

Press : *The Joy of Adventure : on the work of VanessaSafavi,*
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THE JOY OF ADVENTURE: ON THE WORK OF VANESSA SAFAVI

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The two academics Michel Espagne and Michael Werner first coined the expression 'cultural transfer' (in a cultural history context) in the mid-1980s, in an essay entitled 'Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert' [1] or 'German-French cultural transfer in the 18th and the 19th century', thereby opening up a new field of study. Taking the German-French relationship as their reference point, Espagne and Werner investigated the relationship between the two cultures. In their detailed description of the dynamic of the cultural elements exchange process, which was based on a number of different sociological, historical and empirical studies, they elucidated the term 'cultural transfer'. They came to the conclusion that culture can no longer be seen as an enduring, fixed fact of our existence. This changes the concept of collective identity: society becomes a dynamic network of different influences and identities. A society's culture is no longer a firmly fixed phenomenon, but a changeable one that is influenced by other cultures.

Tourism is both the largest economic sector and the largest employment provider in our world today. It is a part of economic globalisation and makes a significant contribution to cultural exchange. People travel in order to discover other cultures, to experience different traditions and to escape from everyday life – from their own everyday life, that is. Vanessa Safavi (Lausanne, 1980) would describe herself as a tourist. Her interest in foreign lands, however, goes a great deal further than that of someone who simply travels in order to discover other cultures – she uses these other cultures as raw material, analysing them and incorporating them into her work. The Iranian-Swiss artist's oeuvre ranges from simple installations to complex multi-part sculptural groups. Safavi makes tourism the theme of her artistic praxis – and also criticises it. For her, tourism develops out of cultural transfer: it is a cultural transfer phenomenon. Her installation 'Plenty of None' at the Galerie Chert in 2010 connects with symbolic representations of leisure time, holiday and tourism. The floor is completely covered in fine, white sand, immediately evoking associations with seaside holidays. These days, countless bar businesses use this space design – which is, in point of fact, extremely simple – to attract customers, with a certain inevitability. So-called beach bars trade on the illusion of exotic beaches and sell exotic drinks, to the accompaniment of southern music. As a result, there are many places in European cities that give a precise picture of the expectations of tourists travelling to southern countries. Safavi, however, presents us with far more: for instance, her installations include forgotten-looking clothes – fully or partially visible. In a very simple way, she shows what remains once the tourists have left: the rubbish and flotsam of a western society. It is a fact that tourism is a 'movement'

that originates primarily in the western countries, and, as a consequence, countries with their own, very well established traditions adapt their culture to tourism – one might say that they want to [or, indeed, are forced to] fulfil tourists' expectations. The reasons for this are the same as those that exist in our own latitudes; the sector's financial potential. And because travellers from western countries have their own expectations of what 'exotic' countries are like, certain traditions only survive because they are part of an entertainment industry for holidaymakers. Development geared to tourists' desire for experiences results in monocultures, eliminating any form of cultural diversity. This is all wrong, and runs contrary to what travelling used to be – an adventure. In her notes, the American artist Agnes Martin identified the essential component of adventure as an agitating sense of the unknown: 'The essential feature of adventure is that it is a going forward into unknown territory. The joy of adventure is unaccountable. This is the attractiveness of artwork. It is adventurous, strenuous and joyful.' (2) We are not surprised to learn that Safavi is an admirer of Martin and that there is a certain correspondence between the artworks of the two artists.

Cultural diversity is a part of Vanessa Safavi's own character. Her life story explains her interest in the subject, and also illustrates the associated problems. The artist possesses multiple citizenships: Swiss, Iranian and French. This profile may sound international, but, when one thinks of the individual cultures connected with each of these nations or states, it brings with it certain problems that have a great deal to do with cultural identity – especially for a young person – because the western cultures are, of course, irreconcilably different to the Persian culture. The cultural differences that confronted Safavi even as a young girl (added to by the fact that her family often changed location) account for her interest in exploring the world, in travelling and in engaging with cultural and individual identities in equal measure.

