



REVIEW - 10 MAR 2016

Niklas Lichti

BY MELANIE OHNEMUS

Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna, Austria



Niklas Lichti, *BioLife*, 2016, 150 x 120 x 250 cm, photo: Georg Petermichl, courtesy: the artist & Galerie Emanuel

Layr, Vienna

Three figures in jumpsuits, with fluorescent lights for heads, sat on the floor. Each held a transparent 'laptop' made of glass. Beyond them, at a slightly raised level, two figures gathered at a table, one standing, one below (all works: *BioLife*, 2016). All wore custom-made overalls in muted shades, slightly padded and stitched in large wavy lines. One wore a jacket with a mask worked into the shoulder. These five figures were arranged along an arc following the main axis of the space. It looked almost as though Niklas Lichti wanted to emphasize that he had chosen the most obvious possible installation option for his exhibition *BioLife* – that is, as if he wanted to minimize the potential for symbolic meaning in the constellation.

Although at first one tended to personalize the figures, meeting them could hardly be classified as an actual human encounter. They exuded a ghostly air. Both animated and empty, the screens of these glass laptops resting on the figures' knees also served as displays, showing diverse UV-printed images, mostly personal pictures and material collected by the artist, including photographs and a woodcut – all juxtaposed.

Another striking feature was the diversity of media. On one laptop, the images were engraved on the glass; on the others, they appeared as UV prints. The motifs ranged from children's toys to people and groups of dog owners to a mini-golf course and arrays of chairs. It was not entirely clear how all this was meant to cohere: individual elements indiscriminately presented side-by-side: fragmented and disparate. In the group of figures that appeared so clear-cut at first glance, the diversity of media and the nesting of different levels and modes of display had both a captivating and a distancing effect: having begun by seeing mainly the figures and gaging their specific mood, one quickly saw that the installation also served to discuss an entire world of images that seemed to need decoding – although, on the other hand, possibly not intended for that at all. It was like wandering about in a world that throws up many signs, all of them illegible. Like being the dog in whose voice Lichti wrote the press release, commenting on the world and its relationship with its master. After all, the laptops were mounted at a height of around 40 centimetres – average dog's-eye level.

In terms of content, then, one was left feeling rather hungry. If only one knew the stories

behind these pictures. But the point here seems to have been precisely to merely hint at the immediacy associated with private meaning, before balancing or even generalizing it with analytical distance. A UV print applied to one of two full-length windows facing the street listed all of Lichti's drawings to date, as well as the titles of some past exhibitions. They merged like a relief into a photograph of the house across the street, appearing to connect with the outside world. This photograph, enriched with figures from previous shows, provided another example of the artist's strategy of reusing his own personal grammar to achieve something like a construction of the world – a construction that generalizes through transference, thus potentially lifting itself out of subjectivity.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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First published in Issue 23

Spring 2016

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