

PERFORMANCE

Anne Imhof: Sex

Moments after entering Anne Imhof's *Sex* my initial reaction was laughter – the kind of laughter that bubbles up, uncontrollably – when confronted by an absolute seriousness established and governed by a group you are not part of, whose symbols and rituals are pointedly displayed as the glue stitching that group together. At best, this feels like watching that viral YouTube video of cybergoths dancing under a bridge in small town Germany, where one's laughter travels out of cruelty and into some kind of reverence towards the group's commitment to its subcultural property, despite how bad it looks and sounds. In *Sex*, however, I quickly understood that laughter was the incorrect response, and to continue down that path might signal envy towards the performers, most of whom possess a generically European/North American ideal of youthful attractiveness and artful coolness. Swiftly eager to repudiate the risk I ran of presenting this reaction by laughing, I had already experienced the frustrated pattern of feeling that manifests the fundamental quality of *Sex*. The work produces an introspective, inescapable sense of visibility for the audience, tightly controlled by the iconography, choreography and tone of this work. All the possible criticism and applause feels predetermined and accounted for by the massively crushing weight of the work's two primary, highly mannered, affects: ennui and self-possession.

An iconographic clutter marks *Sex* and, unlike *Faust*, Imhof's Golden Lion-winning work for the 2017 Venice Biennale, seems to take primacy over the work's choreography. *Sex*'s imagery revolves around the 1990s/Millennium revival in today's fashion and youth culture. Yet rather than driving towards an authentic period style, Imhof weaves through contemporary references. For every Darkthron T-shirt, you have a Bitcoin T-shirt. For every pair of faded blue jeans and grungy hair, you have an Alexandra Ocasio Cortez sweater. Instead of smoking, you have vaping. The period references conjured through style, music and the performers' attitudes largely evoke white, small town, teenage disaffection. At its most extreme, this musters a sense of impending violence: I thought about the Columbine massacre and the pastime of burning churches in the Norwegian black metal scene. At its most wistful, the tone of *Sex* reminded me of the romantic, occult alienation of *Donnie*

Darko, 2001, and other portentous portraits of suburban outsiders.

The Teutonic overtones that dominated *Faust* are shifted here towards evoking Germany's relation to the US. US dollars appear on the floor and on T-shirts, and the aesthetic and sonic references to music and subculture revolve primarily around American grunge and heavy metal, especially in the first two tanks of Tate Modern's basement. We see a towering stack of Marshall amplifiers, while the Fender Jaguar played by Imhof's close collaborator and partner, Eliza Douglas, nods to the guitar favoured by US rockers such as Kurt Cobain, Billy Corgan, J Mascis and Thurston Moore. In the third tank, grunge is supplanted by the suggestion of a generic techno club, in the form of strobe lights and a queue to get in, adjudicated by gallery attendants/bouncers. This atmosphere speaks specifically to the US-German connection: while Berlin may be the world capital of techno, the genre originated in Detroit. This left me thinking

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about the African-American artist Tony Cokes's excellent film *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?*, 2006-08, a work which explores the whitening of techno in Germany, and the racialisation of authenticity within the genre. As a friend, Aurelia Guo, pointed out on a lively Facebook thread about the work, *Sex* seems like a struggle for 'cool' within whiteness: from the grunge references to the proximity of the styling to the fashion house Vetements' fetishising of post-Soviet, eastern European aesthetics (Douglas is muse to Demna Gvasalia, Vetements' head designer and currently creative director of Balenciaga).

The soundtrack heightened the subcultural styling of the cast, with a repeated combination of motifs from classical and operatic music set alongside grunge and mournful alt-rock. In one of the opening sequences, where four dancers move in a square formation flanked either side by the audience, the music sounded like a karaoke version of Metallica's *Nothing Even Matters*. So, even where the trappings of genre appeal most heavily to mawkish misery, this is manifested in an artificial, second-hand style, putting some distance between the original and the revival. Among all these signifiers of small-town whiteness, the performers who do not visually conform to that subject position

stand out, especially as many of the white cast members look eerily similar to one another, suggesting a familial arrangement. If youthful rebellion proliferates as the subject of *Sex*, the second level of abstraction containing these images is the sacred and the profane, ranging from the inclusion of drug paraphernalia to votive candles and burning flowers. This evokes the Venn diagram between Christian imagery and youth cultural transgression that is just so 1990s (think of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* or Courtney Love's adoration of Catholic iconography). The coupling of Christian imagery and rock gestures also repeats in the choreographic sequence in which one performer after another climbs a ladder, spreads their arms crucifix-like and then falls onto their colleagues, momentarily crowd-surfing. Performers also evoke the correspondence between rock and ritual (as already noted by Dan Graham in 1983's *Rock my Religion*) in their headbanging, which forms, as in *Faust*, a central gesture in *Sex*.

