

Thomas R. Huber

„Striking a blow“

Santiago Sierra's works as examples of an Aesthetic of Encounter

What good are images, what is the use of art? As a key medium in visual culture, art is as visible as defining in today's world. Art serves as a crucial communication medium, not only visualizing but creating public opinions. Art is a space for experience and reflection, for learning and trying out, where not only the perception of the others but also the acting within social processes can be deeply changed. Nevertheless, especially in the area of “political art”, where the visualization of sociopolitical discourses is subsumed as well as participatory and activist strategies, the ways of interaction between aesthetics and ethics remain vague.¹

Using the example of some works by Santiago Sierra, this paper examines the potential of art as a space for experiencing the Others and drafts the basics of an Aesthetic of Encounter. Also beyond classic participatory strategies, also without an immediate live experience, also within auctorial, finite work concepts, processes can take place, in the course of which ethical questions about coexistence inevitably enter the space of contemplation. Encounters in the protected space of the finite work are further away from everyday reality, but give much more freedom for the reflection of the self. Therefore, those work concepts are no counterdraft to participation, but realize within one and the same discourse another quality of intersubjectivity. In this paper I express my primary perceiving, my mostly stereotype classifying, in short statements, put under the illustrations at the end of the text.

Santiago Sierra's works, where people are acting under restrictive conditions, take place in a painful narrowing of aesthetics and ethics. They confront with the Others and challenge all present identities. The production of images is directly coupled with the discrimination of people. The only way out of the work leads through a critical revision of the connections between aesthetics and ethics.² This requires a sub-

stantial clarification of how we create our own images inside the experiential space of art, and which incentives and forces are necessary to bring us into the reflection of those images. They work as essential links in the coexistence and contribute substantially to the development of social relations – under the condition that they are used in a creative way.

Aesthetics and ethics – that basically means perceiving and acting. There are many examples in contemporary art, where situations are created that make the contemplation from the distance of a shielded viewing position impossible. The attendants are getting personally touched in a way, that initiates a sustained interaction of perceiving and acting. This incentive can be, as in Sierra's works, the inability to cope with the gap between subaltern service and aesthetic experience of human presence. But there are many other artistic concepts of encounter, that open up the space behind the images and ask burning questions about the relation between stereotype and lived individuality. Teresa Margolles, for instance, turns in many of her works the encounter with the (dead) Others into an immediate corporeal experience. In many of her older works, visual representations are lacking completely. The visitors of her rooms only have their interior (stereotype) images, while the Others are contaminating their bodies in a subtle form. They invade physically, but are not in the images that are at hand for the recipients. Another example: Before the foundation of the *Immigrant Movement International*, Tania Bruguera has realized numerous experiential spaces of insecurity, where the visitors, in the looks of the acting Others, are freezing into images by means of repression and identity as well as physical threat.

All those artistic strategies are aiming for the creation of an intersubjective distance, be it between form and content, between image and issue, between body and identity. This structure allows to open a dynamic field, which serves me as a reflection space for dealing with

the routines of my perceiving, feeling and acting. For that kind of art, which explicitly addresses the encounter of identities, intersubjectivity means, that I actively step into the process as a perceiving and reflecting person, and that my identity always plays an important role here. I get motivated to challenge hegemonially defined stereotypes – and not through a simple affirmation of idealizing counter-images, but through the initiation of a performative dialogue, where I encounter the Others: Those around me as well as those inside myself. This dialogue basically requires to be ready for letting the Others really step into the encounter – not only as signs, respectively sign vehicles, that have in its object status always the quality of stereotypes. In intersubjective processes the experience of encounter is prevailing over the reading of signs, and within the interaction the difference gets effective as vivid distance.

The encounter is the nucleus of every social process. Every encounter is an interplay of perceiving and acting. The perceiving, being a sensorial process, is primarily directed outwards, towards its object. But as a consciousness process it concerns also the own constitution as a perceiving subject. I am relating the Others to my self and am bringing them into a shaping process as objects of perception.³ Already the primary experience has shaping quality, because it proceeds through the comparison with my own – my identity, the structure of my consciousness with its values, images, stereotypes. Being those, who I am using in my subjective perception for the confirmation of my self, or whom I am sending into a transformation process, the Others are screens for the projection of highly charged affective images. They serve for my self assurance as well as for the permanent reformation of my identity.⁴

People in artworks, as well as in other performative genres, generally encounter the audience in a special way. Exhibited, in their living presence yet always also appearing beyond the concrete artistic discourse, they are existing in a kind of double presence, and all the iconic is emerging from the sensual abundance of life. But when the work addresses subalternity, and when that issue is staged as radically as by Sierra, a serious occupation with the ethic quality of the look gets inevitable.

