

Marcel Bleuler

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Constructing an Emancipated Culture of Art Spectatorship?

The Ambiguity of Ben Lewis's Reportage-Series

ART SAFARI (2003-2006)

MARCEL BLEULER

TELEVISION AS A COUNTER-DISOURSE

In 2010, television stations from various parts of the world reported on Marina Abramović's retrospective and her three-month performance entitled *The Artist Is Present* that took place at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In her performance, Abramović remained motionless on a chair in the museum's foyer for seven hours each day for the entire duration of the show. An empty chair was placed before the artist for the visitors, who, one by one, could take a seat and look into her eyes for as long as they wished. As I was studying Abramović's work at the time, I monitored the internet for newscasts and reports on the event, which could often be streamed on the video-sharing website YouTube or directly from the television stations' homepages. Most broadcasts reported on *The Artist Is Present* with respectful amazement. They showed footage of the thousands of visitors who came to MoMA, and explained this massive interest by referencing Abramović's crucial role in modern art history. These reports affirmed and reproduced the image of Abramović as the museum promoted it: Abramović emerged as a seminal performance artist with incomparable charisma.

However, I also remember seeing more skeptical accounts. In particular, I came across some reports that questioned the hype surrounding *The Artist Is Present*. I remember reporters who, for instance, interviewed museumgoers standing in line for Abramović's performance, commenting either on their frustration (because it was almost impossible to get up to the sitting artist) or their often irrational expectations of what would happen to them when sitting in front of the artist. Other reports questioned the authenticity of Abramović's performance by speculating about what gadgets she might be wearing under her dress that helped her maintain the pose, or that prevented her from wetting herself during the seven-hour sittings.¹

Rather than borrowing the sophisticated vocabulary and interpretative framework that the art world (i.e. art critics and the MoMA) provided for the interpretation of her work, these accounts confronted Abramović's performance and the public's reaction to an onlooker's perspective with trivial concerns and from this perspective, the art world's declaration of the show's historical importance and exceptional power suddenly became highly disputable.

Sitting in front of my computer, I perceived these polemic accounts as a critical and antagonistic contribution to the mediatization of *The Artist Is Present*, undermining the promotional discourse of the MoMA distributed through the internet in the form of interview-clips with the artist, a live-stream of her performance, and, most strikingly, highly aesthetic photographs of people crying in front of Abramović. In contrast to this sublime image the MoMA created, the polemic reports revealed the conditionality of the event, the mundane dimension of its actual realization, tracing the full range of reactions within general public, from frustration to the hope for illumination.

In this sense, the reports featured a bottom-up approach, which distinguished them from conventional educational television's tendency to lecture. Confronting the event with a non-specialist's perspective, they shared the rhetoric of online blogs, which were similarly characterized by taking a 'consumer's perspective' when commenting on Abramović's show and referring to its trivial aspects. The reports thereby acted as a foil for the strikingly homogenous and uncritical picture that the MoMA produced. This

1 Such speculation can also be found on several blog entries posted during the *The Artist Is Present* show, cf. Paskin 2010; Sauers 2010.

discrepancy between the official mediatization of *The Artist Is Present* and the counter-accounts in television led me to consider the critical potential of such reports: to what extent do they construct a different and possibly antagonistic culture of art spectatorship?

AGAINST THE STULTIFICATION OF THE AMATEUR SPECTATOR

Since the end of the 20th century, spectatorship has been a widely debated topic in the realm of contemporary art. Especially in regard to artistic practices that involve the viewer's participation, which are usually subsumed under notions of "participatory art" (cf. Bishop 2012) or "relational aesthetics" (cf. Bourriaud 2002), artistic projects have been discussed in terms of the modalities and the politics of spectatorship they construct.

