



Lise Mortensen

The Place of Art is in Between

— Art and context in the case
of Peter Holst Henckel's
artistic practise



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Fig. 113



HEBOMIA LEUCIPPE

Specimen: Stung Treng, Cambodia, March 1983

The Place of Art is in Between. Art and context in the case of Peter Holst Henckel´s artistic practise

By Lise Mortensen

In the history of art, the context of a work is traditionally understood as the solid documentation and factual information on which our concrete knowledge of the work is founded, derived from such sources as diaries, contracts, letters, articles, manifestos and interviews. The actual physical context in which a work of art is created, however, tends to become invisible and vanish. In Peter Holst Henckel's work, the physical context carries meaning and is incorporated as an active co-player. The artist often uses serial-like elements in his installations and exhibitions. Parts of previous installations show up in different contexts. As new parts are added and others abandoned, new meaning is continuously created. A common feature of Henckel's installations is that meaning arises between the work of art and the context, between the exhibited object and the site. Therefore the frame around the work is reconceived in a number of installations where the viewer, the museum and



Dr. Merkwürdigliebe, sec.1, 1992, installationview

the gallery space are incorporated as the reflective site where meaning is constituted.

The exhibition *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* of 1992 is a project structured around the figure of Dr. Strangelove in Stanley Kubrick's film of that name, made in 1964. The crazy scientist Dr. Strangelove, played by Peter Sellers, displays a Dr. Mengele-like, Nazi behaviour pattern and has difficulties controlling his Heil-saluting arm and destructive tendencies.

Dr. Merkwürdigliebe functions as metaphor for the relationship between a natural-science approach to the world and an aesthetic, museological approach, exploring the tension arising from the fact that the aesthetic gaze holds a destructive potential. Peter Holst Henckel elaborates the figure of the crazy scientist, making him also a super enthusiastic collector. The Doctor's objects have been properly collected, sorted and put undeglass, but his passion for collecting, ordering and categorizing has a destructive outcome. In his zeal, by



The Identification of Dr. Merkwürdigliebe, 1992, installationview

removing the objects from their context, he ends up killing as well as preserving what he admires most.

Peter Holst Henckel's *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* thematizes the principles of museological practices and the ordering systems of natural science. Paraphrasing the modern library's classification system, he mixes up categories and changes them. By thus establishing order according to idiosyncratic principles, *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* appears as a caricature of classic natural science and museums.

The *World of Butterflies* of 1992-2002, created in continuation of *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe*, depicts in all its repetitive simplicity how beauty and cruelty are fused. The butterflies hang in rigidly straight lines, classified by species, but removed from their original context. The viewer is left to draw his or her own conclusions, based on the context in which the butterflies are now placed. Familiar press photos of world-political events, acts of murder, war

and terror emerge from the patterns and colours of the wings of the butterflies, visually fused with the delicate and beautiful insects. The Latin names of the butterflies are printed on the work along with the name of their geographical habitat, which is also where the violent events take place.

In *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* the traditional function of a museum, the museum itself and natural science make up the specific site that Peter Holst Henckel responds to artistically. How we relate to an exhibited object depends to a great extent on how it is displayed, how it is categorized and, not least, to what it is compared. *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* examines the effect that aesthetic, museological or natural-science systems of classification has on a given object when it is removed from its context and shown out of time and place. It also examines what happens when different contexts are incorporated in a work, such as world-political events, the framework of the museum or the viewer's own analytical system.

The installation *Untitled [Black Box]* of 1993 takes as its starting point Brian O'Doherty's analysis of the white cube—the white, modernist, gallery space where the disembodied eye encounters modernist art, independently of time and place.¹



Untitled (Black Box), 1993, installationview

O'Doherty analyses the framework of modern art and the assumptions on which the museum and the modern, commercial gallery are based. The works must be able to hang freely and undisturbed, protected from influence from the outside world. The modernist gaze is a

disembodied eye without any connection to a political, social or architectonic context. The many free-floating eyes in *Untitled [Black Box]* hang disembodied within the artistic space, not a white cube gallery, but a raw basement room. A messy network of tangled, crisscrossed, dangling wires connects the eyes, supplying them with electricity and allowing them to shine while looking freely around. This gives the impression that if you were to cut the wires in a single place, all the eyes would lose their connection to each other. Behind them is a large photostat of a very big hand about to open a correspondingly big door, suggesting that this room—the artistic space—is connected to another world that has something more to offer, if only we would open the door.

Are You Talking to Me!?—a video installation made in 1996—consists of two parts. One is a one-to-one photostat of a double door mounted on a mirror, making it look as if the door opens into a

room behind the exhibition space. The viewer thus walks towards a room. The mirror lets you see yourself in relation to the world. You see yourself in the mirror image along with the context you are in, but the room you look into is imaginary and cannot be entered. The tension between the real and the imaginary space arises at the point when you come close to believing that there is a real space behind the door, but immediately realize that it is just a reflection.

The other part of the video installation is a video remake of the famous mirror scene in Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver* of 1976. Peter Holst Henckel himself enacts the part of Travis Bickle, originally played by Robert De Niro, who acts tough in front of a mirror, practicing a fast draw with various types of firearms: "You talking to me? You talking to me? Then who the hell else are you talking to? You talking to me? Well I'm the only one here. Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?" In Scorsese's film, Travis



Are You Talkin' to Me!?, 1996, installationview,
photographer Planet Foto / Bent Ryberg

experiences a kind of psychological mirror stage. The scene occurs at a time when Travis has remained a passive observer of the metropolitan scum, but now suddenly takes action and becomes extremely active, cleaning up the moral decay surrounding him.

In an artistic context, *Are You Talking to Me!?* directly addresses the viewer. You practically become the partner in a dialogue as you encounter Peter Holst Henckel,

alias Travis Bickle, who addresses you as an actual physical body. The work asks the viewer not to let the visual quality alone be the locus of the work of art, but to actively engage in the communication between work and viewer. It makes you aware that you are not just a passive receiver, a disembodied eye independent of context, perceiving the work of art only visually, but that you must take the responsibility for participating.

As we have seen in these examples of Peter Holst Henckel's work, his installations consist of a three-stage rocket that unfolds the relationship



Are You Talking to Me?, 1996



Couplings and Doublings, 2013, installationview, detail

between art, representation and reality. The work comes into being somewhere in between—in *Dr. Merkwürdigliebe* in the relationship between order and destruction, in the case of Travis Bickle in the contrast between being a passive voyeur and active participant, and finally in *Untitled [Black Box]*, when work and context fuse as the work opens up and lets the world enter.

¹ Brian O'Doherty: *Inside the White Cube — The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, San Francisco, 1986. First published in *Artforum*, 1976.

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