Perceiving is a bipolar process, in which we are not only receiving but also actively creating. Its effect is not confined to my consciousness, but touches the Others as well. The experience of their presence conditions the interior mindset as well as the corporeal bearing, the form of acting. Already the look is an active statement. While looking, I assign the Others with images from my consciousness and ascribe them an identity. The formation of identity is always a social process, an oscillation between inscription and self formulation in action and reaction – and as such never free from questions of power. On the other side, the look offers the possibility for a reflection process, that points out how internal stereotype images without any specific relation with the perceived are instinctively inscribed in the Others. Reflection happens in a permanent interplay: Perceiving the Others; perceiving the emotions and images triggered thereby in the own consciousness; acting in the concrete situation (depending on the circumstances); perceiving the Others again in relation to the own self. This process shakes the rigid dialectical mechanisms. Stereotype identifications are getting disputable, and in the same time self-awareness can emerge from the conscious experience of personal reaction patterns. In that way, the dialectic of the self and the Others will be broken up.

Artworks offer experiential spaces for intersubjective encounters. Here, the essential phases of the formation of identity – desire, degradation into the object position, transformation through the reflected exchange with the Others – can be experienced. By actively participating in those identity processes, I am experiencing myself as a representative of a hegemonial sociocultural framework, who is at least indirectly pushed into the position either of the offender or of the victim. Here, at the latest, the encounter reveals an ethic component, which motivates to a much more profound reflection of the perceiving as this would be the case in an encounter without such explicit connotation.

Every encounter happens in images. Be it the representations of the Others with the means of art, be it images that I am making in their presence – during the encounter, there is always that phase of “objectification”, where I am fixating my counterpart in stereo-

types, respectively where I experience myself in that fixation. As iconic representations, images always have the character of the stereotypical. In connection with the visualization of people this is quickly turning into an ethic problem. But (stereotype) images are the essential media in the encounter with the Others. Their elimination can never be the point, because only through them the subjective orientation in the world, especially the formation of identity in dialogue with the Others, is possible. It is in the stereotypes, where the intrinsic connection between internal and external images manifests itself. Crucial for a change in the perceiving and the thereby triggered sociopolitical processes is the mobilization of the images through an intersubjective dialogue. This requests a moment of intense encounter, where I become aware of the discrepancy between the representation and the living individuality.

The way Santiago Sierra designs encounters in his works is regarded as provocation. Mostly the indignation is ignited by the understanding that he transfers “life” directly into “art” without respecting their “limits”. Those are parameters of discourse, which routinely get activated, when there is a lack of sublimating artistic translation of topics dealing in the collective consciousness with systematic injustice. In the western culture art is still rooted in the tradition of idealism, wherefore specific expectations are tied to this medium. But Sierra neither transforms the reality into an artistically sublimated idea, nor does he bring up any concrete message. Instead, he confronts the aesthetics of a classic genre rooted in the idealistic tradition – minimal and concept art – with the reality of exploitation and discrimination. In terms of the aesthetic contract, these works are showing too little and all at once too much: They are lacking visible artistic surplus value and offer instead an overdose of life reality. The fierce reactions and massive conflicts, which they trigger regularly, confirm the transformative power of art in general and of those actions, readily labelled “political”, in particular.

Inscription of subalternity

Sierra does not confine himself to the representation of subalterns. He produces them in his works in various ways.⁵ In the first examples of that kind he paid

people for enduring massive manipulations on their bodies. (Fig. 1) Subsequently, labours were demanded by the actors, that were useless from a pragmatic point of view. For that, the local minimum wage was paid. (Fig. 2, 3) In the last years Sierra has shifted the emphasis mainly on the procedure of punishment. Collective or individual guilt has to be expiated by standing still and mute in the art space. (Fig. 4) In his works, Sierra creates neatly defined roles, that allow the actors not the least space for individual expression and development. By remunerating them for a service, he guarantees from the beginning a subaltern relation. The actors carry their biographical background into the artwork. They take part (with very few exceptions), because they need the money. Their class affiliation is not only the reason for their participation – it is the very issue. The actors are here for work.

The confrontation thrives on the immediate corporeality⁶ of the encounter. While the artwork as an individual expression is generally already an Other per se, those works, which represent the Others in their corporeality and deal with questions of identity not only in images and signs but explicitly, challenge me as even more, because they address me directly in my own identity and trigger unconscious reflexes and reactions. With the radical de-individualization Sierra has separated the actors' minds from their bodies. This causes a massive disturbance of the dialogue during the encounter, which still grounds on a certain balance between subject and object positions. Intersubjectivity becomes impossible, where the Others are only present as body objects. This explicit disturbance of intersubjectivity is an important feature of the aesthetic of encounter in the space of subalternity.

The look fixes the acting people in their subaltern position and simultaneously sends the one who looks into the area of the exploiters and suppressors. The restriction of the visibility of individuality makes the stereotypes come to the fore. They facilitate discrimination due to the mere fact, that the Other as stereotype does not look back any more at eye level – in dialogue – and therefore becomes available for inscriptions ad libitum. All inscriptions appear as stereotypes. However, during the encounter they affect not only the actors, but also the recipients, as they

categorize everybody in victims and offenders. The condition of subalternity always entails a fixation of the identity in stereotypes. Sierra creates spaces of confrontation, where the perceiving is strongly influenced by the experience of corporeal presences. Subalternity is induced into the artwork by assigning discriminating labour. The actors are fixed in this physical function and thus caught in a role as servants. Two processes meet here: The Others are getting objectified first in the act of perceiving, and second also physically, according to the discriminatory frameset of the work. The former is a temporary, albeit essential phase in the encounter. The latter is the core of Sierra's artistic strategy and causes a massive disturbance of the habitual aesthetic discourse.

