

An Interview with Anna Jermolaewa by Gerald Matt

gerald matt In your double video *Five Year Plan* you choose a specific space: a St. Petersburg subway station. Here you film people riding an escalator. Initially, you shot this in May 1996, and you repeated this process five years later in 2001. In the course of five years, hardly anything has changed, not even the style of dress. The only thing that is different is the product being advertised in the background. The first thing one feels when one sees *Five Year Plan* is resignation, a sense of futility; the five year plan seems to have failed; hopes for a change beyond that of consumerism go unfulfilled. Instead, we are appalled by the monotony of everyday life, because the video suggests that nothing has happened in the past five years except for people riding up and down the escalator. Are you suggesting to the viewer the sense of an existential struggle “in spite of” all odds, the irony of the myth of Sisyphus, or is *Five Year Plan* merely an expression of powerlessness?

anna jermolaewa “Bounty and Snickers are hanging out at the drug store, and ...” It used to be that politics and politicians were the main characters in the jokes and anecdotes people would tell. But now the stories people are telling are about Bounty, Snickers or Mars, and I think this is a pretty good indication of the societal changes taking place in Russia in recent years. During the Soviet reign, everyday life was swallowed by ideology. The slightest quotidian gesture had its ideological interpretation, was considered “pro” or “contra” – absolutely parallel to Orwell’s 1984, where Winston sleeps with Julia and defines this as a “political act,” as a “blow against the party.”

The last ten years have brought with them a radical secularization of social life. The people on the escalator – though their attire may not betray the fact – no longer belong to the species *homo sovieticus* (which continues to be the subject of interpretation in Ilya Kabokov’s works). Much has changed above the subway. Keep in mind that St. Petersburg has meanwhile become the ninth most expensive city in the world for tourists, that Moscow is now third in that ranking, and that the greatest number of luxury Mercedes models are exported to Russia. However, most of the people riding the escalators, especially the elderly, are much poorer now and their purchasing power is much less than it was five years ago.

gerald matt At the same time your double video *Five Year Plan* also reminds us of surveillance camera images: the public realm, a realm under organized state and private control. The perspective of these surveillance cameras is indifferent and unemotional, like a visual vivisection. Both luring and repulsive at once?

anna jermolaewa One of the principles in my work is to keep every personal flourish that can be read as a trace of the authentic to a minimum whenever possible. What complicated matters in the case of *Five Year Plan* was that it was strictly forbidden to film or photograph in the subway stations in Russia because they were considered military zones – I remember, for example, there was an A-bomb air raid drill at my school and we all had to run to the closest subway station. I was forced, therefore, to use a concealed camera – a camera in my shopping bag with a peephole cut into it. That would explain the indifferent, unemotional impression.

gerald matt Is *Five Year Plan*, which is your only work that is explicitly situated in Russia, to any extent autobiographical?

anna jermolaewa It is indeed a very autobiographical work. Especially since it was my very first video (1996). As a child I had to take the subway to school every day and I have always been absolutely fascinated by escalators. You could stare at the other people without having to worry about ever seeing them again. The station I got out at was the lowest station in the city – it took almost eight minutes to ride up or down – so I had more than enough time every day to enjoy my favorite pastime. I guess it makes sense that my very first video work was the escalator video.

gerald matt You yourself chose *Big Sister* to be the main title of the exhibition and book. Is this the female counterpart to George Orwell’s “*Big Brother*”? Are you making reference to the questionability of the gender-orientation (male) of this term, which is used as a synonym for our monitoring society?

anna jermolaewa For us in the Soviet Union, Orwell’s 1984 was a very important book back then. We would refer to it constantly and in many senses we could relate to the circumstances in the book. Yes, absolutely, I consciously chose the title *Big Sister* as a female counterpart to *Big Brother* in order to pose exactly your question to visitors. I do not, however, believe that power is perceived as a female attribute.

gerald matt In a society in which the media and public observation bodies of the private sector – like *Big Brother* – and pseudo-democratic constellations – like *Taxi Orange* – are becoming ever more prevalent, the individual seems to be reduced to a role that only permits individuality in a thin outer skin of self-representation. In your works, too, the subject becomes entirely secondary, your video protagonists, toys and dolls, are, by virtue of the production method, figures that exist in the masses and in mass. Their movements are mechanical, and they are controlled and manipulated by an exterior force, in this case by you. Anna Jermolaewa as a *déesse cachée*?

anna jermolaewa Big Brother may be the most well-known representative of this new genre, which first supplanted the talk show, then the game show, and which as a kind of “reality soap” that combines game show elements and reality TV has propagated itself, giving rise to “twin brothers” in many different countries.

