

Een Gebeuren – something that happens

Philipp Gufler at Françoise Heitsch, 9th September – 29th October 2016

Philipp Gufler's exhibition focuses on the creative work of the Dutch performance artist Ben D'Armagnac (1940 – 1978), which has continuously informed his own work throughout his career. He provided Gufler with the source for his contribution to the exhibition "You Must Make Your Death Public" (2016) at the Amsterdam-based De Appel Arts Centre, an institution with which D'Armagnac himself was closely connected in the 1970s. The title "een gebeuren" – "something that happens" – owes its expression to d'Armagnac, who referred here to the very concept, which later gained universal recognition under the term "performance."

On street level of the gallery, Philipp Gufler assembled several head-high mirrors onto which he applied three superimposed yet translucent pigment layers through screen-print techniques. What we usually perceive as a plane surface when looking into the mirror, now, due to Gufler's intervention, becomes tangible in its spatial depth. Thus, a performative space between pigment layer and glass surface as well as the mirror layer, which lies behind both, surfaces; perception now oscillates inevitably between the focus on the spectator's own mirror image and the examination of colour composition and application. The interplay of objectification – the spectator becomes aware of her/himself in the mirror – and subjectification – the mirrors are inhabited by different bodies and individuals – provides Gufler's works with their distinctive quality. In order to activate this potential, he makes use of either his own body, or, in the case of the mirrors, the spectator who completes the work by her/his presence in the space.

The title-giving video installation "een gebeuren," which is shown downstairs, emphasizes such shifts in perspective in a similar manner. The installation is based on Ben d'Armagnac's performance of the same name, which took place at the De Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam on 14th June 1975. D'Armagnac occupied a glass cube with the dimensions of about 2x1x1 metres, painted white from the inside, together with about 2,000 freshly hatched flies; he began to scrape off the paint centimetre by centimetre in order to at least partially reveal the cube's inside for the spectators.

"All my work has to do with my experience, not with things that happen outside myself." D'Armagnac thus phrased his understanding of performance as experience-based, which in "een gebeuren" was performed as the slow unveiling of an inner space to its surrounding environment. This also explains his rejection of recording his performances – neither photography nor film as media able to document only from "the outside" seemed appropriate in order to capture this very quality of performance art.

Gufler reconstructed d'Armagnac's performance based on rudimentary documented material and conversations with d'Armagnac's partner Louwrien Wijers. In his own version of "een gebeuren," which is loosely based on the above-mentioned performance's structure, Gufler captures the events with a GoPro camera. Instead of documenting the slow appearance of a person behind a white surface, as done by the photographs taken in 1975, the video shows the diligent process of laying bare and opening up from an inside perspective – an action, which Gufler completes by releasing the flies at the end of the performance and by which he also upgrades d'Armagnac's own performance. Simultaneously, his video work reveals that faith in a state beyond a media documented reality has become an illusion 40 years after d'Armagnac.

As with other videos, such as "Becoming-Rabe" (2016), a piece about the Munich-based performance artist Rabe Perplexum, Philipp Gufler lends Ben d'Armagnac his own body for "een gebeuren." He employs his body as a medium in order to bring back to light d'Armagnac's

concept of performance as well as the contextual dimension of his action – not in order to create a detailed reconstruction but a free appropriation, in which d’Armagnac’s and Gufler’s positions can face each other.

This form of ventriloquism or of an “indirect language,” as Gufler refers to it in the video, leads to a dislocation of one’s own subject-position. His artistic practice configures itself spectral by and through other people and positions. Exemplary here are the different quilts, multilayered textiles, which are dedicated to relevant personalities and locations. This hall of mirrors of reference points contradicts the hetero-normative expectations of an artistic “identity.” In the sense of Hubert Fichte (who Gufler dedicated his first quilt to in 2013), Gufler describes indirect language as “queer practice.” Instead of stressing one’s own persona, he chooses a form of expression which resonates with others. Thus, subjectivity in Gufler’s work becomes “something that happens.”

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