

Undermining Stereotypes of Femininity and Masculinity

Stefanie Seibold, an artist working with performances, installations and video art, in conversation with Rosa Reitsamer.

Rosa Reitsamer: In your artistic and curatorial work, you mostly use images and sounds from popular music. How would you describe your approach to popular music and gender?

Stefanie Seibold: Music has always been central to my work; it helps me to think and feel. Music delivers life energy, provokes movements, and is a fabulous intelligence that is not necessarily word-related. I really like this quote by the journalist and author Kodwo Eshun in *The Face*:

Why do you call yourself a concept engineer, isn't that extremely pretentious? ... Absolutely! Pretentiousness means pretending [you're] something you're not and this is one of the major functions of music: it's a TAZ [temporary autonomous zone] where you can dissolve the old nature inculcated in you, the things you had no control over, like your name, your school etc. and assemble new perceptions for yourself.

This quote relates to playing with genders too. Pop and Rock musicians have always challenged fixed notions of gender identity through their stage and private personas (and their play with sexuality is an important part of the business to sell mu-

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sic to a (multi-sexual) audience). Look at David Bowie in the 1970s. You do not have to read a single article about gender to understand that he (re)presented an in-between character using images of femininity and masculinity. Performances can introduce themes such as gender and queer desire to the audience very directly; this is what I like so much about it.

RR: Your work comprises of several artistic forms and practices, such as performance, installations, videos, curatorial work, and the publishing of articles and books. How do these artistic forms and practices allow you to challenge the traditional gap between popular culture and high culture? Which strategies have you developed over time to bridge the gap?

Stefanie Seibold: Having a background in theatre design, I always wanted to get away from the notion of the "elevated" which is inscribed in the idea of "high art". This notion of theatre is what big theaters in Germany in the 1980s managed to sell to their audience. This concept implies all kinds of other rigid hierarchies that also mostly provide for a hopelessly patriarchal and pathetically sexist German Sprech-Theater tradition [theater heavily based on the spoken word- I am not interested in the reinforcement of the hierarchies between "high art" and "low art", but rather searching for an integrative approach to break down any boundaries and hierarchies. I originally studied stage design because in performance you have all the possibilities of different media to make intricate, challenging and complex statements. It is less about bridging gaps and differences

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(be it between "high art" and "low art" or different media) as using their elements simultaneously, and even amplifying their differences rather than making them disappear.

RR: In performances such as *I Am Not Half The Man I Used To Be* or in your sound pieces such as *Memories* are made of this you sample images and sounds. Would you say that sampling is a certain aspect of your artistic practice?

Stefanie Seibold: I think the idea of having short excerpts of someone else's work within your own really became tangible through the internet and other digital media; then again, it has always existed in drama and performance. Sampling offers a certain possibility for mixing different sources and referring to certain aspects of popular culture. This point is the most appealing to me. You can create another reality, mostly through integrating a certain known code (or sample) into whatever it is you are doing in this (art)space at that time. A "sample", if you want, always refers to a space outside the rest of the work, which is what I like so much about sampling. Sampling also expresses doubts about the idea of originality that, for example, the professors at the time when I was studying still believed in (mostly of their own originality and genius of course).

RR: Could we call this generation of artists the "sampling generation", as we/they re-contextualise existing images, sounds and texts into new feminist and queer contexts?

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Stefanie Seibold: Yes, there are certainly distinct conceptual practices involved in re-contextualising images, sounds, texts, movements and so on; but they are just as different and varied in their concepts as in their objectives. One of my reasons for using sampling is to confront existing signifiers with new contexts in order to shift their meaning in an indented way. For example, I shift sexist signifiers into queer or feminist signifiers or I re-signify common masculine or feminine codes into a queer context - and defy those fixed categories.

RR: I often think younger feminist-queer artists and musicians who are in their 30s try to achieve a feminist-queer standpoint that is concerned with an "intergenerational dialogue". Would you say this is also one aspect of your work?

Stefanie Seibold: Since I am working a lot with feminist-queer histories, I find an intergenerational dialogue extremely important. The book *Let's twist again - If you can't think it, dance it*, which I edited together with Carola Dertnig, is a good example of intergenerational dialogue in my work. The book brings together performers from 1960s Vienna with artistic positions of the present day.

RR: Could you see specific approaches of the performance artists to popular culture and popular music who are included in the book *Lets's twist again* which gives an intriguing insight in Vienna feminist-queer performance history?

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Stefanie Seibold: I would say that only the younger generations integrate popular music and other elements of popular culture effortlessly in their work, with exceptions such as Christa Biedermann and Renate Bertlmann. The development of the fine-art scene might explain this, as the use of popular culture in art basically started in the 1960s with Pop-Artists like Andy Warhol and. For female artists of that time, the suppression of their sexuality and their bodies - as well as their intellects - was a very serious issue, probably not to be dealt with in such an ironic "light" and silly vocabulary as elements of popular culture mostly represent.

RR: You most often work in cooperation with feminist and queer artists. How would you describe these collaborations? Where do you see advantages? Where do the challenges come up?

Stefanie Seibold: Coming from theatre, it was always clear that working in teams brings advantages as everybody has different knowledge and experiences. Certainly, working in co-operation has always propelled my work forward. Working together implies that you respect the work of other people, their different work practices, knowledge, and experiences. Collaborating with someone whose work and thoughts interest me a lot is challenging, but at the same time very rewarding. For feminist and queer collaborations in particular, I think it is extremely important to set up and push networking strategies, to connect to people and ideas. Much work needs to be done in terms of pushing each

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other forward, to make our works widely recognised and visible,
as well as to create an interesting artistic (and political)
discourse around them.

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Lets twist again - Performance in Vienna since the 1960s

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