The rules of the game force candidates – who live in constant fear of being eliminated – to ingratiate themselves not only with the other contestants but with their television audience as well, and these conditions increase the Orwellian vision of a total surveillance state even more because the surveillance mechanisms are replaced by more subtle models.

The most recent cinematic illustration of this, which I saw not too long ago at the Vienna Filmmuseum, is *Battle Royale* by the Japanese director Kinji Fukasaku. He even outdoes Takeshi Kitano, who incidentally plays a role in *Battle Royale*, in both sheer violence and Takashi Miike. Every year a lottery drawing is held to choose the school class that will be exiled to an island where for three days it must compete in a game with live media coverage. The rules are simple: it's every man for himself and the object is to kill the other contestants until just one winner survives. If more than one player is still left at the end of the game, their collars – each contestant has an identification collar – will be detonated. I sat there shocked while I watched this movie because it reminded me of my own work called (3 Min) *Trying To Survive*.

gerald matt Manipulation, inflexibility, and loss of self-determination, individual dis-orientation in a society that is becoming ever more convoluted, complex, and confusing, these are aspects that determine today's discussion about the relation between the individual and the modern world. To what extent do you hold our media society accountable for bringing forth subjects that are practically devoid of all subjectivity? What stance do you take as an artist between the poles of observation and change?

anna jermolaewa I believe that art is by all means capable of producing societal changes. Tatlin, for example, was convinced that the work of his group of artists had “led to the Russian revolution.” In much the same way, I hope my artistic work will also effect changes.

gerald matt Dolls, animals, chickens, toys, male organs, are often the figures in your video films. Their characters remain schematic, their movements mechanical and repetitive. They do not reveal what makes them unique. To what extent do you tie in with the tradition of the manichino found in artists from Giorgio de Chirico to George Grosz?

anna jermolaewa “Manichini,” those blind, silent, and hollow dolls found in De Chirico's work, immersed in themselves – no, that romantic-mythological, metaphysical camp (he's considered one of the pioneers of Surrealism) is completely foreign to me. When I need dolls, I go to my daughter's toy chest.

gerald matt In your video *Motherhood* you show a handful of puppies trying desperately to suck at their mother's teats. The mother dog, however, is more interested in being pet by a human hand. The person doing the petting, is seated at a table out of view and anonymous. Superimposed on this scene is an acoustically incoherent conversation. As in some of your other works you toy with the notion of presence and absence, of invisibility and visibility. The decisive elements seem to take place outside the viewer's field of vision. The relationships between the figures remain vague, the situation unclear. Martin Prinzhorn speaks of a “looking beyond at the whole” (EIKON 32). Do you believe that the complexity of life can only be discerned via fragmented – and thus non-ideological – means?

anna jermolaewa I'd rather not comment on this question.

gerald matt Then let's change the subject. In the video *On/Off* we see an erect penis turning a light switch on and off. Besides its characteristic monotony this video also reveals an equally characteristic feature of your work: the miniature narration. Paulo Herkenhoff was reminded here of an anecdote about Sigmund Freud: “While she (Martha Freud) nursed Freud's offspring like young puppies, her husband insisted that the light switch only be turned on and off with an erect penis. It's as if the Freuds were acting out Anna Jermolaewa's video.” What role does Sigmund Freud or sexual psychology, in fact, play in your work?

anna jermolaewa In reaction to my work people sometimes mention “penis envy.” Of course, Freud does play a role in my work. However, what I find disturbing about him – like many other feminists – is that he tends to regard the woman as an incomplete man, a castrated male. That's quite a sexist attitude.