Sierra is anxious to avoid any sublimation. The essence of his works lies in transfer. To him this means only the dislocation from one sector of the capitalist system into another, but nevertheless – and this provides the irritating impact of his works – also a transfer from one level of perceiving to another: From the socioeconomic macrostructure into art. Exploitation and discrimination as basic structures of our world order are represented by Sierra through reconstruction. Neither does he sublimate the issue into a distinct image, nor does he follow the principle of documentation, that is the interpreting forming of reality. Instead, he remains in the mentioned basic structure: The presence of the people in his works is an affirmation of reality – he is working with the status quo under the given conditions of life.⁷ The unique characteristic consists in the consequent renunciation of any aesthetic interface, that would allow the escape into sublimation.⁸

Invariable remain during that transfer not only the capitalist regime, but also the people. Outside as inside the artwork they do their job, and the payment of minimum wages appears as a kind of sign for that one-to-one relation. Sierra does not consider it appropriate to talk about the people engaged in his works as “actors”, because he sees the reality of the labour getting blurred by that term so close to theatre and performance.⁹ Nonetheless, I am using this term, because labour receives a double meaning here: It is a concrete service, but inevitably gains an aesthetic

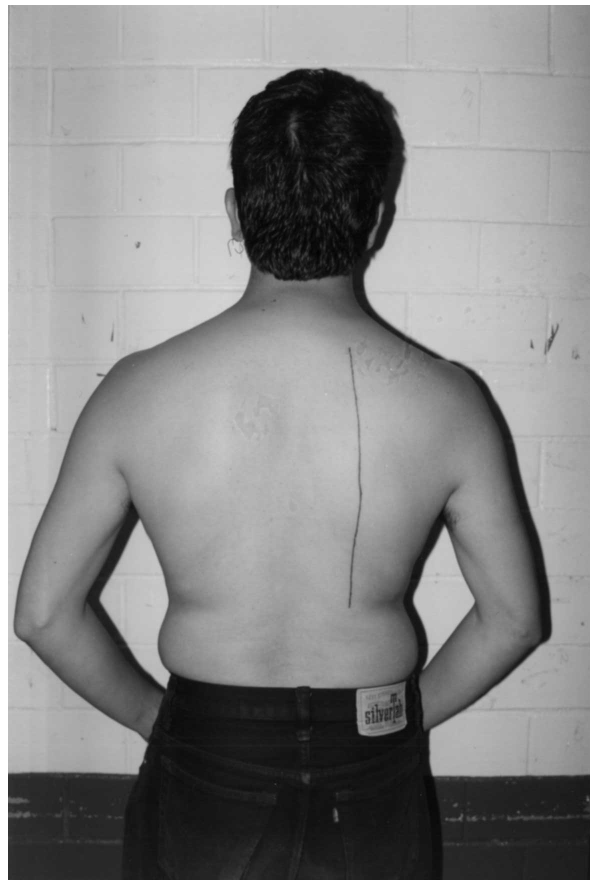


Fig. 1: *Line of 30 cm tattooed on a remunerated person*, Mai 1998, 51 Regina Street, Mexico City, Mexico.

For fifty dollars a man agreed to have a vertical line tattooed in his back. After that he was photographed facing the wall. In the photo I am fascinated by the physical presence of the man in bright flashlight: The immaculateness of his skin where the line appears even more brutal; the gloss in his hair, the midriff bulge above the tight waistband. And I perceive, that the line is not exactly straight. I am seeing this man, and he doesn't see me. Invisibility and absence of individuality – I don't want to see him into the eyes.

surplus value in the context of a performative artwork, which transforms it into a significant political statement.

Punishment and subversion

Making subalternity perceptible in art is an act that always crosses social borders and critically revises the structures of the art business based on elitist distinction. Sierra is working pointedly with the art specific habit of perception, the opening of the senses, the acceptance of proximity to the Others, respectively the active approach towards them. Here, I expect art as sublimation, and here it is, where I get stricken by the “blow” – the radical representation of people in subal-



Fig. 2: Group of people facing the wall and person facing into a corner, Oktober 2002, Lisson Gallery, London.

Six people are standing facing one of the gallery walls, another person, likewise with his back turned towards the other people in the room, in a corner. I see the performance only on the black and white photographs authorised by Sierra as official documents. I see how close the group of six is standing together and what a strong contrast exists between that agglomeration and the single man – it appeals to me like an artistic arrangement. I see the group of six and am valuing the clothes. Does the deprivation show up in them? The women to the left and right correspond in their appearance to my stereotype. The woman with short hair and in black suit in the middle irritates me. I am studying details, for instance the strange style of the flower skirt on the right, that reveals the feet in sneakers.

ternity without the distance provided by the hegemonic social order.¹⁰

The mechanism of punishment is Sierra's explicit issue in the last years, but also in older works the duties for the actors are designed as disciplinary measures. This establishes an unambiguous relation between actors and spectators. While attending the punishment in persona and remaining passively observing towards the event, the spectators inevitably become agents of the hegemonic order and thereby turn into accomplices of the punishing authority. Approach is tantamount to discrimination.