Even if I use the term 'constructing spectatorship' to describe these debates, it is important to mention that they do not continue the legacy of poststructuralist and feminist writings, which, most notably in the 1970s, adopted psychoanalytic concepts of a visual field structuring among other factors subjectivization and on these grounds critically analyzed visual culture in regard to the construction of the spectator as a decentered and gendered subject. The discourses surrounding participatory art are hardly concerned with visibility or with gender, and they are generally less strict—or less conceptualized—in regard to the 'constructivist' understanding of the spectator's subjectivity.² On the contrary: the recent debates often envision a spectatorial subject that overcomes heteronomy and that reaches a state of self-possession and self-definition (which, from a poststructuralist or femi-

2 Like feminist criticism, the discourses surrounding participatory art are loosely informed by an originally Marxist critique of the manipulation of society through unmarked effects of commodity culture (cf. Debord 1967), or of authoritative social and political institutions. However, unlike feminist criticism, the debates at the turn of the century typically use, as Bishop puts it, "vocabularies of social organization and models of democracy" (2012: 7). Instead of being informed by psychoanalysis, they adopted reflections of the field of sociology, spatial theory (e.g. Rosalyn Deutsche, Miwon Kwon) or political philosophy (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Rancière).

nist standpoint, would have to be criticized as naïve essentialism). The expectation here is that spectators' reactions would not be predetermined by artistic or institutional formations; instead, that he or she participates in the creation of meaning, and be 'constructed' (which I suggest be understood as 'addressed') as an unpredictable, potentially antagonistic subject of the art world.

As the popularity of philosopher Jacques Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991) and essay *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007) in the art world indicates, recent discourses on spectatorship are oriented towards a claim for democratization and eventually emancipation of the spectator.³ However, art historian Claire Bishop, who has contributed substantially to these debates, observes that these claims are hardly put into practice, since the realm of contemporary art mostly addresses specialized spectators who already share an intellectual background and agree on specific ideas (cf. Bishop 2004: 66 et seq.). Bishop convincingly argues that from a constellation in which the audience is a group of insiders who celebrate and eventually defend mutual interests, no antagonism and no need for emancipation will arise.

This 'insider's constellation' has been criticized not only in regard to participatory art. Art journalist Nicole Zepter, for instance, recently published a book entitled *Kunst hassen* (2013) [*To Hate Art*], that sharply criticizes the tendency of today's art world to perpetuate and promote the discourses it favors, instead of putting them up for discussion. Like Bishop, although in a much more polemic manner, Zepter calls for a culture of antagonism that contrasts with the consensus of the art world and that confronts its specialized discourses with the perspective of those outside the art establishment.

My observations of the reporting on Abramović's MoMA-performance suggest that television has the potential to construct this called-for perspective of the art world, especially segments of news shows or lifestyle pro-

3 In 1996, the German art historian Wolfgang Kemp observed the growing popularity of such claims with artists and art critics whom he contemptuously called the "Viewer Liberation Front (VLK)" (1996: 13). Kemp's irony is, of course, strategic, since the so-called "VLK" implicitly (but radically) questioned the foundation of his method "Rezeptionsästhetik".

grams, which inform and comment on art but not to the extent or with the expertise of cultural films.

A rare example of scholarly work that takes into consideration such ‘incidental’ television productions on art is Inga Lemke’s book *Documenta-Dokumentationen* (1995), [*Documentations of documenta*], a study of the reporting on the quinquennial international art exhibition *documenta* in the West German public broadcasting service between 1955 and 1987. By analyzing newscasts and short reports, Lemke brings into focus not only how art is explained to the general public, but also how non-specialized agencies (i.e. the television commentators and news teams) convey art to a likewise non-specialized audience (the parts of the West-German society watching prime time television). I am interested in such a non-specialists’ constellation because, as Lemke points out, it brings up questions regarding the legitimization and comprehensibility—respectively *incomprehensibility*—of contemporary art that specialized discourses often disregard.

