

Intermezzo: Misappropriating Stereotypes

Stereotyping, writes Michael Pickering, attempts to deny any flexible thinking with categories (2001: 3). Both categories and stereotypes concern the ways in which we organize the world. But whereas categories are not fixed, stereotyping attempts to deny any flexible thinking. Stereotypes are invested in structures of power and stereotyping 'denies this in the interest of the structures of power which it upholds. It attempts to maintain these structures as they are, or to realign them in the face of a perceived threat' (Pickering 2001: 3). The functionality and consequences of stereotyping has throughout the culture war been a topic of concern in a number of artists' and activists' practices.

Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen has throughout her artistic practice continuously engaged in the culture war. She often uses her Danish/Philippine background as a starting point for a humorous and ironic scrutinizing of stereotypes about identity, race, religion and gender. In the performance video *Absolute Exotic* (Figure 23), she humorously takes on and sings out a double role. She sings about being subjected to stereotypical remarks when men who are hitting on her at bars assume that she is not Danish, but at the same time she is forwarding



Figure 23: Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen: *Absolute Exotic* (2005). Photo: Ulrik Jantzen. Courtesy of the artist.

the stereotypes as she signs about not wanting to hook up with 'Greenlanders' and 'Wogs' and about not being exotic enough and therefore dumped in favour of black girls. While Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen in the video identifies as an exotic and hybrid Dane, she also disassociates herself from other ethnicities that remain stereotyped as not yet exotic but rather dirty and less human. This double logic of being stereotyped and stereotyping works as a form of *détournement* in which *Absolute Exotic* repurposes and rearranges stereotypes in order to transgress the original power structures upheld by the stereotype. As such, the fiddling with stereotypes becomes a way in which naturalized ethnic stereotypes and power relations are challenged. This is thus also to be understood as participation in the culture war because it is engaging in the redistribution of the naturalized relations between stereotyped ethnicities and the national symbolic.

In *Absolute Exotic*, two male dancers back Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen. The two dancers are encouraging her to 'try a black man' to have it justified that she was dumped in favour of 'black women'. This indicates that the stereotypes that are indicative of power relations between nation states and regions of the world are reflected and mirrored in gender relations. This intersection of complex gender relations, ethnic stereotypes and global power structures was even more noticeable in Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen's *Afghan Hound* that was a part of the Danish pavilion, Speech Matters, at the Venice biennale in 2011.

The culture war's conflict between governmental participants and artists and activists was made explicit in the intense debate about the Danish pavilion. It emphasized the importance of artistic freedom of expression and freedom of speech but also, in the word of its curator Katerina Gregos, to challenge the use of freedom of speech 'as an empty political slogan in a debate characterized by prejudices and populism' (2011).

The pavilion was criticized by a number of politicians from the institutional political system as well as journalists and newspapers that acted as participatory claim makers in the culture war. The main critiques were that only two out of the eighteen artists in the pavilion were Danish, and that the pavilion allegedly misrepresented freedom of speech (Seeberg and Mærsk 2011). Minister for Culture Per Stig Møller did not 'see any reason to have a Danish pavilion in Venice if it does not exhibit Danish art' (Stockmann and Benner 2011). This was taken up in parliament when Danish People's Party's Pia Kjærsgaard raised the question of the number of Danish artists represented in the biennale (Kjærsgaard 2006a). Furthermore, the newspapers *Jyllands-Posten*, *Berlingske Tidende* and *Weekendavisen* criticized the pavilion for treating freedom of speech in relation to the western world (Hermansen 2011; Gress 2011; Weirup 2011; *Jyllands-Posten* 2011a, 2011b; Wivel 2011). The critique is most strikingly put by *Weekendavisen*'s Henrik Wivel, who remarks that if the pavilion wanted to represent freedom of speech, the most soluble way would be to simply exhibit Kurt Westergaard's cartoon of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban (Wivel 2011).

However, the pavilion was supported by a number of newspapers, the chairman of the state's art foundation Per Arnoldi and member of the International Visual Art Committee Christine Buhl Andersen (Stockmann and Benner 2011; Arnoldi 2011; Nielsen 2011).

Interestingly, the defence of the pavilion insists on the pavilion's importance for Denmark and the Danish economy. Buhl Andersen argues: 'In a world in which art is global we have to get attention' and that international museums and art halls had noticed Denmark and seen the opportunities in collaborating with Denmark and Danish artists:

One of the world's leading curators, Okui Enwesor, says that the Danish pavilion is among the best at the biennale. We were mentioned in the New York Times and in numerous international culture journals. BBC world makes a half an hour show about four pavilions including the Danish. This means that Denmark is noticed as a culture nation and that is of far greater value for Danish artists than if they merely disappeared in the crowd.

(Stockmann and Benner 2011)

Both defenders and critics of the pavilion are concerned with the survival and competitiveness of the nation state.

Interestingly, a number of artworks in the pavilion redistribute the arguments on freedom of speech and national preservation. In *Afghan Hound*, Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen performs stories of repressed yet powerful female voices in Afghanistan. She insists on the importance of artistic freedom, freedom of speech and women's emancipation, but at the same time she challenges western stereotypical notions of the suppression of Muslim women in Afghanistan and she insists on the agency of Afghan women.



Figure 24: Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen: *Afghan Hound* (2011). Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist.