It is the unsublimated, real objectification, that makes his works so irritating. Every distance between people and their representation in the works is denied here. Nevertheless, the people are present in the encounter as individuals in their vital wholeness, and of course these presences provide an important part of the works. The *mise-en-scène* that meets essential criteria of the medium of performance makes the distance between subalternity and individuality of the acting persons obvious. Sierra chooses the manifold spaces of art as locus of his work. Those constitute an essential part of his strategy that aims at fundamental irrita-

tion without breaking off the aesthetic dialogue. Despite all the bewilderment, I do not leave the work, but remain its spectator. As such I do never give up my active role in the perceiving process.

Sierra works on deconstructing the current art discourse. In the center of his critique stands the claim of an ethic-moral superiority, justified with a concept of aesthetic which, grounded on the principle of auctorial supremacy, maintains a diffuse distance to life's realities and knows ethics only in a specific kind of sublimation. This sublimation is what he renounces, and that causes a short-circuiting of the traditional artistic process. He renounces aestheticization in terms of a individually crafted translation that – according to the ruling discourse – allows practically everything to get represented. The only artistic work, visualized by Sierra, is the one accomplished by his actors.

His subversive strategy sometimes targets directly at the institutions of art business. In 1999 he employed ten Latin American workers to drag 24 heavy concrete blocks with primitive tools around in the rooms of a Los Angeles gallery. The exhibition following this performance showcased nothing but the blocks, the



Fig. 3: *Raising of six benches*, September 2001, Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, München.

tools and the traces and damages on floor and walls (24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by workers). Works of that kind have to be taken as interventions which endanger, obstruct and damage the system – but never really suspend its function. This is also how Sierra sees it, and he never excepts his work when he criticizes the redundancy of emancipatory initiatives in contemporary art which only confirm the common degeneracy instead of achieving real subversion.¹¹ In this point he argues and acts system-oriented: Just as he takes art for a functional element of the capitalist world order, so he is treating the people in his works: As anonymous functional elements whose only relevance consists in their bodies.

But he is operating here basically with a conservative concept of art. He criticizes the business between

Forty men have the task to lift and bear six long benches of the museum two hours daily for a period of two weeks. When I encountered the actors during the vernissage, they were fixed on the spot by their labour. Little movements, cramped arms and legs are getting relaxed. Again and again the benches are set down and lifted again with new power. I see the sweaty skin. Most of the men keep distance to the audience by looking away. This makes it easier for me to observe them quietly, study their bearing techniques, value their physical condition, predict their endurance. More and more the strange discrepancy between the actors and the audience is entering my perceiving. The men are physically absorbed by their labour and have to cope with the precarious situation of being looked at by countless eyes during their apparently senseless doing. I am sensing constrained stagnation – just simply releasing the bench and going away would overcharge the colleagues with the burden. The audience, on the other side, is strolling around this tableau vivant which only testifies its life by those little movements. My look starts wandering between actors and audience. I am all eye and observe other people watching.

Like during the live experience I am attracted also while watching the photos by the details of corporeal presences: The shoulder bag of the person standing with his back to me in the middle photo, reminding me of the situation of short-time waged work, carried out quasi by the way; the diverse headgears, the visual diversity of the attendants: the strange constellation of looks (none of the men in the three photos is looking at his direct opposite); the carrying strap freely hanging down in the bottom photo; the man with videocamera, discernible in the background of the middle photo – all that causes in me the impression of a hybrid situation, full of fascinating irritations.

While looking at the photos, I am becoming aware that my experience would have been a totally other one if I would have visited the room on another day. Then I would have been more or less alone with the people upholding the heavy benches and would definitely have witnessed their presence much more intensively. I can easily imagine the awesomeness of being in one room with those forty men. I am thinking about how fragile the border between me and them would be, and I feel threat.

But my encounter with the work and its actors had in fact another quality. I was part of a crowd and as such in a more secured viewer position, corresponding more to the situation in a theatre. Here the collective perceiving, the voyeuristic looking sheltered by the crowd was happening. And I looked at the scene like at an installation, an arrangement of people and objects in fascinating regularity and stringency.

gallery and museum, but purposely ignores the fact that this business is only one part of a manifold visual culture whose functions and effects are in some parts differing distinctly from the criticized High Art. Sierra's strategy is the attempt of a subversion from within, focussing on the essence: Every kind of art can be handled as a consumer good. In the use of art there is always objectification, functionalization and discursive modelling. And the artistic surplus value is always representing to a certain extent an economic factor. Sierra postulates an antagonism between art and subversive political action. He denominates himself with the stereotype of the "snob".¹² Thus he induces



Fig. 4: *Veterans of wars of Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq facing the corner*, April-Juni 2012, within the exhibition 30 Künstler – 30 Räume, Neues Museum Nürnberg - Staatliches Museum für Kunst und Design. Kunsthalle Nürnberg. Institut für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg. Kunstverein Nürnberg - Albrecht Dürer Gesellschaft.