As the polemic reports on Marina Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present* indicated, it is a popular standpoint to regard the globally marketed art world as a socially relevant but also corrupt realm that ultimately dupes the public. However, educational films tend to do away with such skepticism. For instance, by postulating the great meaning and art historical importance of Abramović’s performance, they implicitly stultify those who are skeptical. This happens quite clearly in the documentary *THE ARTIST IS PRESENT* (2013), in which experts such as philosopher Arthur C. Danto or Abramović-specialist Chrissie Iles comment on the performance, elucidating its meaning and relevance. Their expertise leaves hardly any room for the lay-audience’s potential doubt about Abramović’s work. In this sense, educational cultural films implicate an authoritarian model of knowledge transmission: experts give lessons to amateur viewers who lack the expertise to talk back.

In many cases, this authoritarian model also underlies the culture of art spectatorship constructed and perpetuated in museums and art galleries. Traditionally, these institutions are regarded as an embodiment of expert knowledge that the general public does not possess. In this constellation, the spectator who does not understand is made to feel ignorant.

Of course, this description falls rather short, and there are attempts within art institutions to break with this authoritarian model of art display.⁴ However, as Ben Lewis illustrates in the first episode of his reportage-series ART SAFARI (2003-2006), there is a certain truth to it. ART SAFARI was co-produced by several West European television stations and originally consists of eight half-hour episodes,⁵ each of which portrays an internationally successful artist's oeuvre. Its author is the British filmmaker and art critic Ben Lewis, who acts as the series' reporter and who leads the audience through the episodes. The series was broadcast by two renowned cultural institutions: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the European Cultural Channel ARTE. As such, it is directly positioned in the realm of educational television. However, when the BBC and ARTE first broadcast the series, they seemed to avoid labeling ART SAFARI as an educational show. Instead, both stations announced ART SAFARI as an entertaining, casual, and unprecedented approach to art, intended to break with conventional, authoritarian models of knowledge transmission and with the tendency of patronizing the spectator. The BBC advertised the series as a "close, informal and laidback encounters with artists," (BBC announcement of ART SAFARI 2003) and ARTE emphasized that it would stir up the common opinion that contemporary art is incomprehensible and boring (cf. ARTE announcement of ART SAFARI 2003).

In the first episode, Lewis starts his "adventure" through the art world by confronting the incomprehension of spectators in the museum. With a microphone in his hand and a camera team at his back, he enters Matthew Barney's retrospective *The Cremaster Cycle* (2003) at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York. After browsing Barney's show, he focuses on the spectators who, as Lewis puts it, view the various exhibition pieces as if they were a "divine revelation."⁶ However, when Lewis starts inquiring about Barney's art, none of the spectators can explain its meaning. Even when asked to respond subjectively and share what *The Cremaster Cycle*

4 For an in-depth discussion of such a critical self-conception, cf. Marchart 2005.

5 The official DVD ART SAFARI includes only six episodes (on the artists Matthew Barney, Sophie Calle, Maurizio Cattelan, Wim Delvoye, Gregor Schneider, Santiago Sierra). Two episodes (the one on Takashi Murakami, and the episode on "Relational Aesthetics") were only broadcast on television.

6 All quotes from the original English version of ART SAFARI released on DVD.

reminds them of, they cannot reply. One young man, for instance, pauses for several seconds before admitting laconically: "I don't know."

At first, this opening scene of *ART SAFARI* creates the impression that Lewis would go on ridiculing spectators, like the polemic reporters who questioned museum visitors standing in line for Abramović's performance about their irrational expectations. But as the episode goes on, it becomes clear that Lewis tries to face the difficulty for amateurs to comprehend and interpret contemporary art. In the course of the episode he insistently inquires about the meaning of Barney's oeuvre, eventually encountering the artist himself. This encounter in particular shows quite plainly whose side the reporter is on: instead of just agreeing with the artist, who describes his ideas very seriously but enigmatically, Lewis expresses his confusion. He tries to comprehend and to summarize Barney's statements in more pragmatic terms, but he repeatedly fails.

