

At home and elsewhere: on Gert Bendels work

by Roland Berg

Gert Bendel works with various media. He studied sculpture and is now also involved in an array of film projects, in which he introduces himself into diverse social environments. For 'Zuhause Reisen' (Domestic Travelling) he spent half a year on a campsite, made contact with the neighbours there, allowed himself to be helped to build a terrace for his trailer, and held conversations about people's motivation for spending the summer-half of the year on a campsite. A portrait of a particular social landscape was developed, its creation involving Bendel deploying himself, his camera and terrace construction, as stimuli by means of which he might learn something about the hopes and states of mind of the traveller-campers. Bendel followed a similarly interactive approach with 'Am Moore' (At the Fens). The film poses questions about the status of artists and the artistic world through the example of the village of Worpswede. Here, in a so-called 'artists' colony', the construction of a small, though functionless, train-station, named 'Am Moore,' acted as hub for the opinions of the people living in Worpswede – a large proportion of whom are still artists – and asked them about the role of art in their life and their town.

For the project 'Zuhause' (At home), Bendel amalgamated three-dimensional and filmic media. The assembled construction of removal boxes, once similarly displayed at the Kunstverein Schwäbisch-Hall with the original boxes, now, reduced by a scale of 10:1, serves as the scenery for a video projection. Again, the film presented here is about social environment, strata and class: or about individuals and their designs for life, presented and initiated through Bendel's interest in their accommodation. Here too Bendel approaches his Berlin protagonists with the same intimacy that is a feature of his other film projects: the married couple from Wedding in early retirement, the young homosexual who lives alone, the middle-class family consisting of house-husband, gainfully employed wife, and three small children, and the well-off lady with the female house-keeper from Dahlem.

Bendel succeeds in capturing the sociograms of the respective milieus in concentrated form. The use of the dwelling space of hall, kitchen, bedroom and living-room in the respective houses allow insights into different ways of life and modes of living; the residents' statements about their living conditions and designs for life illustrate mental states and inner attitudes. The house becomes a setting for social research; the rooms reflections of desires, longings, dreams and ideals. Bendel's cross-section of Berlin society is not representative, but nevertheless relevant to contemporary life models.

Through unconditional respect, and natural good will, Bendel was able to realise his intention of coming 'as close as possible' to the people. The proximity to the subjects thus attained betrays much about the living conditions in society, a society that we share with the protagonists of 'Zuhause.' Bendel's interactive method of opening-up people and environment – for instance his personal participation as interlocutor – offers insights and comparisons, and broadens the concept of a portrait in which cinematic image and sculptural space convene.

To bring the things closer to the masses is an 'ardent tendency of contemporary man', wrote Walter Benjamin over 70 years ago. Through his role as communicator, to whom human talents, cinematic technique, or installational setting are simply resources, Bendel has managed to bring

people closer to *the* people, and thus present a perspective on which role the media can play in art today. If technical media present that which is near as distant, and vice versa, Bendel's installational deployment of the cinematic, in direct comparison to the three dimensional, offers a suggestion of the social potential of media use.

The medium in the hand of the artist therefore not only legitimises the method of documentation and intervention with which the artist accesses the social field; it is, at the same time, the interface at which he and the societal subject engage – it is at once both near and distant.

The importance of this condition can hardly be overstated, since in mass-media use - be it film or television - this encounter has by now become redundant; intimacy has been replaced by the calculated exhibitionism of the talk show and the bastardisation of that which is unique.

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