

## Shifting Lines

*“ We must invent and construct that which we could be in order to shake off this kind of political ‘double bind’ that exists in the simultaneous individualisation and totalisation within modern power structures... We must bring about new forms of subjectivity by rejecting the kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for centuries.”<sup>1</sup>*

In her 36-part work with the ambiguous title, ‘off the revolution’, Adidal Abou-Chamat continues her confrontation with the revolutionary icons of the second half of the 20th century that she began in her installation, ‘Ché, no more heroes’, the films, ‘Dear Ché’ and ‘Dear Leila’, as well as the photo series, ‘Revolutionary icons, exhausted selves’.

In that 10-part series skin became the tragic carrier of deceived and unfulfilled expectations. The flacid strips of pig skin with stylised portraits of revolutionary idols burnt into them, were used by Adidal Abou-Chamat to question the redemption of their combative utopias. That she worked with the pyrographic technique and a naive presentation owing to the use of flesh as a material, points to the ghostly existence that these former icons scrape by with in a philistine parallel world. Thus the figure of Ché Guevara is today more associated with a very idiosyncratic notion of freedom and rebellion and no longer with the political ideas for which he fought. What remains in this meaningless revival is the profiting from an icon as an image in a well-functioning devotional commerce. The portraits of a revolutionary idea, however valued, become consumer-friendly graven images. She sets this new idolatry, this idolised charging of an actually hollow idol, against an almost nonchalant iconoclasm with the corresponding video; there she laid bare the person of Ché Guevara by showing that egalitarian ideas went hand in hand with a sexist portrayal of women.

‘Off the revolution’ now extends her deconstructive analysis of revolutionary claims and their fulfillment in an initially almost bewildering mesh of associative images. Aspects of structural and physical violence combine with questions of economic and normative exercise of power, with the construction of personality and the attribution of ‘standardised’ identity. How these societal, ethnic or social codes function, how they go hand in hand with medial representation stands at the centre of her artistic exploration.

Here, the form of pictorial implementation is striking. Like a ‘cloud’ of images in which there is neither hierarchy nor centre, the image carriers, different sizes of aluminium plates, float in front of the wall. The pencil and felt pen drawings placed on them are either drawn directly onto the metal or on cloth, wax, transparent film or tracing paper. They are combined and collaged with acrylic and oil paint, with leather or hair, with photographs and text excerpts. Above and alongside are often handwritten comments, explanations, and notes that give the final work a diary character which appears associative and situative and no longer chronologically reconstructable. This impression is strengthened by the consciously direct, sometimes almost amateurish execution of the drawings, as if they were fast copies, tracings or transcripts from different media such as newspapers, magazines, books or the internet.

Actually, some images quickly become accessible to a western cultural view, such as the film still from ‘Breakfast with Tiffany’ that established Audrey Hepburn as an icon of female style, or the presentation of the German RAF members, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, the revolutionary, Malcolm X, and Angela Davies, Leila Khaled’s assassin. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault *Das Subjekt und die Macht*, in: Dreyfus, Hubert L./ Rabinow Paul,; *Michel Foucault. Jenseits von Strukturalismus und Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 250.

quotes from earlier works and are now overwritten by an associative web of texts and images. The result is an often translucent palimpsest that brings different text and image fragments together in new, unexpected contexts, shifts their meaning and questions their clarity. Certainties are hidden and the 'uncanny' is given space. Concealments, covering ups, maskings, as balaclava or veil, as burka or mouth guard, alienate and confuse orientation. The material reality that they originally referred to dissolves gradually in favour of the imagination, a psychic reality in the form of our fears and desires imperceptibly imbibed from our cultural norm, nourished by our social, societal and ethnic codes.

It is the stranger, the Other that is manifested here as such - and it is also the stranger in us that we perceive in this Other. "The stranger is in ourselves", says Julia Kristeva. "And when we flee from or fight the stranger, so we fight against our unconscious - this 'Unself' of our not possible 'Self'... To detect the strangeness in ourselves... is perhaps the only way not to pursue it externally."<sup>2</sup> The arrangement of the differently formatted individual elements, in particular, enable such a search for traces. The multiple faceting of the monumental wall installation reveals itself like the opening in a veil that keeps the contemplative subject back in himself - for a moment by himself. The separation of the image objects breaks the illusion of a great narrative in favour of a multiple of coherent but not exclusive narrations. The connections are varied, associative, surprising and enlightening.