It is specific to the series that, instead of deleting this scene, its oddity and the apparent difficulty of translating the artist's intentions into something broadly understandable are part of the account. In *ART SAFARI*, the difficulty of comprehension, which in other contexts might make the spectators feel ignorant, is presented as a completely acceptable reaction, that ultimately challenges the legitimacy of, in this case, Barney's success in the art world. In this sense, the series claims a change of perspective: instead of 'elevating' the audience to an expert comprehension, art is brought to account by a non-specialized audience. By undermining the authority structure, *ART SAFARI* radiates an antagonism that, like the polemic reports on Abramović's performance at the MoMA, challenges the promotional and overly sophisticated discourses surrounding contemporary art.

However, contrary to the reports on Abramović, the counter-discourse in this case is launched by established authorities. Not only are the BBC and ARTE major cultural channels, but the series' author is also much more of an expert than he appears to be in his show. Ben Lewis studied art history himself and he proves, in the course of his series, to be a friend of the art world's protagonists, and well-informed on the theorems that define expert discourses. It is fair to say that Lewis is himself an insider and certainly more of an expert than the lay audience, whose perspective and vocabulary he adopts. This constellation makes *ART SAFARI* an ambivalent show. The series narrates the story of the empowerment of an amateur, although the narrator himself cannot be considered an amateur at all.

Clearly, such a masqueraded educational model has its own set of authoritarian traits. It only overcomes the opposition of knowledge and ‘ignorance’ by implying a false sense of equality. Against this backdrop, it appears debatable to what extent ART SAFARI critically engages authoritarian models of art display. However, it is nevertheless fair to say that the series *suggests* an emancipated culture of art spectatorship by constructing such a one within its narrated world. It thereby points to a destabilization of the authoritative models, and, possibly, transforms its audience’s thinking about art spectatorship at the beginning of the 20th century.

With this ambiguity in mind, I will explore in the following the expectations ART SAFARI raises of ‘constructing’ an emancipated culture of art spectatorship, which eventually will lead me back to a clarification of what is involved in and meant by ‘constructing spectatorship’ in this specific context.

IMITATING AN AMATEUR’S PERSPECTIVE

First of all, my observation that Ben Lewis operates from the position of an amateur needs further elaboration. By ‘amateur’ I mean an art spectator who is not an insider of the art world and who does not possess expert knowledge of it. With his ‘common-sense approach’ Lewis shares the perspective of a general audience, inviting the viewers to perceive him as ‘one of them.’ His renunciation of a specialized and sophisticated approach is further expressed through his interest in the practical dimension of artworks and their production, which often leads him to visit factories and to talk to technicians and craftsmen. In the episode on the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, for instance, Lewis interviews two artisans who manufactured some of Cattelan’s works. Besides inquiring about the process of their work for the artist, he also asks about their impression of Cattelan and their reading of his art. These individuals, depicted as typical members of the working class, are presented as the true authority of the episode. In particular, one of them articulates a reading of Cattelan’s oeuvre that is much more tangible than the earlier statements made by curators. Lewis uses this amateur reading as a crucial reference for the interpretation he develops in the episode. It is with such scenes, in which outsiders of the art world make meaningful contributions to the episode’s narrative and the final interpretation of an art-

ist's oeuvre, that ART SAFARI creates the impression of a self-empowered amateur-culture of art spectatorship.

While craftsmen become specialists of art, the art world's designated specialists and insiders, such as curators and art critics, are depicted as overly "intellectual" to the point where their statements appear hollow and meaningless. This skeptical stance towards the 'experts' is made explicit in the episode on the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye. Lewis visits an exhibition of Delvoye's artworks where a curator lectures about the utopian dimension of the artist's digestive machine *Cloaca* (2000-2007) that turns food into feces. Lewis, in a later interview with the curator, emphasizes that his interpretation has no tangible connection to the artwork at all. From the perspective that ART SAFARI takes, the curator's insistence on the term "utopian" seems completely detached from any concrete observation that might be made about *Cloaca*, and therefore comes across as absurd. By challenging the specialist's authority and exposing it to ridicule, Lewis positions himself firmly within the outsider's perspective, according to which the significance and legitimacy of specialized discourses surrounding contemporary art appear dubious—a point which Lewis apparently wants to make. It would, of course, have been easy to cut out his conversation with the curator, which has no substantial function in the episode's following narration. However, by including such scenes, Lewis creates the impression of 'revealing' the art world and of giving an uncensored account of the oddity and emptiness of the so-called specialist's reflections.