The iconographic burden of this work suggests that despite being a performance, *Sex* is very much about images, with the work primarily documented in stills by the photographer Nadine Fraczkowski. The tableaux-like moments work like paintings, or friezes, strongest where multiple performers are arranged geometrically or in a line. The effect of these arrangements is that, once you look elsewhere and return your gaze to where a tableau was set, its disappearance takes on an uncanny feeling, as if the performers were statues, and should have been immobile. This relates to how the most compelling aspects of *Sex* are sculptural: from the violent-looking aluminum curves and wooden platforms to the collections of objects which lined the first room, including drug scales, smashed phones, bongos, bondage-type equipment and oranges. Through these object collections and sculptural aspects an entire, but partly inaccessible 'scene' is suggested, with the architecture standing as elusive in its function, hinting equally towards a sex club, a hangman's platform and an institutional dormitory. These aspects are also the most obstinately queer elements within *Sex*, correspondent with other recent sculptural explorations of this terrain, such as Park McArthur's object collections or Jesse Darling's recent work.



Anne Imhof
Sex 2019

Sex's tightly stitched blanket of references testifies to Imhof's precision and observational capacities, meaning that when an image doesn't fit within the tightly drawn territory, it jars in the way that a badly chosen belt destroys an otherwise immaculate look. The most arbitrary moment arrives in the bags of Tate and Lyle sugar, which at one point were emptied onto the performers, pooling among tousled hair. Why centre the sugar brand other than as an exceptionally literal reference to *Sex*'s production within a gallery that has historic ties to arguably the most blood-soaked industry in the history of capital? A similarly trite disavowal of the institution occurred in the placing of a can of Stella Artois on Imhof's Golden Lion. Perhaps such gestures only seek to parallel the angst-ridden, trapped tone that propels the entire work, and are supposed to feel like institutional critique throwing a tantrum.

The problem with *Sex*, and I guess this is what the sugar attempts to acknowledge, is that once inside Tate, techno, whips, drug paraphernalia and headbanging lose any minute vestige of subversion they may still have and are immediately brought into the realm of populist, often middlebrow cultural programming. When you overhear two extraordinarily posh, West London ladies entering the 'club' tank discussing how many stars *Sex* got in the *Telegraph* and *Evening Standard*, the references

to sex, subculture and drugs risk becoming merely another chance for the bourgeoisie to gawp at more marginal forms of existence under the sign of 'culture'. Which would be fine if there were some images that triangulated the work's seriousness and went beyond standing as a kind of entry-level transgression. As the evening progressed, the atmosphere of the work began to mimic the feeling of lonely, exposed boredom you can find readily in nightclubs. There's no release, just an endlessly coiling sense of control, where the performers are the only ones permitted a sense of temporarily breaking out, largely through their own specialisation or, better put, individuation.

Because of the youth-culture aspect of this work, in the days after and while writing this up, I ended up thinking a lot about Mike Kelley. Kelley approached many of the same themes as Imhof: Christianity, repression, subculture, cults and whiteness using similar strategies of choreography, collecting and obstinately elusive objects. John C Welchman once described Kelley as 'the defiler, not the celebrant of rarity' and this precisely maps the gap between his and Imhof's approaches to the above terrain. As an artwork that stakes out the 1990s/early 2000s as a series of period references, *Sex* also made me think about Bernadette Corporation and how, again, the difference between their engagement with fashion, youth culture and alienation often took the form of a joke, sometimes, however peculiarly, by explicitly

militant politics as a counterpoint. While the limits of an ironic approach to the subjects Imhof engages are manifold, the total absence of humour or even pleasure manifested a melancholic sentimentality within *Sex*, where self-destructiveness is only ever a game without a wager, a masquerade. As a work, *Sex* seems to eat its own tail, suggesting that the sex one experiences within *Sex* is largely onanistic, a quality which the art theorist Kerstin Stakemeier saw as linked with androgyny as it appeared in Imhof's earlier work, *Angst*. That work, like *Faust*, presented barely comprehensible forms of life and modes of relating which bound the performers together in a compellingly oblique manner that seemed to step desperately, yet only just, beyond the social norms of our present. In contrast, the overburdened subcultural specificity of *Sex* transforms hermetic mysteriousness into a game driving viewers towards totting up how many references one 'gets', an experience which is readily compatible with the favoured pastime of the culture vulture, if nothing else. ■

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