Apparently drawings of violence and threat are to be found in many places - painful altercations with utopias of the 20th century revolutionaries, who fought worldwide for freedom from totalitarianism, and themselves developed or took into account fundamental ideologies, means and structures. Elements of vulnerability, of softening, of dissolution stand in opposition to these tough motifs of rigidification: weeping soldiers, icons of the revolution in moving, private moments; floral ornaments in unexpected places question the apparently unalterable; motifs of travesty and camouflage question boundaries or thematise their transgression. They are falsified in cartographic presentations, crossed over in a game with predetermined roles, and uncovered in surreal constellations. Yet these strategies are always ambivalent and connect only in the associative threads to image and counter-image: Friedrich Rückert's travesty-like adaptation of oriental culture could initially describe a culturally naive boundary-transgressing option, only the quote elsewhere from Edward Said questions this form of orientalism as an expression of eurocentric cultural hegemony. What in the first moment appears clear becomes in the next suspended through the ever new combinations of disparate image motifs, and an alert and open viewer is needed who can integrate these moments of fruitful uncertainty and understand them as a movement towards a figure of thought and action, whom Malcolm X challenges: "Change the narratives of our histories!..."<sup>3</sup>

If one looks at the 36-piece work, 'off the revolution', from this aspect, so one recognises that the fragmentary, diary-like form also contains elements of the artist's biography. She describes herself in a photograph as a 'fanatic, arabic, female, queer'. With 'queer', things, actions or persons are referred to that deviate from the norm.

"It is a resistance to the normal", says the queer theorist, David M. Halperin.<sup>4</sup>

According to the meaning of the verb, to queer (similar to interfere), which means something like 'disturb' or - pictorially speaking - 'get in the way', the works of Adidal Abou-Chamat repeatedly undertake the attempt to break through the restrictive discourse of our

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva *Fremde sind wir uns selbst*, Frankfurt/M, 1990, p. 208f.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm X, quoted in: 'off the revolution', Adidal Abou-Chamat, 2009

<sup>4</sup> 'Bunning': *Glad to be Glad*. Interview mit David M. Halperin, in: *Greenpepper* Nr. 27. In the translation by Beate Bronski on etuxx.com. 03.01.2013

society and resist the classification into 'normal' and 'abnormal' forms, designs and expectations of life, or at least to question these. In doing so, autobiographical aspects always enter her works. This is even more the case in the 4-part 'Dyke's Delight' than in 'off the revolution'; certainly it is difficult here to decide whether the single elements are autobiographical or auto-fictive, whether it is dealing with a re-construction or whether just a constructed 'I' position enters the work. It is an 'Autobiography of Masquerade'<sup>5</sup> that offers the viewer a confusing barrage of different facets of sexual orientation and sexual identity against a background of migration and ethnic, cultural difference. At the same time an exemplary reconquering of the autonomous subject position happens here that Frantz Fanon urged for the subjects degraded to objects in colonial situations: "...it is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self...that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world."<sup>6</sup> Such autobiographical strategies allow "the symbolic 'reproduction' of one's own Self and self-referential 'exploration'. That no unbroken, monolithic Self-position becomes manifest, but rather hybrid and multiple identities would be conceptualised, appears as the inevitable consequence of the post-colonial situation."<sup>7</sup>

The installation, 'Dyke's Delight' also consists of 24 differently sized panels disparate in content and form. Their arrangement occupies, as in 'off the revolution', no rigid or hierarchical structure, but now a basic motif can be ascertained, 'little sheik', which floats over the entire arrangement and is particularly emphasised by the framing from two ornamental tablets. In a slight shift it onomatopoeically captures the title of the work and simultaneously functions as a leitmotif, like a prototype. He reflects an early humiliation that originates in the child through the refusal of parents, relatives and friends to recognise his biological gender. "...the past continues speaking to us" runs one of the inscriptions in this image, and this past speaks in terms of a narrative, namely the social designation of a gender. One can encounter this painful, powerful story only in the sense of Malcolm X's challenge, "...change the narratives of our histories..." and thereby gain alternative options. Additionally, this work questions the construction of social and biological gender identity and examines the various hybrid manifestations of sexual orientation.