A recurring indication of the art world's alleged emptiness is the speechlessness that Lewis's pragmatic questions provoke in several interviews. In general, it is not the art spectators who become speechless, as in the episode on Matthew Barney, but the experts and the artists themselves. In the episode on German artist Gregor Schneider, for instance, the artist often falls completely silent when Lewis inquires about his work. At an early point in the episode, Lewis asks Schneider why a certain space he plans to produce as an artwork is important to him, but the artist cannot reply. The camera tracks him in silence for more than ten seconds, which is a considerable duration for the series' usually high cutting rate.

By showing Schneider repeatedly unable to answer Lewis's straightforward questions, the artist's speechlessness becomes an almost comic element that creates the impression that even the artist himself cannot explain his artworks. With the author of the work unable to provide any meaningful

insight, the episode casts doubt on whether there is any sense or meaning in his pieces at all, and on whether the artist is even capable of properly expressing himself. In fact, this doubt is not 'cast' in the sense of a cognition that emerges in the course of the episode: it corresponds to the first impression that the episode creates. Gregor Schneider's art is introduced as weird and inaccessible, and this impression is strengthened by the depiction of the artist as an escapist 'weirdo.' In this sense, Lewis does not approach Schneider in order to challenge the first impression, but rather to perpetuate it.

This observation can be applied to the whole series. On closer consideration, Lewis's common-sense approach serves not so much to reveal a formerly unknown complexity about art, but rather perpetuates a preexisting cynicism about the (lack of) significance of artistic and intellectual work. By stultifying the artists and the experts, ART SAFARI often turns the tables of conventional knowledge transmission, which might be entertaining and which might be a long overdue revenge of the 'ignorant' on the authorities of the art world. However, the series thereby sustains the opposition of outsiders and insiders established by the same authorities it rebels against. Instead of enhancing their mutual comprehension, it just inverts their positions of power.

Furthermore, taking one step outside of the narrated world and considering that the series' author is an insider to the art world himself, it appears disputable whether ART SAFARI, instead of empowering the amateur, in fact caricatures him. While a traditional educational television show might assume a certain amount of ignorance on the part of its audience, Lewis's accounts insinuate that the general audience is not only ignorant but also unwilling to learn about the specialized and sometimes odd mindset of artists and critics. Thus, on closer consideration, one could argue that Lewis, in fact, perpetuates a cynicism about the outsider spectator.

THE CODES OF BEN LEWIS'S CHARACTER

Despite its ambiguity, Ben Lewis's approach to contemporary art is not only characterized by his (perhaps cynical) construction of an amateur's perspective, but also by his attempt to break with the passivity of the viewer and his willingness to expose his personal investment. As a character in his

own show, Lewis interacts with the art world and interprets the artistic oeuvres against the backdrop of his own subjective findings and experiences.

By saying ‘a character’ I wish to emphasize that the Ben Lewis in ART SAFARI appears at least partially ‘an act,’ meaning that, rather than thoroughly authentic he appears to be enacting a constructed cultural identity, namely that of the spectator of contemporary art at the turn of the 21st century. As such, Lewis’s characterization bears certain codes that, as I will show in the following, are ‘dated’ in as much as they mirror, albeit in a rather simplistic manner, dominant paradigms of contemporary art criticism.