In this sense, I would say I have been much more influenced by what I know by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

gerald matt The viewer of your work is confronted with a rigid frame that strictly delimits what happens within. The action itself is spartan. There is hardly any narration, or if there is, the narrative is anecdotal. Your video scenarios are not elaborately designed. The reasons for the action are not revealed. The world is confined in the rigid frame of the camera. Do you focus in your films on images of confinement, reduction, and retreat as a reaction to a certain societal form?

anna jermolaewa You're right, my work is very laconic, I'm not interested in extreme scenarios and elaborate productions, most of the time the production costs for my projects are next to nothing.

Slavoj Žižek addresses the subject of Bond movies in *The Fright of Real Tears* and poses the brilliant question: what actually happens between the idyllic happy ending of the movie – after

the mission has been accomplished and we come to the sexual act – and the beginning of the new movie – where Miss Money Penny calls with the new assignment? According to Žižek, this lapse would be “the ultimate postmodern Bond movie,” “a kind of boring existential drama about decay.” And it is precisely this that fascinates me: the trivial, quotidian, commonplace, un-spectacular, an occurrence that might take place in someone’s kitchen or at any given hotdog stand, but which by virtue of being fragmentary suddenly becomes strange and surreal.

gerald matt In the video *Shooting the viewer* you see you at a shooting gallery firing with live ammunition. Your bullet hits and destroys the camera as it films you. What follows is a brief flickering of the image, which quickly goes blank, accompanied by a noisy roar. The artist destroys her medium; she disappears into her medium. In this first and to date last personal appearance before the camera, is the point you are making a discussion of the role of the artist in the art industry as well as his/her artistic practice, or are you continuing the self-destructive strategies of the feminist position of the 1970s?

anna jermolaewa As far as self-destructive strategies go, I’d say men have contributed their share. Consider John Fare, who held clandestine sessions during which he had parts of himself amputated, including, finally, his head; or the Japanese artist in the seventies who announced his art event that he called *Life* and then he jumped from a skyscraper, splattering himself on the sidewalk in front of the eyes of the audience that had turned out to see him. In the light of these works, I think we can safely consider this chapter closed.

For my part, I am much more interested in questions like “me and the public” and “me and the art industry.”

gerald matt Chris Burden let people fire at him. You shoot at the image of yourself captured by your camera. The artist as “exemplary sufferer” – now and with you: in the age of media society?

anna jermolaewa You mean this shamanic attitude people attribute to an artist, e.g. Joseph Beuys? No, I’m not interested in that. Maybe I do hurt myself in that I destroy the instruments I’ve grown attached to, that have become almost a part of me and that I have used to make all my video works up until this point, but I do it for me.

gerald matt Your three-part series of drawings *3 Monkeys* whose protagonists, upon closer inspection, turn out to be hand puppets, shows marked expressiveness in the monkeys’ faces. The progression of intensity starts with the bashful smile of the first monkey and ends with uproarious laughter in the third monkey. *3 Monkeys* series seems uncharacteristic compared to your other work, not only in terms of the chosen media, i.e. as drawings, but they are your only works that reveal this kind of strong emotionality, something that might even be interpreted as a caricature. Do *3 Monkeys* represent a further perspective of your work, or how would you classify these drawings in respect to your work up until now? Or let me reword my question by focusing explicitly on the choice of medium. With only a few exceptions, all your art consists of video works. Your photography utilizes almost exclusively frames (or stills) from your videos. What advantages or disadvantages does this media restriction have? Do you juxtapose the moving picture (video) with the still in order to address the dichotomy of this restriction and the potential of these two disparate media in respect to your work?

anna jermolaewa I graduated from art school in St. Petersburg, where you were expected to work according to strict academic principles. After my arrival in Vienna, I continued to paint, but then there came a moment, when these huge canvases pervaded with work character that took up so much space in the apartment began to bother me. I wanted to make a clear and radical break, so I cut all my paintings up into small, uniform-sized, puzzle-like pieces that you could toss in the corner in a pile that hardly took up any space and assemble however you pleased. That was an important step for me back then. It was the year I entered the Academy. Peter Kogler told me John Baldessari had already done the same thing, only even more radically: he had burned all his work around 1970.

Many years later I began to paint and draw again, applying the skills I’d acquired earlier but with a conceptual approach.

