

Werkschau - Nan Hoover at the Academy Gallery (by the Art Academy Düsseldorf) in Dusseldorf, Germany, 2016.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESENTATION

exhibition review by Rob Perrée

She taught for almost a decade. She was popular with her students. She was more mentor than teacher. Her influence can be seen in the works of some of her students. It was therefore not surprising that the first retrospective exhibition after her death - in 2008 - was presented in the gallery of the Düsseldorf Art Academy. They owed it to her.

Because I have followed Nan Hoover's work since the early 1980s, seen it in various locations and in various galleries and museums, it was obviously interesting and important to see it again after several years. It did not in any way disappoint. Equally thrilling was to see how, in which setting and in which concept I would see the work.

At that point, the exhibition showed its weak side. It grappled with a problem that occurs frequently with exhibitions of works by deceased artists: how do you present the work of someone who is no longer alive, who considered the way of presentation important, but who left no clear instructions about this, and who worked with a medium - video - which has not only undergone constant technical renewal, but has also continually developed new forms and increasingly been distanced from its experimental origins?

In her early years, Hoover - still living in New York - mostly made drawings and paintings, and it was when she settled in Amsterdam that she began experimenting with the then new medium of video, an area in which she would come to play a pioneering role and gain international recognition. Her early video works already revealed the great themes of her work: light, movement, time and space, and their mutual relationships. She set up lights and turned her (static) camera on parts of her body or on paper objects, then moved these very slowly and a subtle play of light and shadow arose. The works lasted as long as the recordings. Real time was essential for her. Editing was out of the question. The viewer had to experience the suggestive, quiet, slow 'movements in light', immerse themselves in them and allow their imaginations free rein. An intimate relationship had to be engendered between the viewer and the work. Her performances were based on the same principle, and her photographic works (colour and black and white) and her black and white drawings were in fact snapshots of that process. Although they show frozen moments, they suggest movement. A presentation of Nan Hoover's work must live up to these intentions. With regard to her videos works, in Düsseldorf this was hardly achieved.

The exhibition consisted partly of archival material - one room - and mainly of existing works that have been presented before. Regardless of how interesting archives are, because they often tell the history of a work or can give an idea of the choices an artist makes, the question is whether you should include archival material as part of an exhibition. How does the average viewer value it? Does it have a de-mythologising effect? Is it an - unintentional - posthumous reckoning of the choices made by an artist? Is the material suitable for presentation? Is it perhaps not too crude, too 'amateurish'? Does a viewer see past it? Is its value not limited to connoisseurs and insiders? I found that part of the exhibition fascinating, but most visitors quickly passed it by.

The main part of the exhibition consisted of video works, a large number of photographic works (some of which are rarely seen), a few drawings, and two installations. Her performances could be interpreted from the photographs - recordings of them were not included. The sculptures were missing. Each choice

is debatable, of course, but I thought the selection succeeded in providing an impression of a multifaceted oeuvre.

The presentation of the video works was an obstacle to me. Most videos were shown on a large, dominant monitors placed on the ground in a lighted room without anywhere to sit. How could I possibly lose myself in a work that lasts at least ten minutes, and one in which the slow and subtle shifts in which light and shadow are the key protagonists? I could not even look at them directly; I had to look down on them. Sitting down to experience them was impossible.

A few video works were projected large onto the walls of darkened spaces. At first this seemed to be a much better way to do full justice to them. The spaces provided a certain degree of seclusion, of intimacy. Because the images were at eye level it was easier for viewers to focus and be carried away by them. However, the works date from the 1980s and were made with equipment of that time. 'Blowing up' images was still in its infancy back then, and video projectors were not yet widespread. The resolution of the images was matched to the small dimensions of a TV screen. Projecting such images now in such a large size inevitably means that they lose visual quality. With sensitive works like *Desert* this is especially painful. The coarse graininess of the images is perhaps a different kind of charm, a quality that the artist did not have in mind when making the work.

I understand that it is difficult to create conditions that allow artworks to fully come into their own. The availability of rooms, of appropriate equipment and of financial means can each in their own way become a hindrance. I also understand that the way the average museum visitor looks at art has undergone changes over the years. In particular since the 1990s viewers have been accustomed to seeing video works as installations or as large wall projections in spaces you can walk in and out of, where seeing a work from start to finish is unnecessary, and where subtlety is often exchanged for effect. The question is whether a curator should simply go with this flow and be guided by it. That question was raised large as life in Düsseldorf.

After my visit to the Nan Hoover exhibition I went to an overview of the work of Agnes Martin, 500 metres away, in K20. I know that Martin was one of Nan Hoover's favourite artists. The simplicity, the directness, the minimum, the subtlety: both artists shared these qualities. The curator of this exhibition, however, had it easier. The media that were exhibited - drawings and paintings - are not only familiar to the average museum visitor, but also their presentation is not subject to the technical possibilities and limitations of an electronic medium such as video.

The problems revealed by this exhibition - making an archive suitable for an exhibition, exhibiting works made with redundant equipment, and showing works by a deceased artist who left no clear presentation instructions behind - call for a meeting by expert stakeholders. A symposium might be too ambitious a framework, but a thematic day would certainly be useful. Something for the Nan Hoover Foundation to think about perhaps?

Rob Perrée

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