The Lewis-character’s approach complies with the call for a destabilization of the interpretation of art required under the notion of a “performative writing” by post-hermeneutic theorists such as Amelia Jones at the end of the 20th century, and, more recently, by art historian Philip Ursprung, who coined the term “performative art history” (2008: 13 et seq.). Of course, ‘performativity’ has become a broadly and imprecisely-used term that today describes all sorts of artistic practices and methodological unorthodoxies, and that has mostly been excised from its originally sophisticated conceptualization informed by feminist and poststructuralist theory. Nevertheless, performativity in this context is generally understood as a method that demands that critics and art historians reveal the contingency and conditionality of their interpretations. As Amelia Jones and art historian Andrew Stephenson put it, the method is a strategy to critically contrast the premise of conventional discourses on art:

“Adopting the notion of performativity as a critical strategy within the study of visual culture thus enables a recognition of interpretation as a fragile, partial, and precarious affair and, ultimately, affords a critique of art criticism and art history as they have been traditionally practiced. Since meaning is negotiated between and across subjects and through language, it can never be fully secured: meaning comes to be understood as a negotiated domain, in flux and contingent on social and personal investments and contexts. [...] Interpretation itself is a performance between artists (as creators, performers, and spectators of their work) and spectators (whether ‘professionals’ or non-specialist).” (Jones/Stephenson 1999: 1-2)

Based on the premise that there is no such thing as one true interpretation of an artwork Jones and Stephenson argue that there are as many interpretations as there are spectators. They regard ‘the meaning’ of art as something

that is established in relation to the spectator who interacts with the art in a specific context and under personal preconditions. Thus, Amelia Jones speaks of “interpretation-as-exchange” (Jones 1998: 9), a term through which she emphasizes that meaning results of a contingent exchange between an artwork’s properties and the spectator’s personal investment and subjective interests.

In each episode, ART SAFARI foregrounds precisely this contingent exchange between Ben Lewis’s character and the artistic oeuvre (or the artist) he tries to understand and interpret. His figure negotiates the meaning of an artwork on the grounds of his personal investments, instead of reproducing a seemingly objective interpretation. It is crucial for the culture of art spectatorship constructed in ART SAFARI that this contingency and the obvious partiality of interpretation does not lend dullness to Lewis’s characterization but that it is presented as a valid and productive approach. These traits of the critical performative method encode Lewis’s approach as anti-authoritarian. It is expressively *not* based on the premise that the spectator must learn about the ‘true meaning’ of art or that expert knowledge is needed to derive meaning from art; rather, Lewis shows that the spectator can produce the artwork’s meaning based on his own personal investment and capacity.

By further considering the traits of Lewis’s act, it becomes clear that his character’s insistence on interacting with the art world exceeds the aim of pursuing a subjective exchange: He seeks not only to participate in the creation of meaning but, more invasively, to become part of the artworks. This happens quite literally in the episode on Wim Delvoye, who is known for tattooing pigs, whose skin, after their natural death, he sells as artworks. When visiting Delvoye’s pig farm in China, Lewis convinces Delvoye to tattoo one of the same motifs the artist is tattooing on a pig’s back on his own shoulder. Thus, Lewis explicitly exceeds the role of the spectator and becomes a carrier of the art project, which, by animating the artist to apply the tattoo on a human body, he even leads in a new direction.

Similarly, in the episode on the French artist Sophie Calle—notably, the only female artist whose work is presented in ART SAFARI—the Lewis-character seeks to interfere in the artistic project and blur the boundaries between recipient and producer. Inspired by Calle’s collaborations with other artists, such as Paul Auster or Damien Hirst, he tries to initiate a project that should reflect her artistic interests. The episode documents Lewis’s letters

to the artist, in which he suggests ideas for projects they could realize together. Unlike Delvoy, Sophie Calle does not show interest in collaboration with the reporter and turns him down repeatedly. Even if she does not allow Lewis to become a co-creator of her art, their communication is crucial to the episode's narrative and to the modality of spectatorship presented here: the Lewis-character is not just inspired by her art, but it appears to come naturally to him to react on the same level as the artist.

With this intrusive behavior, the Lewis-character casually dismisses the opposition of art creator and spectator, foregrounding the aspect of participation, which, as I mentioned, is a key concept of artistic discourses and of art criticism at the turn of the century. In this context, the concept of 'participation' is mostly linked to a critique of the 'spectacle,' which goes back to the Marxist analysis *Société du Spectacle* (1967) by French writer and artist Guy Debord. Broadly speaking, Debord's notion of the spectacle is based on a critique of passive consumption and it implies a pejorative understanding of spectatorship, which the philosopher Jacques Rancière summarizes in his essay *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007):

"Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing, for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting." (Rancière 2007: 272.)

