

Undress/ Redress by Noemi Lakmaier

It's just a picture – another image onscreen. This time it's a woman in a bare room. Perhaps she's being dressed, or perhaps she's being undressed. Or perhaps she's waiting.

In 'Undress/ Redress', Noemi Lakmaier and her collaborator for this piece, Jordan McKenzie, are part art object, part performance, and part real people. Over the course of a day, McKenzie undresses and redresses Lakmaier inside a bare space. Occasionally, he leaves her and goes to mingle with the audience. The audience watches on CCTV screens at the entrance to the building, or we peer into the performance space itself – a makeshift room inside a gallery, with viewing panels cut into its walls.

Lakmaier says she hates lying in her work, and the duration of this piece means she and McKenzie stretch their movements into time – well beyond the limits of pretence. Nevertheless, the woman you are watching is not Noemi Lakmaier. She is an aesthetic object, to be seen but not touched. And the man you see is not Jordan McKenzie – he's a performer. Even you are not simply yourself. The moment you choose your passive viewing station, you step into the shadowy role of 'audience member.'

Noemi Lakmaier's work is concerned with the tangle of social codes tethered to every relationship. In 'Working Moments' (2010), for example, she carried out jobs in arts administration – impersonating real members of the workforce, and subverting office culture by dressing inappropriately. The piece survives as a series of photographs by Sabine Gruhn. (As a series of performative interventions, it has other ramifications that can't be tracked.)

In 'We Are For You Because We Are Against Them' (2009), Lakmaier asked volunteers to sit inside individual fibreglass spheres, then hold a dinner party. The guests negotiated food and small talk alongside their new, sculptural physicality. They ate in front of a gallery audience, and a video camera filming from above.

In these two pieces, Lakmaier constructed an absurd scenario using equal parts humour and convention. As a result, the artwork occupied a space between real and imaginary social relations. It tested the limits of acceptable behaviour for the people taking part, and it explored the variations of implicit and complicit observation in the people watching.

In 'Undress/ Redress', it's not humour that's the (un)structuring principle of the work, however, but power. Dressed in formal clothing, are McKenzie and Lakmaier acting out a business transaction? Is their relationship connected to their gender, their age, their physicality? Is the attention McKenzie gives Lakmaier borne of love, sexual attraction, or a more medicalised kind of care?

Lakmaier uses her body as material and her body, she says, 'comes with what it is.' Her disability plays a part in 'Undress/ Redress' as one of the associations that floats through the work, and keeps Lakmaier, McKenzie, you and me adrift between individual and symbolic status.

This is not (just) a picture. It's a cracked mirror. What do you see?

Written by Mary Paterson. Mary Paterson is a writer and producer. www.open-dialogues.blogspot.com