

## Somewhat Beautiful

Catalogue essay for Gabrielle Jennings' exhibition, *Reverie*  
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By Harald Fricke

At first glance, everything seems to go together well; it is almost too perfect. Landscapes flit by on one wall, a video of a park is shown opposite, and on the other end wall there is footage of swans swimming gracefully over a pond. In the center of the room, the visitor may use remote control to steer a camera whose shape refers to that of a swan. This produces nervously roving images of the almost dark room which are then broadcast on a monitor. It is a rite of passive and active vision, and of the resulting shift in perspectives. As the simulated viewpoint of the swan, the image of the room reflects upon the observer and is equally mute.

At the same moment, however, one realizes how many desires and how much mythology is stored in the symbol of the swan: there is the ugly duckling which somehow finds itself friendless amongst the ducklings in the fairy-tale story; that is until it develops into a beautiful swan and swims away with its own kind. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Zeus appears to Leda, the daughter of Thestios, in the shape of a swan. She is captivated by his charms and later gives birth to Castor and Pollux. There is the dying swan of the ballet, moving most beautifully only in death, and there is Marc Bolan - the singer of T. Rex - on whose grave a swan made out of white flowers was erected after the pop star had killed himself in his Mini Cooper during 1977.

All these stories are concerned with the fascination of a beauty which may appear popular, close to the people, or then again almost kitschy or even - fading - completely bourgeois. The spectrum ranges from trivial cliché to a metaphor for high culture. In Gabrielle Jennings' work, there is a catch in all this: viewed individually, the elements of her installation remain hardly worth discussing with regard to concerns of art at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - the fairytale motifs, the reflected image of a technically reproduced Nature, in which the animal appears both as the projection and the reproduction of human needs; these only fulfill the criteria by which the context of art should be directed to a very limited extent. For the precise aim of the context is to break the spell of an image production directed at reception and mediation: where artist only relies upon communicative relations in his/her work, we become suspicious that he/she is excluding the circumstances of his/her own creative production. Then the swimming animal, be it ever so charming, is not founded in life - whether the life of the viewer, the artist or even the swan itself.

By contrast, for Gabrielle Jennings, the animal is more of a model, reduplicating fantasies which could have originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With its combination of video apparatus and mythological creature, the work questions to what extent the imaginary world of this age may be found in sedimentary material which has become historical. We know from Ludwig II, who called his castle Neuschwanstein and surrounded himself

with swans, that animals already provided the form for technical or erotic desires at the time. In the English Empire Style, filigree design (for John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde) also took on a particular significance, because in its imitation of Nature, it reconciled good taste with the mass-used materials of industrialism. The beautiful appearance of objects disguised their less attractive character as mass-produced goods.

When repeated, the problem shifts: that which was formerly intended to assist people in coming to terms with the present in capitalism has now become an agent of the cultural industry. Can one defend the beauty of something with the contemporary discourse on art - in particular as Jennings' work is obviously founded in an aim to seduce? The image of the swan appears to drive the paradoxes of the aesthetics of enlightenment and criticism to an extreme: if something has an immediate effect on the senses, then it can in no way serve the demands of the intellect. It is closed to any insight, which is in turn dependent on a sensual pendant. Those who wish to understand aesthetics should not allow themselves to be dazzled by them - it is not correct to read Kant's Critique of Judgement as just such a hopeless attempt; where every direct experience of an object is opposed to the interests of knowledge?

So the bourgeois theories of morality and aesthetics coincide on one point: on their rejection of the sensual pleasures, of the lightweight and the superficial, of whatever causes emotional reactions in the body, or even aims for these. In Kant's work, aesthetics serve to perfect or to stabilize moral attitudes, and he concludes, "that the intellectual, itself useful (morally) good, must be conceived aesthetically not only as beautiful, but rather as sublime, so that it awakens a feeling of respect (which scorns attraction) rather than love and familiar affection; because human nature cannot agree to that good of its own accord, but only by means of force which the intellect applies to sensuality."<sup>1</sup>

But in connection with Jennings' installation, this insight amounts to a form of remembering, in which the relation to the object is inverted. It is precisely the charms of the trivial and not their abstraction by the intellect from which an image of past situations may be created. For Marcel Proust, it was the madeleines dipped in lime blossom tea from which he drew his "mémoire involuntaire". From Freud, on the other hand, we know that even a small child learns to differentiate and to cope with the principles of desire and reality by means of remembering and repeating stimuli.

In order to make this theory comprehensible, in the essay "Beyond the Principle of Desire" Freud employed the image of a game which he had observed a boy of 1 ½ year playing. The boy had a habit of throwing his toys away, so that all of them had "gone", before his mother brought them back to him. However, with a small reel on a thread, the child carried out the ritual in another way; he let the reel disappear behind his bed only to pull it back up himself with great enthusiasm. Freud calls this the "gone-there" game and concludes: "This was within the context of the child's great cultural achievement, relinquishing desires (relinquishing the gratification of a desire), he thus allowed the mother to leave without protest."<sup>2</sup> By creating its own order of activity, the child altered and overcame the transition from the principle of desire to that of reality (the gone stage) and recreated the original situation for itself by means of a trick (there stage).