As for the medium I choose to work with, I move freely among various media, depending on what I am trying to achieve. The medium itself is never the subject with me. I reject media specificity as a significant value. For me McLuhan’s slogan “the medium is the message” is no longer valid today.

gerald matt In your exhibition *Big Sister / The Five Year Plan* you not only show your own work, but also films that are connected in some way to your work. For example there’s Dziga Vertov, who tried to show the dream of invisibility of the camera’s point of view in his films (“the surprise shot – the old combat rule of thumb: wait for the whites of their eyes, don’t hesitate, fire”). Do you also see yourself as a discreet voyeur? This calls to mind the film *Peeping Tom* with Karl-Heinz Böhm, where the camera becomes an instrument of murder and the object of observation becomes the victim. How would you position your work between Vertov’s warm, documentary view and Michael Powell’s cold enacted view?

anna jermolaewa You’re right, Vertov’s camera language and that of *Peeping Tom* – that’s about as diametrically opposed as you can get. Vertov’s invisible, voyeuristic camera (not to be confused with Hollywood’s “invisible camera”) and the physically present, aggressive, action-determining camera in Powell’s work – I’d say I’m equally interested in both.

Although I have done several “voyeuristic” works, I suppose I currently tend more towards Powell – I’m thinking specifically of my works Shooting, Crashtest, or Solo, in which I deal with the physical presence of the camera.

gerald matt In the exhibition you also show films by Gordon Matta-Clark, who makes the invisible perceptible through a perforation of the spatial boundaries. What role does the dialectic between visible and invisible play in your work?

anna jermolaewa In the seventies Denis Hollier asked, “Is prison the general term for every product of architecture? ... Is it possible to imagine an architecture that doesn’t, as with Bataille, induce socially sanctioned behavior?” (La Prise de la Concorde). Gordon Matta-Clark tried to demonstrate the hidden ideological seams in the fabric of political and social life, to bring to light another story. I would say, just as Gordon Matta-Clark was not only talking about architecture, my work with toys is not only about toys either.

gerald matt In connection with your exhibition you also present prize-winning Cannes Reel commercials. “Advertising is the sandbox in which we play-act the situations of real life,” is the message between the lines of the exhibition slogan: “Advertising is for everyone.” What interests you here? Is it the discrepancy between desires and reality that falls short of fulfillment, or is it the structure, the schema of a commercial that must convey its catchy message in a brief time span?

anna jermolaewa Advertising is something that has fascinated me for a long time. I have no qualms about learning from it, despite all the preconceived notions associated with advertising. Just sticking to Russian examples, I can name Wassily Kandinsky, who advertised for a Russian chocolate manufacturer or El Lissitzky who sold his face for the artist paint brand Pelikan. “Tokimeki” is the term used by the Japanese for the desired adrenaline rush that turns people into consumers.

On the other hand, advertising also uses knowledge gleaned from the field of psychology, namely that information conveyed through images is registered and processed much faster than via writing or language. Considering that today only 2% of all available information reaches its audience, sensual appeals are an effective means of getting your message through against the competition of the flood of information/images.

gerald matt William Wegman’s dog films thrive on the element of surprise in which the expectations of the viewer are disrupted. His works are full of irony and humor. You chose to show works by William Wegman in your exhibition. What role does irony play in your work?

anna jermolaewa What especially interests me about Wegman’s videos from the seventies is their undogmatic lightness and irony, particularly because he deals with serious subjects like the performing animal acts and domestication.

Irony is also very important to me. I consider a work to be well done if it addresses important issues without being dogmatic.

gerald matt You studied under Peter Kogler in the class for computer and video art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, graduating recently with honors. Were there dialogues with Peter Kogler or with his works that were meaningful to your own work?

anna jermolaewa I enrolled at the Academy after having studied art history at the University of Vienna for six years, and after all those years of being in an anonymous mass production line I was lucky to end up in a class that was like a surrogate family to me.

Moreover, with us, all media was created equal – there were people in my class working with music and performance, others with photography or video. This produced an interesting exchange within the class. There’ve been many conversations with Peter about my work and about his work and I’ve learned a great deal from him.

gerald matt Speaking of Five Year Plan– where do you see yourself in five years? What’s your plan for the future?

anna jermolaewa Five years from now? I’ll probably be on the escalator with a camera in my modified shopping bag.

in: Anna Jermolaewa Big Sister / The Five Year Plan, Ausst.Kat., Herausg. v. Gerald Matt f.d. Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Wien, 2002.