In the performance Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen imitates voices from Afghanistan. Dressed in a costume made of hair inspired by the tradition of Afghan hound racing, she transforms when the hair moves around her body. The hair turns her into a warlord wearing a kaftan and a huge beard, into a Bacha Bazi, a boy forced to dress and dance as a girl and to be a sex slave, and into a woman, a Bacha Posh, who in her childhood was forced to dress as a boy because there were no sons in the family. Furthermore, the hair transforms her into Malalai Joya, famous for setting up underground schools for girls under the Taliban and for running for parliament and winning in a landslide and speaking up against the warlords. By referring to Malalai Joya, Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen insists on Afghan women's self-empowerment and confronts the stereotypical myths associated with the war efforts in Afghanistan. Joya has repeatedly emphasized that it is 'false' to say that Afghan culture is inherently misogynistic. The history is much more complex. In the 1950s, there was a growing women's movement in Afghanistan, but it was crushed by foreign wars and invasions. Intolerance and brutality towards women in Afghanistan did not begin with the Taliban regime, but with the fundamentalist mujahedin during the civil war (1992–96). The Taliban continued the brutality towards women, but when the Taliban was overthrown the warlords from the fundamentalist mujahedin regained power backed by the United States and the coalition. The war against the Taliban has thus merely, she argues, replaced one repressive system with another (Joya 2009). This complex history is told in *Afghan Hound* when Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen sings: 'Your western eyes/Judging/Preaching/About women's rights/You choose which conflicts you want to see/Your sympathy and aid – they're never for free.' The performance thus fully recognizes the brutality towards Afghan women, but it also insists that this violence is misrepresented in western stereotypes that hide the power structures that contribute to further suppression. *Afghan Hound* opens for a nuanced understanding of Afghan women's agency often neglected in the stereotypical myths of the coalition's 'liberation'. Thus, by challenging the stereotypes of women in Afghanistan the performance also challenges the self-representation of the coalition of nation states, which is equally stereotypically framed as always already on the side of women's emancipation.

Notes

- 1 It is not new that art engages in political meaning-construction. Hyperglobalism is in prolongation, and also is a part of other trends in contemporary art. In 2002, Britta Timm Knudsen and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen studied *reality hunger* and new realism in the 1990s and 2000s and the blurring of the boundaries between reality, art and media. This 'new realism' was, they argued, followed by a need to contextualize and insert artistic practices in societal correlations (Knudsen and Thomsen 2002). Further, Lisbeth Bonde and Mette Sandbye have pointed out that a declared political and cultural trend emerged on the Danish art scene in the early 1990s (2007) and Rune Gade and Camilla Jalving wrote about 'art that works' as a trend of the 1990s scene (Jalving and Gade 2006).

- 2 Conceptual art names a trend in which it is the idea itself, the concept, which is the artwork. The idea can be realized, materialized or documented in different media and through different tools. Conceptual art has been a key international movement since the 1960s. In Denmark, conceptual art had its breakthrough with artists such as Albert Mertz, Sven Dalsgaard, Stig Brøgger and the artists from Eks-Skolen (Bonde and Sandbye 2007: 272–73).
- 3 The focus on hyperglobalism does not mean that there are not tepid nationalist artworks. Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter, in an American context, discuss the ways in which pop culture ‘enlists’ in wars (2010). However, the examples of artists and activists who explicitly express tepid nationalism in the Danish culture war are few.
- 4 This is evident in Carsten Jensen’s (e.g. Jensen C. 2010) ongoing dispute of Danish war efforts and in the subtle metaphorical paintings and installations of birds in Peter Holst Henckel and Svend Allan Sørensen’s *But, You Shoot Birds!?* (2008). In 2009, BKS Garage held an exhibition entitled *CRW – Contemporary Reflections on War* (BKS Garage 2009) and gallery Goloss opened with *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2009), which quotes the title of a book by Slavoj Žižek. In his book, Žižek refers to Freud’s anecdote about a borrowed kettle that is returned broken. The first explanation given is that the kettle was never borrowed, the second is that the kettle was returned unbroken and the third that it was already broken when it was borrowed (Žižek 2004). Žižek and Goloss use the anecdote to point out that the reasons to invade Iraq are inconsistent and that Iraq is returned broken. Reasons to join the army are questioned by authors such as Jens Blendstrup (2010) and Jens Husum (2010). The wars are also investigated in Nørrebro Theatre’s Iraq musical *Lets Kick Ass* (Beaton 2005) and Theater Grob’s *Home, Dear Home* (Scheel-Krüger 2007) that depicts a soldier from Iraq committing suicide in a homely kitchen.
- 5 More than 1,075,000 people saw the movie and 774,000 saw the following debate. This is quite a lot in a Danish context. In comparison, an average of 1,806,000 viewers saw the most popular TV show in 2010 *The X-factor*.
- 6 Like Claus Beck-Nielsen, Rasmussen plays with identities and he uses many names. When I refer to him, I either use the name Rasmussen (used Das Beckwerk’s projects) or Thomas Skade-Rasmussen Strøbech.
- 7 The lawsuit raised demands for penalties including a fine and a personal compensation of 90,000 DKK to Thomas Skade-Rasmussen Strøbech. The latter felt abused by Das Beckwerk, who in the novel *The Sovereign* (Das Beckwerk 2008) characterizes Thomas Skade-Rasmussen Strøbech as an unpleasant sovereign and exposes details about his private life and economy. The high court acquitted Gyldendahl and Das Beckwerk (Østre Landsret 2011).
- 8 The media coverage of the lawsuit has been intense, not only in Denmark but also in the rest of Scandinavia. See Geist 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e; Andersen 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e; Bangsgaard 2011; Jyllands-Posten 2011.
- 9 Das Beckwerk responded by turning to the police and demanding grave peace (Das Beckwerk 2010).
- 10 Das Beckwerk has responded to Behrendt’s reading of his work in the article ‘Dr. Behrendt’s monster’, in which he identifies Behrendt’s ‘secret note’ (Das Beckwerk 2006a).