Veterans of war are standing faces to the wall in corners of the exhibition space. Not all men are wearing uniform – attire, posture and also the distance to the corner are varying. People in back view are special projection surfaces. Depending on the inclination of the head, I see pride, indifference or shame. All seems to have already happened here – veterans are invoking images of survived wars. The physical isolation seems ambivalent: The actors have been recruited with the officially communicated aim of criticising the common disinterest in the situation of the former soldiers. Now they are addressing me as victims – not only of the common ignorance regarding the politics of war, but of the exhibition situation where the standing in the corner is inevitably degrading the men to objects of my look.

his own person into the strategy of dead-end objectification and refuses once again the aesthetic sublimation which is expected by the artist as sovereign spirit above the realms of the object. Sierra does not show any way out of the dilemma. The participants in the work are left alone with their attempts to transform their experiences.

Mobilization of the stereotypes

The process of sublimation of the Others, as expected in the common aesthetic discourse, is not achieved here, because it requires the distance of passive contemplation between the perceiving subject and its object. Whereas Sierra's artistic strategy makes the separation between me and the Others explicit. The sociopolitical distinction is acted out in a direct intersub-

jective constellation, and can thus be experienced as an ethic problem in the reflection. People with subalternity inscribed in their bodies are in the art generally intruders, stepping in from the borders. An experience of intersubjective distance is only possible when the objectification becomes a real problem in a directly confronting discourse, instead of being merged in a conventional aesthetic of sublimation. Where the power of discrimination rules the dialogue with the Others, I am confronted with a gap. That gap remains permanently open in Sierra's works – my counterpart is only partially present, the defect, respectively the deficit being the true reason of his presence in the artwork. That's how the manifestation of the victim becomes a paradox of art: The absolute visibility entails a permanent invisibility.

All participants – me as spectator included – are fixed in their stereotypes, which also causes a dilemma for me, where I have to defend my identity against being stereotyped as part of the hegemonial system. This makes the conflict potential strong enough to initiate a deep reflection of the perceiving process. I can only put in motion the inscribed stereotype of the oppressor when I challenge not only my individual position but the whole encounter in the space of art.

To free myself from the captivation in the stereotypes I have to focus my experience process in another way than that which Sierra has arranged provocatively in his concept of art. I have to take the distance between art and life as an aesthetic distance, wherefrom I can push forward to ethic questions. Thus the Aesthetic of Encounter in the space of subalternity always contains the necessity of emancipation from a traditional concept of art within itself.¹³ With his works and their seemingly fatalistic affirmation of the existing structures Sierra exercises radical art criticism which makes this liberation inevitably necessary. In that situation the emancipation of the subalterns is inextricably linked with the emancipation of the aesthetics. A change of mind can only happen when the traditional attitude of reception where art is esteemed as a sublimation of the status quo is left behind, and when the ethic implications of a dialogic process with the Others get implemented.

This challenge requires me to leave the safe spectator position and to pass through the experience of stereotyping. This process necessarily entails a crossing of the borders of the traditional aesthetic discourse whereby the Aesthetic of Encounter reveals its ethic dimension. In discriminating as well as in desiring the Others I am confronted with the same task: During the dialogic process I have to transform those basic monologic forces of objectification in intersubjective impulses by applying the reflection of objectification on my own consciousness, recognizing my internal stereotypes and creating an area of freedom between them and the Others.

The new intersubjective distance

The Aesthetic of Encounter is the artistic manifestation of a vast change in the sociopolitical situation. In democratic systems the individual expression of in-

terest is increasingly taking the place of the mostly passive behaviour within the electoral representation. In totalitarian regimes the attempts of individual empowerment also by means of new media platforms are becoming more and more intense. The new migratory movements are challenging traditional collective identities and demand new ways of coexistence. All that contributes to the occurrence of new forms of aesthetics.

As I have shown up to this point, the Aesthetic of Encounter uses the experiential space of art for an ongoing reflection of perceiving and acting. During the confrontation with the Others, dialogic processes between people and (stereotype) images are getting started. The basic energies in the formation of subjectivity – discrimination of and desire for the Others – are set free and initiate repeated changes between subject and object positions. The Aesthetic of Encounter allows the experience of intersubjectivity, even when there is no real communicative exchange during the participation in the work. Due to the intensity of confrontation, ethic questions arise during the aesthetic experience. Thus alternative ways of acting in the social environment can be imagined and transferred into concrete reality.

Regardless of the concrete setting, encounters with the Others, as examined on the example of Sierra's works, are always sociopolitical border-crossings and as such highly topical. Even when the form of our living together is fundamentally changing, the Others remain Others. The sociopolitical restructurings in the course of globalization cause wide-ranging deterritorializations, and dialogical processes of identities, based on intersubjective distance and accompanied by desire and fear, have lost their traditional balance. The ruling classes defined their collective identity mainly by means of the stereotypes of the Others, and thus guaranteed a clear social separation between the privileged and the subalterns. Today, the situation is changing. As one of the consequences a new form of encounter is emerging, where the Others are no longer standing behind clearly defined frontiers. The disappearance of those separating lines has an immediate impact on the intersubjective distance. The locus and the borders of identity as well as the self-assurance of a secure subject position have guaran-

teed a basic safety behind my opening towards the Others. This base is becoming more and more brittle, in the same time the encounters in the daily life are multiplying. The situations where I am experiencing myself as object without the rooting in the basic safety of traditional cultural collectives in the look of the Others are increasing.

