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F for Fake: Notes from the conversation pit

Amsterdam
Endless Installation, A Ghost Story for Adults at SMART Project Space
21/03/09 – 26/04/09

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A lecture at PSWAR's amphitheatre

Curator and critic Simon Sheikh, who lives and works in Berlin and Copenhagen, makes regular guest appearances in the Netherlands. The occasion for his lecture *F for fake: Notes on the signature, authorship and authority* is the exhibition *Endless Installation: A Ghost Story for Adults* by Public Space With A Roof (PSWAR), an artists' collective in Amsterdam currently consisting of Tamuna Chabashvili, Adi Hollander and Vesna Madzoski, at SMART Project Space.

Endless Installation is a staged encounter between three individuals from different cultural and historical backgrounds: art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), artist-architect-art historian Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965) and writer-critic-artist Meir Agassi (1947-98). The exhibition is a complex interplay of text, image and sound; a jumbled web of unattributed references divorced from their original context and therefore ripe for appropriation and re-/mis-interpretation. Sheikh's lecture is presented in the final room of the exhibition, *The Archive*, within a specially designed structure that functions on its exterior as a library (with a vast collection of source material and theoretical texts) and on its interior as a conversation pit. PSWAR describe this structure as "an amphitheatre" or "the brain" of their project.

Installation view of the 'Archive' part of 'Endless Installation: A Ghost Story for Adults'

Sheikh begins his lecture by focusing on how the idea of the joke, forgery and trickery, can be used to bring issues of authorship into focus. The title of his presentation is taken from Orson Welles' final film, the ficto-documentary *F for fake* (1974), which contains interweaving narratives relating to art forgery. The opening scene, where Welles performs a magic trick for a young boy, establishes a metaphor for art (and film) production as a series of illusions.

Sheikh lays the theoretical groundwork for his lecture with a brief mention of Roland Barthes' text 'The Death of the Author' (1967). Barthes' text has clearly been a source of inspiration for PSWAR as a collection of his essays appears in their "Archive" and they use a short quotation from 'The Death of the Author' at the start of their introductory text to the exhibition.

The discussion is brought to the art world when Sheikh raises the issue of assumed identities with

Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1917) which, as is well known, was submitted for exhibition under the assumed identity of R. Mutt. As a counterpart to Duchamp, Sheikh mentions the first modernist "superstars": Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí. Despite Picasso's quite divergent styles throughout his career, it was the signature of the artist that was most important and which made him "the perfect artist of capital". Sheikh continues by addressing the move in the 1950s towards the transferral of "authenticity" to the artist's own body. Use of the pseudonym or collective authorship (as used by *Group Material* for example) have historically been a way to sidestep the fetishism of the signature, the artist and the authorial voice.

Installation view of Endless Installation: A Ghost Story for Adults

If there is a sustained argument throughout the lecture it is that authorship is a concept that, despite efforts to elude it, will always be present. Rather than assigning authorship through a process of authentication, his lecture suggests it is more interesting to consider why and when we consider an authorial voice necessary. Here he follows Michel Foucault's argument in 'What is an Author?' (1969). Since it is impossible to abandon the notion of the author, according to Foucault, it is more important to question the "author-function" and how authorship is constructed through context and social relations: the author as a "complex and variable function of discourse".

Although Sheikh's lecture doesn't refer directly to *Endless Installation*, it is certainly present in the minds of the audience. At its conclusion, moderator Noa Roei relates the lecture back to the exhibition by asking PSWAR about their stance on the signature. Is their project, she asks, an argument against signature through signature? She cuts to the crux of the matter, in my opinion, which concerns PSWAR's relationship to their source material and how they construct their own authorial stamp on the exhibition. When PSWAR decline to comment at this point, they effectively sustain the ambiguity surrounding artistic identity and authorship presented in their exhibition, leaving us to conclude that on this matter they have no definitive answers.

Reacties