or cannot identify with, or be affected by another subject. After watching the blurred faces of those who have committed heinous crimes, and with whom we have become intimately acquainted, in this

encounter we are left with the question: are we a different we after we've come in affective contact with them, and have they changed after testifying to us? The question remains open, becomes a matter of identification and thus shifts towards a potential of empathic recognition.



Doug Ashford, *Nocturne*.
New York City, United
States, March 28 1989, 2017,
installation BAK, basis voor
actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2018.
Photo: Peter Cox





Doug Ashford, Nocturne.
Oslo, Norway, July 22 2011,
2017, installation BAK, basis
voor actuele kunst, Utrecht,
2018. Photo: Peter Cox

The institutional and curatorial format of BAK opens up to a similar ambition by embedding its artistic ambition in a structure that is hospitable and explorational. Artistic research has become a household name and stands the risk of becoming an empty moniker if not followed through in consequence, and when it is treated -in institutional handling- as the next commodifiable style or school. Another pitfall that presents itself, is the affluent use of theory that may envelop and overbear the experiential. In *First Person Plural* these risks are avoided. The different approaches to the problem of art's imbrication and limitations produced within its own structure, indicate a direction out of it. It is through BAK that other aspects of artistic concern, which can be found in most if not all presented artists, becomes tangible, and presented as an integral and essential part of artistic practise.

Artists and institute jointly seek a form of resistance to the threat of commodification which comes from multiple directions.

All images courtesy BAK Utrecht

First Person Plural: Empathy, Intimacy, Irony, and Anger with
Sepake Angiama, Doug Ashford, Sven Augustijnen, Tala
Madani, Liz Magic Laser, Eva Mattes, Franco Mattes, Otobong
Nkanga, Sarah Vanhee, until 22.07.2018, BAK, Utrecht

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