The traditional sociopolitical positioning of certain groups as a whole, which continued defining even the postcolonial culture with clear power relationships, has begun dissolving in many areas. Sierra makes the subalternity tangible to a problem that is immediately affecting me, and straightens out the necessity of a radical revision of aesthetics and ethics. In the global structural change towards a tendentially place- and boundless “*Multitude*”¹⁴, the duality of the I and the Others is constantly shifting on the level of the individuals. There, a way of dealing with the problematic simultaneity of closeness and remoteness has to be found. This new situation has significant consequences not only for the stereotype classification system. Homi K. Bhabha coined the concept of the “*Third Space*” for the productive process between the distinction from the others and the identification with them. The “*Third Space*” is neither the own nor the other, but „*something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both*“.¹⁵ The room of transformation as defined by Bhabha is rooted in the postcolonial discourse and therefore lives in the reference system of the blocs, constituted by the former colonizers and the former colonized where the issue of the new power relations between them marks the central theme.

This reference system does not exist any more. Bhabha's “terms” and “territories” within the system of identity formation are dissolving for instance in Sierra's works where the identities of myself and of the Others receive equally massive inscriptions. Individuals take the place of classes and other groupings, the recourse towards collective identities is getting more and more difficult. Moreover, the being of the Others has changed in the multitude. They are no longer primarily people with other skin colour or religion who in the long-distance look disappear mostly behind the collective stereotypes. Instead, they are showing up as complex as never before in my proximity. The iden-

tity process with its interaction of subject and object positions and the transformations and recreations during the encounter has not substantially changed however – the Third Space is still existing. But one important change has occurred: In the reference system of the global multitude it is no longer located mainly between the collectives, but more and more inside every single person.

With the internalization of the Third Space into the individual subjectivity, the sovereign intersubjective distance has melted down. Now, the experience of distance is losing its collective orientation – be it on the parameters of skin colour or ethnic origin – and becomes more and more individual. The dynamic of the Third Space with its moments of border-crossing and uprooting however requires a certain amount of stability in the identities. If the deterritorializing dynamic seizes hold over the individual subjectivity from the inside, experiences of irritation and existential insecurity are the consequences in the first place. These experiences mainly result from the fact, that living persons are obscuring the stereotypes in the perceiving, without any significant distance, respectively the possibility of a securing demarcation remaining. The blurring of the collective identities did not cause the stereotypes to disappear as manifestations of the objectification of the Others. They are still essential factors in the identity process. As the safety of the collective identity – concretely the feeling of the power of majority – is more and more fading, the stereotypes of the Others are rising more and more impressively during the daily encounters. The plurality of identities is permanently present and demands of every single individual permanently to position her- or himself towards many different Others without getting lost in the thick- et of stereotypes.

It is therefore necessary to restructure important parts of our subjectivity. In a situation where the protected domains of perception in terms of a contemplative approach to the Others are no longer unconditionally at hand, and where the power – the feeling of superiority over the Others – is only a momentary phenomenon within the interaction of subject and object positions during the formation of subjectivity, the intersubjective distance has to emerge from an attitude that is both aesthetically and ethically aware. The

space of *perception* has become a common space of *living*, a space of dynamic multitude where identities have to be acted out permanently anew. This is how the duality of perceiving and acting gets rooted deeply in the subjectivity and defines the encounter not only during the process of reflection but permanently. In this new mobility the phenomenon of parallel processes is more and more taking the place of essential differences in the sign of the stereotype – parallel processes in which we all take part and where we are sometimes close to each other, sometimes far apart, but always remain existentially connected.

This paper is based on my book *Ästhetik der Begegnung. Kunst als Erfahrungsraum der Anderen*. (Bielefeld: transcript 2013). There, I am trying to make the works of Tania Bruguera, Isaac Julien, Nikki S. Lee, Teresa Margolles, Adrian Piper, Santiago Sierra and Lorna Simpson accessible as performative spaces – spaces, where desiring and discriminating the Others are reflexible as essential consciousness processes. The investigation of exterior and interior images realizes art as sociopolitical agent.