What the child learns at an early age has a similar effect upon the adult's associations in connection with certain objects. The concept of an absence of desires, of lust, which may be found realized in the functional design of our surroundings, is overcome in our leisure time ambiance by means of emphasizing tasteful designs. When Gabrielle Jennings, in the video "A Small Fortune", films a fairy-tale park and its exhibits, adding herself to those scenes as a golden fairy trying on a costume, this self-portrait has the effect of an extension to the previously shown, strictly arranged fairy-tale landscape; far too static in its conception for a child's imagination, anyway. Obviously the park is intended for the recreation of the parents; here they find a precisely arranged ensemble of their own childhood memories, the direct charm of which also extends its effect to their children, but in its feeling, in its atmosphere, is still present for the adults.

In a similar way, the set-up with the swans appears as an ambivalent adoption of images from childhood, collected from the perspective of an adult. Positive associations with the past are concealed in the artificial magic of the setting - a treasure which can perhaps only be discovered in a gestalt-psychological sense. So one may read the entire installation - from the videos to the camera-swan-vehicle - as an allegory of the connection between desire and recollection, in which the relation between distance and immediacy is constantly being inverted: the more idyllic the large image of the swans or of the landscapes appears, the more direct a contrast is presented by the technical apparatus. Rather than a "Disneyfied" situation, an allover of childhood memories, the work is characterized by its scanty environment, "in which the visitor him/herself has a large part to play in the realization."<sup>3</sup>

The individual parts of the installation retain a fine balance between represented and representation. By steering the model, the visitor practices a technology which makes a film-like perception of reality possible, whilst the video material on the wall reproduces permanent situations from outside. Whatever may be experienced interactively by means of the apparatus in the gallery room, the visual conditions which control the attention of the viewer have been produced at an earlier date by Jennings - in Idaho and at Sanssouci. The wobbly circuits with the camera-"swan", by contrast, refer to the enclosed situation of the exhibition. Jennings' notes, sketches and research papers are fastened to the gate, so that the camera - in the middle of the game as it were - can look behind the scenes.

In this way, the connection between image production and the role of the viewer breaks down repeatedly, the technical ambient does not unite the public (as for example in amusement parks, where everybody is guided in the same way and at the same time by visual means), it leaves perception open to each person's subjectivity. Those with more experience of cameras will combine the differently structured levels of the installation to form a narration (on technology and free time) in a different way to those who are interested in the objects pictured (fairytale/idyll). This game with ambiguity and references in situ heightens the process of seduction in situ. All the levels overlap, so that the border between ideal landscape and artificial park, between charm of the swan and its plainly constructed technological pendant gradually disappears.

Gabrielle Jennings has compared her work to an orchestra of images and feelings: "There is a permanently increasing, motion within the situation exhibited - you know how the thing works; but you are constantly drawn into a stream of associations, and allow yourself to be seduced by them, you want to abandon yourself to them." Because the viewer also has this knowledge, the artist can improvise with those different fragments of image production from which a panorama of collective recollection develops. Despite this, access is retained to each specific element without a superordinate story emerging.

This playful openness has a particular effect on the legibility of the symbols. They cannot be translated into concrete meanings, so that the ensemble becomes the illustration of aesthetic problems; but the seduction does not emerge as mere semblance, producing no true symbols but only effects, either. Jean Baudrillard has coined two phrases for this confrontation of semblance and reality: simulation pretends to have something which one does not have - and that is the rhetoric which most art from the grapes of Threxis to the satyr scenes by Matthew Barney has amounted to up until now. On the other hand, there is the far more attractive theory of dissimulation, the deception of which lies in not having something which one actually has. Whilst simulation creates an artificial object, a feeling or a state, dissimulation veils the fact that these things actually exist.<sup>4</sup> Dissimulation is, by definition, the artificial alignment of differences: the rich man acts towards the beggar as if he were also a poor man, the west - seeing itself as the center - integrates all indications of periphery in the name of the "other". And art adopts the problems of life by stylizing itself as the everyday.

Under this stipulation, the concept of the beautiful also alters: images from cosmetics advertising, for example, serve the conception of repeatedly construction, new personae; the continuity of the request economy is reflected in the masks of desire. The game that art promotes here is the permanent alteration of the attributes of reality - sometimes it is defined by a relation to recollection. For this work by Gabrielle Jennings that means: does the relation to Nature disappear in the technically reproduced image of a landscape, or does the image of Nature lay open the technical character of the installation? Is the toy car with the camera based upon the swan in its form and function, or does the apparatus create a distance from which, by means of the virtual swan, one understands its purely pictorial character? And finally: is the trivial charm of the beautiful in the installation based on the concrete function of reproduction - or do the various stages of abstraction within the work create a relation which only make this individual viewpoint possible due to the sum of all the diverging parts?

Ultimately, perhaps we must take a cue from "Alice in Wonderland" when she asks the cat the way: "Could you please tell me where I should go from here?" - "That has a lot to do with where you want to go," said the cat. "Well, where to doesn't really matter-" said Alice. "Then, it doesn't really matter which way you take," said the cat. -as long as I arrive somewhere," added Alice as an explanation. "Oh, you will, certainly," said the cat, "if you keep walking far enough."<sup>5</sup> It is the same with successful recollection - we walk in circles and find all the images encountered on this path confusing, but nonetheless somewhat beautiful.