

Lisa Haselbauer

STRUCK BLIND

On Rediscovering Political Sensuality

It's Friday night in a bar somewhere in Munich. Neither a chic club nor a trendy pub, this bar is simply a place that seems content to serve its function of bringing people together. Background music mingles with the sound of numerous conversations to create a cosy atmosphere. People are seated at the tables, engrossed in stimulating conversations with their friends. Someone from the staff comes by every now and then to ask if anyone would like another drink. I am one of the guests this evening, which couldn't be more normal and relaxed until the moment when I need go to the toilet. I raise my hand and soon I am dependent on the assistance of the woman who'll lead me there – because tonight I am blind, just like all the other guests at this bar.

This unusual situation was created by *katze und krieg*, the Cologne-based performance duo of Julia Dick and katharinajej, whose project *wirklich sehen* (*Really See*) invites people to say goodbye to their eyesight for a few hours and perceive their surroundings, especially their companions, with the other senses that remain after the eyes have been blindfolded. How the people find each other, whether they find each other at all and how the situation develops from there is the experimental part of this project. In other words, this highly participatory artform raises several questions. What is the product per se? Is there a product at all? Or is the commercially freighted notion of "product" wholly out of place in this context? Habit teaches us to expect every artistic undertaking to culminate in something tangible or at least visible. Whether sculptures, exhibitions or stagings, the efforts must all lead toward some predefined intention. Participatory artforms evolve these objectives through collaboration between performers and participants, whose collaboration may last for shorter or longer lengths of time, depending on the particular project. In the case of *wirklich sehen*, the interval lasts about two hours and is spent with several different people, but the whole event ends in neither a material nor a transitory object. This distinguishes *katze und krieg* from other participative artists, because Julia Dick and katharinajej focus on the experience itself. Their intention is provide a real space and sensitive guidance which combine to create a sheltered environment where a special experience becomes

one's fear of sightlessness and whether this anxiety can be overcome. Second, and this is the central element, there's the encounter with another individual, whom we can perceive only with our remaining senses in this "unforeseeable" situation. Social perception is the process by which we appraise other people. An essential factor is the feeling of likeability that even a brief encounter can spark. Likeability largely depends on how physically attractive the other person appears to us. But we immediately confront the primary difficulty in *wirklich sehen*. Now we can no longer judge the other person on the basis of physical attributes that we cannot see and neither can we rely on nonverbal clues such as eye contact, facial expressions and gestures. What remains are paralinguistic and proxemic signs. We are obliged to rely on them in order to infer, for example, that the other person is smiling, and our sense of touch must replace eye contact as a psychological component of paramount importance. That we nonetheless find a person likeable whom we meet without being able to see, and that we are perhaps even quicker to bestow this positive appraisal on them, is due to the fact that the true character of an individual cannot be fairly assessed on the basis of their outward appearance. Their degree of physical attractiveness contributes to our experiencing them as likeable, but it is only marginally related to their personality. When we are able to see them, we automatically perceive details and attribute traits to them on the basis of these perceptions because cues such as body size, skin colour, luxurious accessories and clothing facilitate our assessment process. *Wirklich sehen* evades these barriers, which mislead us into making prejudiced verdicts, by simply switching off the decisive organ, i.e. the eye.

Jana and I spent most of the evening together. Contrary to my expectations, our encounter did not stop on a superficial level focused solely on perceptions. In less than an hour, we talked about our musical preferences and our greatest fears. But since we were both curious, we decided to adjourn our tête-à-tête and meet other people. As if fate had heard our promise to meet again after the performance as sighted persons, I was soon led outside to finish the evening by including passers-by in my sightless experience. Never before have I experienced a more peculiar feeling of loss than on this evening. We came from different cultures, were brought up under totally different circumstances, ten years of life experience lay between us, and we struggle with wholly dissimilar challenges in our daily lives. We were essentially total strangers, yet we encountered each other on a level that could make do perfectly well without being able to see at all.

What was formerly deemed alien becomes a neutral unknown, a *terra incognita* to discover as curious explorers rather than as missionaries who arrive with prejudices and stereotypes. "Become political again" is either



„wirklich sehen“ (Really see), katze und krieg. Photo: Cardinal Sessions

an unvoiced hope or an enthusiastic appeal, but above all it is the cornerstone on which we set up the equipment for our research. Could it be that making do without the sense of sight impels us to sharpen a different sense: namely, our political sense? In their hours of blindness, the participants become better acquainted with ideas that are increasingly losing significance but are essential for genuinely democratic politics, e.g. trust and confidence, participation and involvement. These are the concepts that ought to fill the methodological toolbox with which we begin our exploration of the unknown other. To borrow two buzzwords from Ulrike Guérot's book *Why Europe Should Be a Republic*: neither the individual's *pursuit of happiness* nor the blasé shrug of *anything goes* in the sense of *everything is possible and nothing is obligatory* is appropriate here. When we experience another individual without our eyesight, we sharpen our remaining, often neglected senses, including our political sense. And that is precisely what this project by *katze und krieg* is all about. This exercise helps us rediscover the political in us. As active participants, we learn how compassion functions and we swap our ego-based individualism for responsible and responsive togetherness. During this sojourn in sightlessness, external society is forgotten and a community based on trust and cooperation is restored. And the duty to get involved is inherent in community. Of course, "getting involved" might seem like uninvited rudeness, like poking one's nose into other people's business. Perhaps we should try to disburden "get-

ting involved" of its negative connotations and see it in a new light, because "getting involved" has many synonyms which are free of pejorative undertones (e.g. mediating, contributing or assisting) and, perhaps most importantly, interceding rather than insisting. Being part of a community means being willing to get involved on each other's behalf – because involvement is essential for cultivating contacts and sharing with others in our community. If we can change our view of "getting involved" so it can again mean looking after one another, caring for one another and participating in one another's lives, then this consciousness can spread into a global context, where we discover that being political does not mean casting a ballot on election day, but cultivating a sense of community in which the social and the political are inseparable. Perhaps the question of the product of this performance was answered prematurely because the situation was viewed through the analytical eyes of a pragmatic, academically trained scholar of theatre. Why can't content also be a product? And doesn't content point beyond all material, tangible facts? *katze und krieg* catalyzes the creation of a caring connection between two former strangers. In this respect, *wirklich sehen* begins small. By relearning how to openly encounter people, by allowing voluntary sightlessness to prevent us from jumping to prejudiced conclusions, by overcoming our suspiciousness toward strangers and granting them an advance of trust, and by letting ourselves rediscover the familiar, we reveal and reinvigorate our stunted sense of the political.

Further literature:

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