Endnotes

1. Claire Bishops investigates the complex melange of ethic and aesthetic discourses in participatory art. Her diagnosis of “*an urgent need to restore attention to the modes of conceptual and affective complexity generated by socially oriented art projects, particularly to those that claim to reject aesthetic quality, in order to render them more powerful and grant them a place in history.*” (Bishop (2012), p.8) gets to the heart of the matter. Her focusing on the genuine aesthetic potential of art, especially in strategies generating social processes, corresponds perspectivically to my approach of research.
2. The opening up of art towards life and the concomitant revision of aesthetics does not necessarily resolve the question of ethics within that extended concept of aesthetics. On the contrary: The critical examination within certain parts of the cultural studies, especially the race and gender studies yielded a more or less rigid ethnic canon of the politically correct. This means a short-circuiting of aesthetics where art and artistic media get reduced to one-dimensional signifiers. It is that ethic censorship of the aesthetics which Jacques Rancière repudiates. He polemizes against the “*ethic turn of aesthetics and politics*” and criticizes the ignorance of the ethic judgement under the primacy of political correctness. (Rancière (2007), p.127f.)
3. I am grounding my argumentation on Lacan's concept of the subject which is inherently oriented outwards. The relation to the Other is defined by an interplay of subject and object positions. It constitutes an essential part of the own subjectivity that stands in permanent interaction with the subjectivities of the Others. (Lacan (1991), p.235ff.) The formation of the own subjectivity and of the subjectivities of the Others is *one* process, fueled by elementary psychic forces. The framework of the subject necessitates the Other to be objectified by means of a fixation into images. Discrimination, as well as fetishistic desire, is the result of a disequilibrium in the interplay of subject and object positions. Thus, the subject exists in an elementary duality. Between its poles a dynamic distance full of opportunities for development presents itself. Images and wishful thinking emanate from that duality. Dealing with it leads the way to the own self.
4. The concept of “*identity*” is used not only for the manifest features that make a human being recognizable and classifiable. Nor do I assume the concept of a “*self identical subject*”. Instead I apply this term on all dimensions of the human being. These include the fixation into stereotypes as well as the subjectivity as living synthesis of self determined perceiving and acting. Identity is living on the tension between self perception and inscriptions from outside, between images and their permanent transformation in the consciousness together with the acting out in the world. Image and process are never neatly separable, because they determine each other. To understand the concrete references, the complexity of the concept of “*identity*” affords a differentiation, depending on whether the person is located at that moment more in a subject or in an object position.
5. In “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has clearly pointed out the dilemma of the subaltern. (Spivak (1988)) Those who are not in the focal range of the societal discourse have no vote in it because they do not exist as subjects there. In my opinion, the main significance of Spivak's critique lies in the way how she problematizes distance. She reveals how big the risk of a final objectification of the Others is as a consequence of the production of difference within a discourse that is so sure about its universal perceptive faculty and its creative potential in the permanent creation of meaning. Of greatest importance is the reflection of that process which produces during the encounter between people never only a difference of signs, but always one of subjects.
6. Bodies wherein encounters between people take place are screens for identitarian inscriptions as well as vessels of the biological life with all its sensory stimuli, instinctive reactions and emotions. In the artistic representation the corporeality of identity is not only an issue of the work. Instead, it invades the perception process in a lively ambivalence of question and affirmation. Within that discourse the body never is just a static sign, but a visible medium of identity consisting of innumerable, vividly developing facets and possibilities. Insofar, the represented body always serves as a medium of transformation. Be it self experience inside the own body, be it the experience of the Others in their bodies by the help of empathy – corporeality is the fundament and frame for the formation of self consciousness as well as consciousness of the social environment. (Sobchack (2004)) As a vital medium of identity the body offers the possibility of

emancipation from inscribed stereotypes and transformation of role models. In the encounter he is never only present as object, but always also as subject, because nobody can look at the other bodies as a pure spiritual being. The experience of the own corporeality inhibits any strict separation between subject and object from the very beginning.

7. As Pilar Vilella Mascaró remarks in her text on reality and ethics in Sierra's work, the aim, as uttered by Sierra himself, to "reproduce" the normative structures of capitalism in his art, is as such still no unique characteristic, because this is provided by every artwork within the capitalist system. Mascaró (2007), p.33. Sierra represents a sociopolitical fact in the discourse of art under avoidance of any ethic commentaries. The injustice receives a reenactment and in the theatrical situation turns into an irritating stereotype. (ibid., p.35)
8. He tries never to let the socioeconomic reality of art disappear in the background: „I try to do things that are the most natural in the world. At the moment I do the work of an interior decorator or an organizer of exclusive events for the cultural elite. What I do is refuse to deny the principles that underlie the creation of an object of luxury: from the watchman who sits next to a Monet for eight hours a day, to the doorman who controls who comes in, to the source of the funds used to buy the collection. I try to include all this, and therein lies the little commotion about remuneration that my pieces have caused.“ (Sierra (2004), S.65) The payment of the minimum wage to the actors is essential to his art. Paying more would be just inconsequent: „That would suggest I'm a good guy and that I did my bit towards saving those souls. Ridiculous! If I can find someone prepared to hold up a wall for five days for 65 euros, I'd be showing you a true fact. If I pay double that, I'd be showing my generosity.“ Sierra (2003), p.207
9. Sierra (2002), S.19ff.
10. „My works are a bit like Zen teaching, where disciples are led to a high level of concentration and suddenly they are struck a blow, taking them to a state where their essence comes to the fore. My works function a bit like that. They are like striking a blow so that people react, as they really are. Then the audience think twice about it and recover their composure, they take it back.“ Sierra (2009), p.46
11. „I would say that, instead of creating subversion, we are confirming, again, the falsity of all liberatory maximalisms, of all the humanitarian, emancipation maximalisms. We are confirming how fucked up the planet is. I insist, I deeply respect the people who respond to an unfavorable situation in a radical way, those who face it with political weapons and those who art. Truly I am nothing but a snob, and that is how any worker should regard me, as a snob, because that is what they should call someone who makes art, as well as someone who shows off on a catwalk. I don't think that there is more to it, but I thank you for your expectations.“ Sierra (2005), p.16
12. Cf. annot.11
13. A radically poetic formulation of that emancipation comes from Félix Guattari: „The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment, which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself. A new existential support will oscillate on the work of art, based on a double register of reterritorialisation (refrain function) and resingularisation. The event of its encounter can irreversibly date the course of an existence and generate fields of the possible 'far from the equilibria' of everyday life.“ Guattari (1995), p.131
14. Hardt/Negri (2005). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have explained the radical sociopolitical changes in the course of globalization with a fundamentally new form of power. Their writings show on the one side strong references to the communist manifest of 1848 and express the wish to develop its thoughts further into the 21st century. On the other side, I discern plenty of utopian drive and as a consequence thereof a generosity in terms of the relationship to concrete reality, especially a certain vagueness in the sociological pervasion. Undoubtedly the manifest character of their writing renders them problematic for the interdisciplinary implementation, and perhaps they are embodying a already bygone zeitgeist. Especially the perspective of Empire is generalizing, latently apocalyptic, oriented towards simplistic concepts of power and sovereignty, and in many respects theory is missing reality. Nevertheless two points seem very appropriate for my focus of investigation: The concept of "multitude" as a new sociopolitical structure and therein the central role of the production of subjectivity through interaction.
15. Bhabha (1994,1), p.28

