



Come As You Are
by Barbara Kapusta

For her show at Saprophyt Johanna Unzueta created an environment of shelter- and tent-like constructions the visitors can walk through and enter. To build the constructions she used the material of the previous installations. She transformed the gray fabric of the last show into roofs and walls for her shelters, Jenni Tischers wall painting became basis for another painting, Sonia Leimers glass panel now functions as a huge window. Julia Seyrs painting is used as a barrier. These preexisting pieces are not used as referential objects, but as plain working material. The artist hereby creates an environment that brings into mind topics such as manual labor, handicraft and autonomy. The patched-up shelters remind of alternate ways of life, autonomous communities and hippie movements of the 60ies as well as of nomadic groups, tribes and housing conditions in poor city areas, slums or of marginalized groups. Nevertheless by constructing these very fragile spaces, she opens the space for herself. Her pieces do not only resemble shelters but also actually function as one for Johanna Unzueta and her work.

Inside one of the constructions, behind the glass window, she sets up a video beamer, projecting still images through the glass onto the ceiling of the space. The pictures show works of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica in combination with works of Alexander Rodtschenko & Warwara Stepanowa. They all are a reference to the influence of everyday life in form and content matter in modern and post-modern art. It is no coincidence that in this context she refers to an artist like Hélio Oiticica, whose works lined up with formal strategies and aesthetic concerns of contemporary sculpture but apart from that included a very strong criticism of the social and artistic conditions in Middle and South American countries. His work itself includes a political vision on everyday life but is also a critique on art that is contextually and formally abstracted from common issues regarding life and living.

Johanna Unzueta's work emerges out of a similar dualism. The title of the show - Come as you are, is an open invitation to people regardless of who they are or where they come from. Of course this again can be linked to a very open minded autonomous way of living and acceptance of the other. Besides this generalized reading one has to think of the title as a more direct connection to her art practice. Autonomy is what she claims for the visitor as well as for herself and her work. Read like this, the title and her work transform into a critique of regulative tendencies in social, cultural and artistic systems and in continuation into a critique of the concept of Saprophyt.

At this point Johanna Unzueta's work starts a critical discussion about the relationship between site-specific art practices and the autonomy of artwork and artist. Thereby she exhibits a main issue concerning the Saprophyt concept that has played an important and central role for every artist so far. On the one hand she demands autonomy of thought that of course is fragile and vulnerable, but necessary. Without any autonomy art would be conceptually empty and arbitrary. On the other hand – as ignoring the surrounding would mean just to add another work to the space and reduce it to a layer - she reacts to the given condition by formulating a critique.

She neither defines her work as mere site-specific installation - what would limit her personal attitude - nor as a totally autonomous piece that ignores all preexisting structures and keeps on with its own strategy. She leaves her work open to be both - a reaction to the previous works and the concept of the space, but also a statement about her own art practice. What Johanna Unzueta performs is a balancing act between her work, the space and the viewer, an act that combines her critique with a gesture to participate and to appreciate what she created.