This description is, of course, highly polemic and it is important to mention that Rancière himself renounces the idea of a passive spectator typically connected to the notion of the spectacle. However, it is based on this simplistic and pejorative understanding of the spectator's relation to the spectacle that participation has been proclaimed, for instance by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, as a critical strategy of dismissing passive consumption. It is understood that, by participating, the spectator overcomes his separation from the realm of the creators, asserting his equality with them, and that he eventually becomes empowered in his own capacity of knowing.

On the grounds of such an understanding, participation implies emancipation, and it is further clear that the Lewis-character's ostentatious interaction with the artworks can be read as a code for precisely this kind of effec-

tive, if not necessarily subtle, emancipation. Through his intrusive behavior Lewis demonstrates his overcoming of the spectator's distance from the artworks. Instead of merely looking, he expressively unravels the conditionality of the artistic oeuvres that he approaches, investigating their production and thereby tracing the realities that lie behind them and the mechanisms that finally shape our perception of them. By dismissing the opposition between looking and acting in his position as an art spectator, the Lewis-character embodies the claim for empowerment and puts the equality of creators and spectators to the test.

It is further an important nuance for the culture of spectatorship constructed in ART SAFARI that Lewis's character interacts and participates with the artistic oeuvres, whether he was invited to or not. He does not wait to be prompted into activity and agency by the artworks or their creators. This nuance encodes Lewis's character as inherently activated and—according to the aforementioned rather simplistic understanding—emancipated. His character pursues a subjective, interactive approach regardless of the directions established by the artworks and their display. He thereby embodies an unpredicted spectatorship.

ART SAFARI'S LACK OF SELF-REFLECTION

Such an *inherently* activated approach is also required of ART SAFARI's television-viewing audience, since the series itself does not tear its viewers out of their alleged passivity by instructing them to be critical towards the narration. On the contrary: while Lewis exposes the art world's oddity and the conditionality of artistic productions, he does not extend the same critical eye to his own show's conditionality. The audience does not get any insight into its production or into the agreements between Lewis and the art institutions he reports on. However, there must have been several agreements with these parties that eventually influenced the series' narrations. In spite of the Lewis-character's empowerment within the narrated world, ART SAFARI cannot have stayed aloof from the terms of the depicted artworks' copyright owners in the real world. Also, he cannot have completely hidden his agenda to take an antagonistic or ironic stance, which was certainly no secret after the first four episodes were broadcast in 2003. The series is

clearly based on dialogues, decisions, and agreements, which, however, are not traced within the diegesis.

This observation about the series' lack of open self-reflection raises questions about the authenticity of Lewis's revelations and the allegedly emancipated approach of his figure. To put it plainly, the Lewis-character interacts with the artworks without having been invited to *in front* of the camera. However, he might well have been invited to *off* camera. It is further plausible that Lewis manipulated his footage, which is edited to the effect of entertainment. In the episode featuring Gregor Schneider, for instance, in which the artist falls silent several times, it may well be that Schneider did answer Lewis's questions after all, but that his answers are cut out in order to create a coherent image of the artist as a 'weirdo' who is as inaccessible as his artworks' meaning. However, it is also unlikely that Schneider only learned that he was cast as a 'weirdo' after the series was aired. It is rather likely that the artist agreed with the portrayal and that he followed Lewis's script. Maybe they had even fun enacting his speechlessness.

In general, Lewis's relationship with the artists portrayed in ART SAFARI is kept inscrutable to the viewer, as are his reasons for presenting these specific high-profiled artists. Again, this lack of insight into the series' background calls for speculation. Is Lewis friends with the artists he depicts, and would they otherwise let him make fun of them? And why is Sophie Calle the only female artist depicted in the series? Did other women not approve of Lewis's pally behavior, or did he not bother to engage other female artists in his series?