'Dyke's Delight' references a slang expression used for lesbians with a more 'masculine' appearance. The term was taken up by those it was aimed at and changed into a positive self-description. This and a whole host of further forms of gender-based transformation and reinvention that refuse sexual socialisation are present in the individual panels. Through varied contextualisations, individual perspectives of masculinity and femininity open up. They stretch a field between the vectors, sameness and difference, that denies all collective attributions and universalisms, deconstructs specified role allocations, also within cultural and ideological aspects, and "circulates rather than decides between the sexes, multiplies them rather than identifies."<sup>8</sup>

At the same time it is clear that to carry this out is not without risk and casualties. Force, aggression and oppression are always present in the individual panels. They manifest themselves in mutually hostile expressions of different sexual role definitions or in image and text quotations of female and male strategies of violence. The historical image quotation of Rosa Luxemburg in combination with an hirsute triangle suffices to evoke the horror of unleashed violence against female self-assertion. That the waxy-green colour of the

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<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man *Autobiographie als Maskenspiel*, in: *Die Ideologie des Ästhetischen*, Frankfurt 1993, p. 131 – 146.

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins: White Masks*. London 1968, quoted in: Susanne Gehrmann: *Gender-Identität im kolonialen Kontext, westafrikanischer Autobiographien*, Web Publication Conference Papers VAD 2002. p. 6 –7

<sup>7</sup> Susanne Gehrmann: *Gender-Identität im kolonialen Kontext westafrikanischer Autobiographien*, Web Publication Conference Papers VAD 2002. p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Brigitte Rauschenbach *Gleichheit, Differenz, Freiheit? Bewusstseinswenden im Feminismus seit 1968...*, gender-politik-online, 2009

downfallen Iranian revolution reminds one of the feel of an embalmed dead body is no coincidence. Frequently, however, this evocation oscillates ambivalently between attraction and repulsion, desire and failure, affirmation and subversion. The lascivious, spread out, opening act is simultaneously attractive and threatening. With the presentation of different veiling methods, sometimes only minimal differences determine whether it is experienced as a decorative, alluring accessory or as an ethnic or gendered symbol, even sometimes as an threat.

'Shifting Lines' (2011) ultimately carries this ambivalence in the title: once again, in this 9-part work, questions of sexual identity and orientation, of ethnic and cultural difference, the projections of the majority and the pressure thus exercised on the minority, are dealt with. Yet, these questions are overlaid with the question of a happiness beyond prohibition: "As, for us, beauty is to be found in completely contrasting forms of art, so, too, sexuality - in which, by the way, some hear the language of beauty - permeates all spheres of life of the individual as well as society."<sup>9</sup>

Its beauty, however, only reveals itself to us in the acceptance of the strangeness of the Other in us and in the Other: "If we demand to know the Other", write Judith Butler, "or when we require that the Other finally or definitively says who he is, then we can expect no answer that will satisfy us. In so far as we waive this satisfaction and leave the question open, ...we let the Other live, for life could be understood as exactly that which goes beyond attempts to understand."<sup>10</sup>

This is the message of 'Shifting Lines': recognition means to let others live, and this recognition is based on the insight that my knowledge of the Other - never completely defined, and therefore hard to endure - has limits.

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<sup>9</sup> Philippe Ariès *Überlegungen zur Geschichte der Homosexualität*, in: Ariès, Béjin, Foucault et al. *Die Masken des Begehrens und die Metamorphosen der Sinnlichkeit. Zur Geschichte der Sexualität im Abendland*, Frankfurt 1992, p. 88

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt*, Frankfurt 2007, p. 60