

Markús Thór Andrésson: You, FUTURE7, Florian, Nikolai, Emil, Johanna, Markús and Others

Analyzing what takes place in your mind when you see a work of art is almost impossible. It is just one of those automatic things. If you for instance attempt to dissect the process of reading while you are at it, the flow of thought is completely thwarted. Remember the joke about the EU's five-year plan for Euro-English? As the text describes the proposed changes in spelling, it gradually deteriorates and in the end "zer vil bi no mor trobl or difikultis and evrivun vil find it ezi tu undrstand ech oza." FUTURE7 make art a bit like that. It's confusing, but compelling at the same time.

Just like reading, we somehow learn how to look at art and then forget how it happened. At the Art Basel Miami a few years ago, there was a lady strolling around the booths with her little boy around five, hand in hand. They caught people's attention because every so often they would stop and she would point out a work, raising her eyebrow to the kid. Pointing to an aluminum box on the wall, he said loudly and clearly, "Judd!"; a stack of felt on the floor, "Beuys!"; an image of Marilyn Monroe, "Warhol!"; and the mother rewarded her boy with a warm smile. This was quite impressive for such a little guy, if somewhat bewildering. On the one hand, people might agree that there is a certain amount of visual data required to engage in the field of contemporary art, but on the other hand, that data is far from autonomous. It strikes you observing the five year old, who was associating a name with what he saw, a name incontrovertibly related to a person, to art history, to a discourse, to the market, to the institution . . . The poor kid hardly stands a chance to develop his own association to the works that he is registering. If it were only as straightforward as the art critic Jerry Saltz puts it, "Seeing as much art as you can is how you learn how to see."¹ Now, let's imagine the same little boy growing up, getting a degree as an art historian and taking on a position as an assistant curator in a German art museum. He comes across a work in the archives that he cannot account for. A medium-size collage composed of a photographic image, displaying a construction site, on top of which different color paper squares are systematically arranged. "What is this?" our guy asks the intern, who browses through the index and answers, "It's a work from 2008, entitled *Register (Seite 1)* by FUTURE7, an artist collective composed of two artists, Nikolai von Rosen and Florian Wojnar from an exhibition called 'Emil Johanna' named after their great-grandparents, and the work is actually based on the work of another artist, who we don't know, there might be as many as seven possibilities; it says in the exhibition hand-out that he or she might be a dancer, no, the work is a dancer...er...it's some kind of a portrait." We leave our confused protagonist, as his mind drifts back to the good old days with his mother in Miami.

When it comes to FUTURE7, it is far from clear that what they exhibit is plainly a work that they made. Their practice upsets the established procedures of the art world, such as the creation, presentation, consumption and interpretation of art. Most prominently, they do this by operating from different positions within the art system; their practice extends to that of the artist, the curator, and the collector. With the publication of this book they add yet another

position to the list. All roles are surprisingly equal, whereas one might expect the role of "the artist" to take the lead and the other projects to be on the side. On the contrary, conducting each of the other roles is inherent to their consolidated identity. By doing so they analyze and contest such conventions as the self-anointed artist who stands aloof from society; the autonomous works that the artist delivers into the world; the entrepreneurial spirit of the privileged collector; the unique insight of the connoisseur and so on and so forth. Their flexible practice is also reflected in their studio that serves both as private and public space, a multifaceted site of the production, study, and display of their own work and that of others. In a minuscule manner, FUTURE7 imitates the art world at large and opens it up to questions that tend to fall between the cracks. Ultimately their practice attempts to tease out "The Question" of art, without raising it in so many words. However, in the process of aspiring to do so, there may be a standard of measurement for their work.

Before delving into the work of FUTURE7, it might be worthwhile to bring to the table the writing of the artist Adrian Piper. In a text called "Two Kinds of Discrimination" she proposes interesting ideas on looking at art and defines them as either "cognitive" or "political".² Describing "cognitive discrimination" she explains it as "a manifest capacity to distinguish veridically between one property and another, and to respond appropriately to each." This would be the viewer's ability to appreciate the particular intrinsic qualities of an artwork and to evaluate it on the basis of an intimate familiarity with its singularity. The opposite, "political discrimination", depends in Piper's theory on a failure of the former kind, when instead of focusing on the actual properties of a work, the viewer grasps at some irrelevant, external factors. These might be general norms or familiar ideologies, such as when people are judged based on their race, gender or religion. Piper encourages viewers to discriminate cognitively between what they see and what they are, emphasizing their authority and their potential gain:

In this sense, contemporary art is a paradigmatic experience of cognitive anomaly. It offers one the opportunity to reorganize the conceptual structure of the self in order to accommodate it, and to test and develop one's capacity for cognitive discrimination in order to grasp it . . . Contemporary artists who are serious about art take seriously the responsibility to question and extend the limits of knowledge by offering anomalous objects, innovative in form, content, or both, as an antidote to provincial and conventional habits of thought.³

