

Karolin Braegger: Play Dead

Fashion: "Madam Death, Madam Death!"

In Karolin Braegger's new exhibition *Play Dead*, Fashion's call for Death is answered by a polyphonic chorus of various literary quotes and fashion statements. These set pieces come together to form a play consisting of nine acts, a *Play Dead*, a dead play performed by puppets, projections and screen-printed white t-shirts. The classic white t-shirt – originally worn by the Marines under their uniform, later popularised by actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando as a symbol of rebellious masculinity and today an essential piece for any norm-core basic bitch – serves as the screen, stage and display on which the drama unfolds. The dialogues appear on the t-shirts in different fonts, turning them into wearable book pages that also allude to the graphic tee as a medium for pseudo-political messaging and commercial branding. Installed on dolls like articles of fashion and on walls like works of art, the white t-shirt functions both as an empty signifier for the fashion industry and the art market.

The exhibition title *Play Dead* evokes Mike Kelley's seminal essay "Playing with Dead Things," which he wrote for his exhibition project "The Uncanny" that followed Freud's understanding of the feeling of the uncanny as a form of frightfulness related to the long-known and familiar, something common to psychic life but estranged by repression, often related to the uncertainty over whether or not an apparently animate being might in fact be a lifeless object. Kelley found a form for this uncanny feeling in figures and figurations on the edge between life and death: dolls, dressmaker's dummies, mannequins, puppets, and automata. Originally, the essay "Playing with Dead Things" was intended as a selection of quotations on the doll and her failure to be alive or art, reworked into dialogue form for a theater piece, but Kelley never got around to it. In a way, Kelley's unrealized play with dead things is played with in Karolin's theatre play *Play Dead*, in which the figure of the undying doll becomes a projection screen for our fantasies on death, desire and fashion.

Following on from Giacomo Leopardi's romantic poem "Dialogue Between Fashion and Death" (1824), the play opens with an encounter between Mrs. Death and Fashion, *die Modistin, Madame Lamort*. Here, Fashion faces Death as her undead sister. "For fashion," Walter Benjamin wrote, "was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her."

The second act of the play introduces The Dying Swan, a pathetic character hiding behind clothes while knowing that underneath her clothes, there's an endless story, and her boyfriend

Zelig, a Woody Allen-inspired human chameleon, who takes up the looks and feelings of others as if they were his own. *Avec toi je suis moi*. But who wore it better, the supposedly authentic self or its inauthentic copy?

The subsequent acts include a Virginia Woolf-inspired monologue by The Dying Swan on failed outfit choices in face of dying trends, a dispute between Fashion and Death on fake and realness and a break-up dialogue – Zelig leaves The Dying Swan for Fashion – told through the tongue of Elfriede Jelinek: „And I am what I prefer to be: without myself. That’s how we found ourselves, by constantly losing ourselves. No, not losing ourselves by being there, but only for the purpose of being without ourselves. Fashion and me.“ The play finally ends with a dialogue between The Dying Swan and Nobody on a lost beloved t-shirt that The Dying Swan would have worn – had it not been lost – until her death.

I’m currently reading the 1929 novel “Das Weib ist ein Nichts” by Austrian writer Mela Hartwig that follows Bibiana, a female nothing, as she passes through the hands of various men: first, as the tool of an impostor, then as the muse of a poor composer, later as the mistress of a rich businessman and finally as the companion of a socialist labor leader. Each of these men completely reshapes her, giving her a new identity, a new name, a new appearance. Bibiana seems to accept these different fates in apathetic passivity. “Das Weib ist ein Nichts” – the title evokes, somewhat anachronistically, Lacan’s dictum that *la femme n’existe pas* – was given to me for my birthday, along with a Praying t-shirt saying “Father Figure”. I picture myself wearing the shirt while reading the book; identifying with the woman as the symptom of the man while taking up the position of the father, playing dad. In Karolin’s play, Fashion is to the Black Swan what men are to Bibiana, a technique of adaptation and appropriation, eine Anverwandlung. But it’s an appropriation that is also form of self-appropriation, a process of oikeiôsis through which the self not only absorbs its external environment, but also constitutes a self-relation that protects it from alienation. Karolin’s play follows this paradoxical path of appropriation through which The Black Swan becomes, through undead trends and layers of self-fashioning, who she is.

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