Bibliography

Bishop, Claire (2012) *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London/ New York: Verso 2012.

Guattari, Félix (1995) *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Hardt, Michael/Negri, Antonio (2005) *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London/New York: Penguin Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1991) „Introduction of the big Other“, in: Jacques-Alain Miller (Hg.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. New York: W. W. Norton, S.235-247.

Mascaró, Pilar Vilella (2007) „Not in my name. Reality and ethics in the work of Santiago Sierra“, in: *Santiago Sierra. 7 Trabajos / 7 Works*. London: Lisson Gallery, S.7-41.

Rancière, Jacques (2007) *Das Unbehagen in der Ästhetik*. Wien: Passagen.

Rancière, Jacques (2008) *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris: La fabrique éditions.

Sierra, Santiago (2002,1) „Ich versuche Wirklichkeit und Wunschenken nicht durcheinander zubringen“, Gespräch mit Gabriele Mackert, in: *Santiago Sierra*. Wien: Kunsthalle Wien, project space, S.13-50.

Sierra, Santiago (2003) Gespräch mit Rosa Martinez, in: Rosa Martinez (Hg.), *Santiago Sierra. Pabellón de España. 50a Bienal de Venecia. Spanish Pavilion. 50th Venice Biennale*. Madrid: Turner, S.151-211.

Sierra, Santiago (2004) Gespräch mit Teresa Margolles, in: BOMB Nr.86, Winter, S.62-69.

Sierra, Santiago (2005) Gespräch mit Mihnea Mircan, „The Corridor through recent history“, in: *Santiago Sierra*. Malaga: Centro de Arte Contemporanea de Malaga S.9-18.

Sierra, Santiago (2009) „The critical capacity of art“, Gespräch mit Vivianne Loria, in: Lapiz. Revista Internacional de Arte, Año XXVIII, Nr.253, Mayo, S.28-51.

Sobchack, Vivian (1994) „Die Materie und ihre Passion. Prolegomena zu einer Phänomenologie der Interobjektivität“, in: Christoph Wulf/Dietmar Kamper/Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Hg.), *Ethik der Ästhetik*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, S.195-205.

Pictures

Fig. 1 – 4: © Santiago Sierra.

Abstract

This paper examines the potential of art as a space for intense encounters and investigates the value of (stereotype) images in a period of radical sociopolitical changes. Santiago Sierra's works serve as an example for artistic strategies, aiming at encounters, where traditional lines are crossed. They radically challenge the identities of the actors as well as those of the spectators. Sierra directly couples the production of images with the discrimination of people. The only way out of the work leads through a critical revi-

sion of the connections between aesthetics and ethics.

The aesthetics of encounter use the experiential space of the artworks for a deep reflection of perceiving and acting. During the confrontation with the others, dialogical processes between people and (stereotype) images are getting started. The basic energies for the formation of subjectivity – discrimination of the others and the desire for them – are set free. This entails repeated changes between the object and the subject position. Caused by the intensity of confrontation, ethical issues arise during the aesthetic experience. In that way, alternative ways of acting in social relations can be tried out within the experiential space of art.

Author

Thomas R. Huber is an art historian (M.A.) and cultural scientist (Dr.), independent curator and publicist. Currently, he is working mainly on projects focussed on the issues of identity, representation and intersubjective experience in the context of Soziokultur.

Title

Thomas R. Huber, „Striking a blow“ Santiago Sierra's works as examples of an Aesthetic of Encounter, in: kunsttexte.de, Sektion Gegenwart, Nr. 4, 2015 (12 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de.