Entering the exhibition space, Projektraum Ackerstraße 18 in Berlin, where FUTURE7's *Emil Johanna* was on display in 2008, you were initially faced with a screen in the middle of the rather small space that functioned like a room divider. It was a part of one of the three elements that made up the exhibition, two on each end walls and this piece in the middle. It was a wooden stretcher reaching from floor to ceiling with some space to each side and stretched on it was a light, patterned cloth. With the fabric stretched like a painting, there was a clear notion of a front and a back, and as the gridded backside faced the

door, you got the feeling of entering the space backstage. The gesture gave way for a subtle notion of performance or theatre. Drawn into the space to arrive at the front of the screen, you saw two sculptures on the floor, two solidified cement bags. They were positioned in front of the screen, the gray mass is fitting in modestly with the muted olive green of the abstract pattern behind them. One bag stood upright and the other lay crumbled in an anthropomorphic position, like actors in a tableau vivant. A veritable centerpiece, the installation bore the title of the exhibition, *Emil Johanna*, and automatically each of the two lumps took on one of the names.

Facing the "stage", on the far end wall, was what appeared to be a wall drawing of dance instructions, consisting of rolling arrows and the four playing card symbols, hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs. Closer inspection revealed that the drawing had been carved into the wall, through the white paint, revealing the grey plaster underneath and thus materially echoing "Emil" and "Johanna", lying on the floor. The drawing was entitled *Française (#13)*, no doubt a reference to an old contradance in which several couples partake in a coordinated routine. On the opposite wall, behind the stage and next to the doorway, three shelves supported seven collages that all together were entitled *Register*. Each in the same shape and size, they were symmetrically arranged, two on the top, three in the middle and two on the bottom, covering the wall almost entirely. They were quite different from each other, consisting of photographic images, drawings, photocopies and found objects, assembled in seven separate works. One consisted of twenty small drawings, another of idyllic postcards mounted on a map, yet another of a poster and a vinyl album.

FUTURE7 elaborated on their ideas and work process in a text that accompanied the exhibition, revealing interesting facts that help shed light on the works. They explained how each of the seven collages was based on their relationship to works that they had previously acquired by seven different artists. Emphasizing appropriation (rather than inspiration), they call attention to the conscious process of materializing in a creative way (rather than illustrating) their experience of and relationship with another artist's work. The result was a series of new works; seven portraits of an analysis. Nowhere in the exhibition was the identity of the artists or works that were subject to this analysis accessible to the viewer, only the final product. The text additionally introduced FUTURE7's fascination with dance and how they see it as a metaphor for an evolving portrayal of interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, the mysterious title of the center installation and the exhibition as a whole was put into words; an arbitrary pairing of names from the family trees of the two artists.

The three projects in the exhibition, *Emil Johanna*, *Française (#13)*, and *Register*, share corresponding features, regardless of their diverse formal and conceptual means. In this regard the enterprise gave an impression of a curated display of works by different artists. The common thread between them was a notion of the constitution of something new by way of play among pre-existing elements – elementary in the collaboration of two artists working as a third identity. Already in early works by FUTURE7, from the turn of the

millennium, this became a recurrent theme. The series *Cuttings* (1999–2001) was made up of two different photographs that were cut into strips and then reassembled as a single image. What started as a relatively didactic illustration of synergy has, over the course of numerous projects, taken on a complex, yet very playful research into the creative process through the appropriation of positions and functions rather than of objects and images. Such rudimentary questions as what an artist provides and what people want from art are at the heart of many works. In *Emil Johanna* the game is elaborate, as a multitude of identities is introduced. In spite of the attempt to pin things down in time and space, by carving instructions into the gallery walls and schlepping cement boulders into the middle of the floor, FUTURE7 surrenders to the fact that something new is born with every visitor to the exhibition. Just as they have created new images out of the analysis of works by others, that process continues for each person entering the space. Perhaps this notion lurks in the performative undertone of the exhibition, the stage setting, the dance and the portraits. However, the theatrical quality does not pacify the viewer, on the contrary. The role of the viewer is manifested in the way that the work of art is presented as a mask, and the reality of it, its subjectivity, or its identity is at the mercy of who is looking. In a sense the viewer is encouraged to perform the works, render them new. FUTURE7 provides certain incentive to kick-start the process, such as the dual strategy of identity and difference. Within the range of the seven identically sized images of *Register*, each is characterized by what it is not, by what the others contain. The identity of each work therefore relies on difference and more importantly, the viewer's process of identification. This is a kind of comparative phenomenology that leaves space for imagination. By revealing themselves as multitudes, the works invite the viewer to interpret them as such, making no claim for a monadic truth. The exhibition as a whole also evokes the compromising of absent and present identities; that of the viewers, the artist duo, and their alluded ancestors, the seven artists and the dancers. In what ways are the works capsules, representing the absent, and in what ways are they mirror devices, reflecting the present?