In her exhibition 'Resorts' at Kunsthhaus Glarus (2011), Safavi exhibited an artwork entitled 'Les Figures Autonomes', which shows a sculptural group whose range of forms is reminiscent of Formalism. These slender metal sculptures are abstract and yet highly singular and individual imitations of bodies. Each of them symbolises an entirely autonomous character, and they appear to exist individually and independently of each other. At the same time, their 'expressionlessness' suggests alienated individuals. Painted in different colours and composed of a variety of geometrical forms, they present both similarities and differences. This is an artwork that describes a multicultural society in which different cultures exist alongside one another in a seemingly natural way, where coexistence appears to produce no conflicts. Safavi's installation on the rear wall of the Kunsthalle Basel, 'After the Monument Comes the People' (2012), is similar. Again, the emphasis is on people, who are the building blocks for a society which, in this case, formulates its own goals. The language of shapes used for the Kunsthalle Basel artwork – slender forms that put one in mind of individuals – is reminiscent of 'Les Figures Autonomes'. Right-angled steel frames, sometimes accompanied by a partially broken brass ring, are arranged in rows, and yet are made arresting by their seeming individuality.

In her exhibition 'I wish Blue would be Water', which took place in the summer of 2012 at the Centre Rhénan d'Art Contemporain in Alsace (France), Vanessa Safavi exhibited a series of new artworks that were based on her established interest in "the exotic", but which took it in new directions. 'Each Colour is a Gift For You', a 17-part work, consists of stuffed budgerigars, located along the skirting board in one of the exhibition rooms. The birds are clearly dead, and appear to have been discarded, as if they had simply been forgotten. As an artwork, they have a definite presence, but

as animals, they are inactive and, in a certain way, very sad to look at. What they symbolize is merely the idea of an exotic animal; they are also a reference to our relationship with nature. Here, we see the artist taking her interaction with the exotic and our relationship with it a step further by showing, in a very critical way, how the western world's notions of exotic lands are expressed. Our enthusiasm for foreignness appears as an illusion – in spite of all our enthusiasm for foreignness, we impose certain expectations on it. Exotic birds symbolise foreignness and are a part of what one is in search of when one travels. 'Each Colour is a Gift For You', however, shows foreignness as a remnant, as a forgotten material, making it far more realistic than the exotic utopia celebrated in advertising and marketing.

Another artwork by Safavi – 'Vital Energy and Relaxed Beings' (2012) – is a display of colourful monochromes manufactured from silicon and conserved under Plexiglas domes. Her use of these chemically manufactured materials for this artwork is practical - for her, however, they also evoke a far greater degree of connection with nature in terms of their appearance. Silicones, rubber coatings and transparent construction materials appear to fascinate the artist. The title 'Vital Energy and Relaxed Beings' refers to overrated beauty and health products which are supposed to impart a better, smoother and more beautiful skin along with eternal youth. The products in which Safavi is interested are often sold in similar transparent packaging, and in this artwork Safavi makes use of this standard presentation form and adapts it for her own purposes. This artwork is another reference to a utopia that does not deliver – that of eternal youth. In this case, her artwork becomes a product intended to satisfy the consumer's expectations. It is intended to do justice to a desire that has nothing to do with naturalness – however much the quality of naturalness is touted.

The exhibition in Alsace brings together several of her artworks, and raises themes already touched on in previous exhibitions in Berlin, Glarus and Basel. It is particularly interesting to see how the rigour inherent in Safavi's working method – a thread that runs through her oeuvre – is revealed in this exhibition. What makes the exhibition arresting is its carefully considered choice of materials and its highly individual language of shapes. The overriding impression, however, is of Safavi's genuinely convincing interest in people as part of a society and culture and of her thoughts on people and cultures, which relate both to political and to popular themes. Safavi's actual physical creations and artistic works, which are based on a very conceptual approach, represent only a small part of her complex and very far-reaching body of thought on the exotic, on tourism and on a society's culture. We are reminded of how Agnes Martin once summed up the nature of the imbalance inherent in artistic praxis in her notes: 'Art work has only a tinting of what it attempts to represent to the artist and to responsive observers. It is not beneficial, nothing is gained from it, and it does not tell the truth. It is enjoyed or not according to the condition of the observer. A very small gesture of exultation.' (3) Vanessa Safavi suggests lines of thought to viewer that serve to make them think, in their own wholly personal way, about the theme of cultural transfer and to reflect on their own behaviour as tourists. If it does not come to a real critical re-examining of this theme soon, more and more indigenous cultures and traditions that do not conform to the notions and expectations of mass tourism will vanish.

Translated from German by Michael Robinson

NOTES

- [1] Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, 'Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert – Zu einem neuen interdisziplinären Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.', 'Francia 13', 1985.
 [2] Agnes Martin and Dieter Schwarz [ed.], 'Writings/Schriften', Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2005.
 [3] Ibid.

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Vital Energy and Relaxed Being, 2012
 Silicone, variable dimensions.
 Installation view, 'I Wish Blue could be Water', CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin.
 or
 Installation view, Artissima, Turin, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Chert, Berlin.