

## 'Sonata 11000+' Project by Maria Smits, drawing as performance

Understanding the logic of the Sonata 11000+ project can be challenging.

Struck by a newspaper photo of a dying child in the Syrian war, Maria Smits searches to offset the horror and in particular the detached manner of news reports that up to date over 11000 children have already died in this war. In Lucian Freud's painting of his dog Smits finds a counterbalance. The mindfulness in which he portrays his dog with the utmost care and focus and in its most simple form makes it possible to offer redemption through a work of art.

In a ritual response to Freud's work, Smits sets out with the creation of a sequence of 120 drawings that evolve into a continuum of movement. Rather than spotlighting the animal itself, the artist seeks to emphasize the sense of immersion and intensity she felt while taking in the newspaper image. For weeks on end she focused on the death of the child by repeating and varying Freud's concept of the dog.

This offering resulted in the installation of 120 sketches and a book documenting the performance. Why so many drawings, why the repetition, why exchanging the fate of a dying child for the image of a sleeping dog?

In the approach and presentation Maria Smits observes the sonata form. An interesting choice. As an artist, she searches for expression, a bold statement in both movement and character and the form of the sonata channels the expression. Originating from an era during which instrumental music became more prominent in European music, the sonata offers a framework to articulate a rhetorical discourse.

A sonata consists of three episodes, one fast, one slow and lyrical part like a song without words, and the last episode, often a rondo, fast again. This particular structure offers a setting in which diverse emotions can be part of one performance.

The first part frequently captures the contrasts within that single section which is composed in the original sonata form. Typically there is the primary thematic material followed by a lyrical theme. Through presentation of these two themes in the so called "exposition" the same material is dramatically repeated in various forms and modulations within the main theme which gives the first segment the appearance of an oration. Differing points of views are being presented and arguments are weighed in order to come to a conclusion. Simultaneously, the sonata is an oration, a space where one can roam around and a place where different moods can be brought together.

Through the application of music and rhetoric Maria Smits adds weight and balance to her expression. Also based on the academic Liberal Arts, her project becomes an essay in response to the present day's images of war.

The first theme represents the newspaper image itself and concerns the many questions it evokes. What does it say about the chilling fact of 11000 perished children? Does it do justice to the actual situation? Maybe it does because the photograph portrays a specific case, an individual child on a particular day etc. An image of which it is unclear whether it has been produced by the world, by history or by a photographer, an impression of eyewitnesses or of actors perhaps? Do we really need to understand?

The second theme is the discovery of Lucian Freud's painting. At first glance an innocent and inconsequential subject in a specific situation, a pet. However, painted with such tender compassion that it may touch the viewer after seeing the horrifying newspaper image of the dying child.

The contrast brings to mind a famous passage from Homer's Iliad. Andromache and Hector are saying farewell. A woman saying goodbye to her husband who is going to war. A scene full of fear and sadness. But through a touching detail for tenderness, Homer created an unforgettable passage that wipes out the image of war and destruction. Hector wants to pick up his baby son who begins to cry at the sight of his father's fierce helmet. The parents laugh uncontrollably. Only after Hector takes off his helmet, the child calms down. It is this fabricated observation that makes the passage so memorable. The loving attention for this specific human detail gives consolation. Should the artist probe the unbearable fate or counterbalance this by displaying what can be achieved by intense focus?

Following these two themes a comprehensive question about art and society has been posed. The sonata form, but also the oration awaits an impact. Playing with themes, trying out variations, repetitions, reversals, magnifications etc. Purified by the variations and considerations the orator or artist can now return to the main theme and bring closure with the conclusion.

In Sonata 11000+ the impact results from blending the two themes with 120 repetitions of the second theme expressed with the same deep thought and intensity as encountered in the first theme, the newspaper photograph. The actual installation of 120 drawings will serve as the final chord.

The entire project is classical as well as heterogenous which at first glance seems paradoxical. Classical in terms of recognizing the sonata's rhetorical form. Shaped along two observations, theme 1 and 2 followed by the impact of the performance by the creation of 120 drawings and finally the shape of the actual installation, possibly followed by a coda through this publication.

The choice of the installation is a topical choice. An installation may serve as a framework to communicate an experiment in a poetical form. Distinguishing feature of an installation is the heterogeneous character and the lack of an axis or core. Maria Smits' installation is a series, a work without an axis, the impact of a performance. The performance is the artist's self-imposed endeavor to produce 120 drawings created with the utmost contemplation. In this we recognize the approach of Joseph Beuys. The realization of an offering emphasizing the concept of the dog reminds us of Beuys works of a dead hare and his coyote project. The origin of this interest may also be traced back to the drawings and sculptures of animals in primeval style by his mentor Mataré.

Besides the offering of a drawing performance one should also consider the fact that Maria Smits chooses expression and physical action. All her work involves a powerful, at times even violent approach to achieve an outcome. Moreover, she is a sculptor creating pieces based on actual events and actions rather than a recording artist who paints or draws. In contrast to a conceptual approach commanded by rhetoric, her work

rarely is stylized but rather demonstrates force and often times aggression.

And then we can detect another approach in Maria Smits' work. In a provocative way she experiments with reversals and ambiguity. Characteristic of Maria Smits, she reverses the word "dog" into "God". In her forcefulness, Maria Smits defends herself not only with the form of rhetoric but perhaps even more so with irony.

Matters that are too personal, too intimate are often expressed by the reverse. Since the Romantic period, escape in irony became essential in the arts when the individual artist and strictly personal matters became the main topic. A form had to be conceived in which an artist could freely express himself without compromising anyone. The form of irony and even more so, exaggeration offered a suitable venue.

The Sonata 11000+ by Maria Smits has become a complicated tangle of two fundamental approaches: the classic rhetoric, developed in the domain of the Liberal and the Academic Arts on the one side and on the other side the irony typical for the Romantic period.

What is an artist supposed to do at times of war and injustice when the human fate is expressed in chilling numbers and in newspaper photographs which are disposed off immediately after publication. Simply spotlighting life and world itself could be a possible response to find consolation. Such action should at least have the appearance of a prolonged effort 11000 Drawings? For the moment this seems impossible, however, a substantial space brimming with thought and tenderness should be feasible.

Text by M. van Hoogenhuyze.