Collaborating with the illustrator Olaf Hajek, FUTURE7 have made a series of self-portraits, consisting of the faces of Nikolai von Rosen and Florian Wojnar joined in one. The title *Janus* (2007) refers to Roman mythology, the two-faced god who had the ability to see both forwards and backwards. It is an appropriate identity as in their projects FUTURE7 study what happens before a work of art is conceived, as well as what happens afterwards. In light of this "in-between", the unaccountable space amid an artist, an artwork, and a viewer, from where they seem to be operating, it might be useful to consider the notion of the fold. Instead of defining clear boundaries of separation between different elements or different roles, they are merely separated by the folding across lines. Introduced as a process that constitutes the basic unit of existence in the writing of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, folding stands for a differentiating process, while still maintaining continuity always folding, unfolding and refolding.⁴ The practice of FUTURE7 is entwined with this idea of becoming, while clinging to a mutual substance. Considering the reality of a work of art, they suggest that it is in essence a manifestation of the cultural

field as a whole. What happens between a collector and a work, a critic and a reader, an artist and a viewer? It is not so much something brand new that pops up, but rather a detection of something that is already implicated in the prevailing conditions. FUTURE7 scrutinizes the folds of the art-origami in search for a slit that might take them to unexpected territories. To a certain degree their work might be described as critically inbred but on more playful terms it suggests an intricate level of Chinese Whispers.

For FUTURE7, one of the key resources is the analysis of the creative process, both on the side of the producer and the receiver. Testing the extent to which they as artists could produce work hands-off, they employed certain kind of laissez-faireism in the making of *Invest* (2002) and *Landscape Game Memorial* (2003). Both projects involved the production of paintings based on data from the unpredictable financial market. Colors and forms represented graphs, showing the relation between variable quantities, without proposing any particular meaning. The viewer was thus motivated to decipher the paintings and make up their significance. Further elaborating on the creative authority involved in the reception of art, the project *Kollektor* (2004-2006) was a series of seven exhibitions that FUTURE7 organized with particular art collectors in mind. The names of each collector was part of the exhibition title – *Kollektor Stange*, *Kollektor Wessel*, etc. – but otherwise works from their collection, together with found objects and a distinct exhibition display, were used to portray them. FUTURE7 presented remarkably diverse images in the form of entire exhibitions, where the creative identities of artists, collectors and viewers resonated. From the point of curatorial practice, the project raises quintessential questions of the treatment of art. To what extent does one respect the context from where a work derives and reciprocally, in which a work may be displayed? The controversy of the issue is crystallized in the words of the curator Robert Storr, during a symposium on curatorship: "I have been responsible for having 'framed' or contextualized art in ways that subtly, albeit unintentionally, altered its meaning or diminished its impact."⁵ He treads carefully, as it is widely considered unprofessional for a curator to deviate from the reputed substance and integrity of an artwork. As Storr puts it, the profession is "a more or less sophisticated version of Show and Tell."⁶ Curators, who undertake overly creative ways in exhibition making, run the risk of being discredited for trying to be artists themselves. However, many are driven by the urge to develop ways of engaging viewers in the creative process of reinterpretation rather than passive reception, extending the scope of a work of art. As artists operating as curators, FUTURE7 find themselves interestingly in a zone where they will not be held accountable for curatorial protocol. This vantage point provides a chance to delve into an area of institutional critique that has been overlooked and puts the work of art to the test.

In the realm of institutional critique, artists have not only focused on undermining the alleged neutrality of established, organized sites for the presentation of art, such as museums and galleries. The artist Andrea Fraser claims to have coined the term, "institutional critique" early in her writing.⁷ Tracing the history of such practice, she argues that everyone and everything related to art is inescapably "the institution" and that it is impossible to

practice outside of it. Artists who attempt to position themselves outside by ignoring art establishments or by claiming creative freedom merely end up expanding the institution of art. FUTURE7 accept to occupy a position of authority and maintain their practice methodically within established and well-known procedures, with the exception mentioned before, of playing the leading roles themselves. Their paths cross those of artists like Louise Lawler, who is known for her photographs of artworks by other artists in museums or private collections. In her research into the value of authorship and ownership of art, she emphasizes how a situation is always a part of the production of a work, long after the artist has let go of it. This is a radically different view from critical methodologies such as phenomenological analyses, reading a work based on its physical qualities, or psychoanalytical review, considering biographical facts of the artist. Perhaps it could be considered in the light of the procedures of secret intelligence, insinuating oneself into multiple positions and sustaining different identities. In a similar way, FUTURE7 does not attempt to interpret works of art, mistrusting in a poststructural manner the notion that there is such a thing as content in an artwork. This position is essentially quite critical towards the art object, though they certainly do not denounce it. The sheer love for materials and craftsmanship embedded in their projects immediately gives away their appreciation for the object. However, when you as a viewer approach a work by FUTURE7, you are not likely to identify it as such. In any case, not like the five-year-old kid who can spot a "Koons" a mile off. Some parts of the work may seem familiar and others not, and recognition will undeniably affect your perception. You will be submitted to a polyphony of associations, nostalgia, indeterminacies and cluelessness. By then – particularly if you end up acquiring the work – you should be warned that you have become the subject of FUTURE7.

¹ Jerry Saltz, "Seeing Outloud," *Artnet Magazine* (December 25, 2005)

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz12-20-05.asp>.

² Adrian Piper, "Two Kinds of Discrimination," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 215.

³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque" (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁵ Robert Storr, "How We Do What We Do. And How We Don't," in *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2001).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44.1 (September 2005), 278–283.