

An interview with curator Anthea Buys from Hordaland Art Centre in Bergen, Norway



Loore Sundja and Else Lagerspetz
26/09/2017

Image Drain **Tallinn Art Hall and Museum of Photography** Through October 8, 2017

Image Drain is an exhibition of photography-related artworks whose reasons for being brought together are buried in a fiction about fixation, speculation and obsessive looking. The exhibition uses the notion of the photographic as an approach to the visual, rather than photography as a medium limited by certain technical specifications. In this understanding, a photograph is how one approaches the world in order to make sense of it, and therefore photography does not have to be limited to the production of traditional photographs.



View to “Distorted hands”, Kristina Õllek, 2017.

When the Photomonth biennial invited Anthea Buys to do an exhibition, she started looking for a way to avoid a classic thematic group show. “I have developed a very strong dislike of these kinds of exhibitions, where the curator comes out with some idea like ‘Oh, I’m going to make a show about migration or the refugee crises or learning from Athens,’ or whatever – where the works in the show are just serving the theme,” she says. Buys tried to come up with a show without a very strong curatorial authorship or a strong pedagogical tone, a show without a curatorial text which tells the visitor what the exhibition is all about.

Buys has been thinking a lot about the relationships between fiction and reality, art and reality, and the relation of art to fiction. “I think art and literary fiction share a similar relationship to reality,” she says. The French philosopher François Laruelle has a term called ‘art-fiction’. This is a very crude paraphrase, but he has this idea that fiction is not necessarily literary fiction, but it can be anything that doubles or clones reality. So, a photograph is a fiction, or when you just describe what’s outside, it’s a fiction, and even when you look outside, it’s a fiction, because your eyes are essentially giving you the same information that a photograph would. So, even our experiences are fiction in that sense.” Buys became interested in this expanded concept of fiction and started looking for a way to make an exhibition into fiction. “What if we just let go of the idea that an exhibition has to reflect anything about art, or our current situation or anything like that. What if we just allow this to be a realm of fiction?”

Buys says there really isn’t a relationship between the artworks shown in *Image Drain* and the story she presents. “Something that became clear to me as the artworks became more thoroughly developed was that some of these artworks have quite strong narrative elements and it felt like the story I made up was crowding them. So, I haven’t made the relationship between the artworks and the story explicit. They’re all such different works – some are just sound, some are text, and so as a set of examples, they don’t actually tell you anything. In a way, the one part where I do try to make the connection between the story and the exhibition clear is precisely where the relationship just doesn’t fit. It’s like trying to put together two pieces of a puzzle that aren’t the right pieces for each

other. I deliberately wanted it to be that way, so that the viewer could decide how much they want to believe in the story.” This is also why the fiction exists in several different texts – there is a prologue in the guide book, there’s an exhibition wall text, and there’s an interview with Nadezhda Mandelstam in the Estonian cultural monthly newspaper *Müürileht*. Therefore, there will be people coming to the exhibition who haven’t read the story, and people who will have read the story and who will be looking for clues to that story in the exhibition. “I wanted to create a situation where you could decide how much fiction you want to take with you into the exhibition,” Buys says.

“At a very practical level, I decided to invite these artists because I feel like a lot of them are thinking about images and concepts in similar ways as I do. We are 14 people, 13 artists and I, who are thinking roughly in the same corner of the room. There are similar thoughts and questions going around, and I was sure something interesting will come out of putting these people together.”

There is a chance some people will interpret the artworks in the exhibition as illustrations to the story of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, but giving that impression is something Buys wanted to avoid. “This is exactly my problem with that kind of curated group show – you have the curator pronouncing the truth of the world, and then the artworks are supposed to support that. With the fiction, of course you run into the same problem. But here, you don’t have enough information in that fiction to make the direct connection between artworks and the story.” Buys admits there are little sparks of commonality between the artworks. “But it’s not supposed to be a pedagogical moment, it’s almost like – the Anthea Buys and the Anthea Buys, or the Nadezhda and the Nadezhda. It’s a kind of coincidence, and it’s up to you whether you make some meaning out of it or not.”

Buys agrees that artist fiction has gained a lot of popularity in the last few years. “There are a lot of curators writing fiction and artists writing fiction, and it’s almost an area where the curator, the critic and the artist can have some kind of overlap in what they produce. It’s an area where these different roles aren’t distinguished in the conventional way, where you have the object, the curator organizing the object, and the critic reflecting on it.” At the same time, Buys is critical of the widespread assumption that fiction is text, and that artist fiction usually means an artist writing a novel. “This collapsing of the fiction and the novel is maybe an unfortunate habit that the art world has inherited from the world of literature. I really think that an artwork is an artist’s fiction. And an exhibition can be an artist’s fiction. I find it strange and a bit dull that the whole genre of artist fiction is fairly limited to text, that the medium of fiction hasn’t been interrogated to the extent that, let’s say, the mediums of painting or photography have – or any other medium, really.” Buys believes this has something to do with nostalgia and a romanticized idea of an artist writing a novel. “That idea is completely at odds with the way our attention spans work, or, in fact, the way we work nowadays.” All in all, Buys finds our time to be an interesting one to be thinking about fiction. “I just think that we have to jump off from text and think about how fiction can be manifested in other ways as well.”

The 4th edition of the Tallinn Photomonth contemporary art biennial runs for two months, from September to October 29 in various spaces throughout Tallinn. This year it has also made an extension into the border-town of Narva.

The full version of this interview has been published in the quarterly magazine of art and visual culture in Estonia, *KUNST.EE* (3/2017).

www.fotokuu.ee

www.kunstihoone.ee