To put it briefly, ART SAFARI is produced as a distant spectacle. Ben Lewis may disturb the rules and the self-adulation of the art world, but he does not disturb the pleasure of watching his series. In this sense, one could claim that there is a discrepancy between the construction of emancipated spectatorship within the narrated world, and the 'passive consumption' the series constructs with its own audience. This claim would, however, be based on the assumption that emancipation has to be instructed. And this assumption must raise suspicion, since it leads to the paradoxical expectation that a spectator should overcome the instruction that tells him to overcome this same instruction.

In line with Jacques Rancière's concept of emancipation, the observation that ART SAFARI is produced as a distant spectacle does not categorical-

ly disqualify the show from being a critical account. On the contrary, Rancière regards it as a misunderstanding that spectatorship “must be torn into activity” (2007: 279), and he goes as far as to disqualify the attempts on the part of the creators to willingly activate the spectator and instruct him to be critical. In his essay *The Emancipated Spectator*, which is based on a lecture held in the context of theatre studies, Rancière illustrates such an activation with the paradigmatic examples of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, which distances the viewer by emphasizing the spectacle’s conditionality, and of Antonin Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty*, which involves the viewer and puts him under pressure up to the point where he intervenes (2007: 272). Rancière argues that such attempts to activate the spectator perpetuate an inequality between the audience and the creators, since the attempt to lead the spectators out of their alleged passivity is, in fact, a paternalistic gesture.

In this sense, the fact, that ART SAFARI does not reveal its own conditionality but rather provokes its viewers to notice this withheld aspect, may be considered an indication of the series’ resistance to establishing an authoritarian constellation of knowledgeable mediator and an ignorant viewer who has to be taught to be critical. By *not* instructing the spectator to be critical, the series assumes its audience capacity to critically responding by its own. And indeed, it might be a subjective observation but it is precisely the ambivalence of the emancipatory construction within the diegesis, and the series’ ‘uncritical’ enunciation, that constructs me as an activated spectator. As a viewer I oscillate between the identification with the series’ aspects of an anti-authoritarian culture of art spectatorship, and my rejection of its overly bold, cynical, or ‘uncritical’ style. This oscillation makes me follow the series without being completely on its side; instead I find myself consistently examining my own response to it.

As part of this constant examination I also find myself trying to decide whether ART SAFARI can be regarded as an antagonistic counter-discourse similar to the polemic reports on Marina Abramović’s performance *The Artist Is Present* that I described at the beginning of this essay. Like these reports, ART SAFARI creates a counter-discourse that considers non-specialist’s observations and that does not reproduce the usual explanations of the art institutions that are usually in power of the discourse on contemporary art. It therefore creates an anti-authoritarian space and constructs a culture for which antagonism is a basic principle. However, in terms of its

pragmatic status in the 'real world' and the position ART SAFARI takes in regard to the institution of educational television, the series appears less of a counter-discourse. Like the polemic accounts on Abramović's show, it adopts a rhetoric related to the current blogger-culture, which is characterized by using an informal vocabulary and a subjective perspective to report on topical phenomenon. However, as opposed to the polemic reports on Marina Abramović that were broadcast by regular television stations, ART SAFARI was broadcast by specialized cultural channels that, in spite of their aim to address a general audience, indeed reach an audience with likewise specialized interests. Contrary to most of the polemic accounts on Abramović that were at least temporarily available on YouTube, ART SAFARI could never be watched on an open online platform. Instead, in its edited DVD-version that was published in 2006, the series has been available in libraries notably specializing in contemporary art.

The series does not break with traditional principles of knowledge transmission, but it eventually empowers them. By incorporating an antagonistic rhetoric and an amateurish approach to contemporary art, the major cultural channels BBC and ARTE demonstrate their willingness to innovate the format of educational television, anticipating the criticism of patronizing their audience. The institution, however, remains the same. There are no outsiders reporting and producing a show, but only an insider with the authorities at his back enacting an emancipated culture of art spectatorship.

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