

IT CAN BE QUITE CONCEPTUAL AS WELL

'Earth Telephone' (1968) a sculpture by Joseph Beuys made out of a rotary telephone connected to a lump of clay. The sculpture functions as a metaphorical device to express the transformative value of art. Art triggers an energy flow, which has been epitomized in Beuys' Social Sculptures, ritualistic dialogic expedients in which the artist as a modern-day Shaman seeks to change society.

Sven Sachsaler's 'You are not Alone II' shifts Beuys' concept of Social Sculpture on a quotidian, almost banal dimension. The performance stages a series of fourteen phone calls to brick companies asking them for suggestions and ideas about work to-be-realised for this exhibition in order to overcome an inspirational impasse. Sachsaler's unexpected intermission in the receivers' working life is an attempt to stimulate a creative dialogue; publicly facing the taboo of the uninspired artist. The energy flux between the caller (the artist) and the receivers (society) is formally fragmented; characterized by silences, repetitions, misunderstandings and dissatisfied expectations, far from the utopic harmony between art and society theorized by Beuys.

In Sachsaler's video the Otherness represented by the artist and his somewhat clumsy artistic jargon invades a familiar context: surreptitiously prompting the receiver to exit his/her comfort zone and assume the role of creative thinker, Sachsaler tests Beuys mantra according to which "every human being is an artist". The paradoxical combination of humour and seriousness in the creation of an exhibition consisting of an artwork that deliberately conceptualizes the lack of ideas for the exhibition itself could recall another artist who was ambivalent towards Beuys legacy: Martin Kippenberger. For the series of twelve paintings called 'Dear Painter Paint for me' Kippenberger hired a film-poster Illustrator named Werner to make some portraits of the artist based on some photographs. He then signed these 'Werner Kippenberger'. Conserving his authoritarian role while acknowledging his need for technical help, Kippenberger seems to play with the piecewise paradoxical figure of Beuys, the leading shaman advocating collaborative and democratic practices. We could thus interpret Sachsaler work as an attempt to achieve Beuysian outcomes following a Kippenbergerian approach.

The theme of telephonic communication was the backbone of 'Art by Telephone' - a seminal 1968 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The invited artists gave instructions by telephone to the museum on how to install the artworks so that the artist could create the artwork from home. Here artists were neither Shamans nor Pranksters, but bosses. Even if the art-making process was collaborative, the artists authoritarian roles were not subject to compromise.

During the phone calls in 'You are not alone II' Sachsalber gives no instructions, only vague and open directions. Most conversations start with Sachsalber describing the characteristic bricks of the Gallery S O space and his intention of doing something related to these peculiar walls in order to "make it look like art". The artist's only desire is not to touch the gallery walls, to make something "quite conceptual", something based on ideas and language more than a physical intervention: "(Maybe) you know, just a nice text". The conversation that stems out of these considerations is a collection of nervous laughs, embarrassed silences, sharp rejections, bewilderment, incommunicability and intuition. Displaying his weaknesses Sachsalber shows that, as Kippenberger said mocking Beuys, "every artist is a human being". And similarly as every human needs to not feel isolated as do artists, whilst at the same time emphasize their individuality. That is why Sachsalber recognises his need for help, support and inspiration from art history, friends and society, but equally he wants to create the artwork himself, explicitly refusing the contribution of other professional artists.

Sachsalber doesn't take a position towards the issues of artist status, their 'role', or their self-validating right to infuse artistic dignity to their creations, but he cheekily legitimises the immoral act of stealing other's ideas through a conceptual gimmick. While making an artwork out of his failure Sachsalber celebrates the artist's faculty of turning the table on stagnant circumstances. Making original artworks out of stolen ideas is indeed one of the most successful creative strategies in an era dominated by the feeling that everything has already been done, before and better than what you could possibly do. At the end of the day is asking for inspiration via browsing art galleries or on Google/YouTube so different than calling fourteen brick makers for ideas?

It is not easy to define Sven Sachsalber's intentions. In fact it is difficult to determine whether the artist's need for help is genuine or if it has been a mise-en-scene directed to produce an artwork. More probable that it is both.

'You are not alone' fluctuates between the status of 'relational readymade' and that of an opportunistic Social Sculpture. It is impossible to determine whether these queer telephone calls changed something in the receiver as Beuys would appreciate. However, it is quite probable that some of the interviewed would have smiled in recollection the next time they hear the word 'conceptual', as Kippenberger would surely appreciate.

Valentina Bin, 2013