

Please Mind Your Head

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Please Mind Your Head could constitute the friendliest of reminders – an invitation to look where you normally would not and an admonition to protect one of the most treasured parts of your body while traversing whatever stands before you. Yet, through the play on words, it can also be interpreted to suggest a grave warning concerning one's mental condition – an entreaty toward careful evaluation of what the brain might happen to suggest, as the millions of thoughts that run through one's head always harbour the potential both to sharpen perception and cloud judgement alike. If viewed in a self-referential mode, the 'Please Mind Your Head' sign challenges the very same danger of which it warns. What is originally introduced as an external threat turns to be an internal one. The centre of attention is moved from the object to the subject, implicating issues of far greater complexity – ones which cannot be simply dodged.

Please Mind Your Head (p. 65) is also the title of a sculpture installation by Sofia Goscinski, conceived of for her solo exhibition at Ve.sch in Vienna in 2010. The installation elucidates her concerns about the pros and cons of a hard-working human brain, and exemplifies the duality that regulates her work at the same time. The wooden bar hanging from the ceiling resembled a classic road signal and acted as an introduction to the rest of the exhibition. Tellingly titled *Rejection* (p. 70) – another indication of displacement – the show's centrepiece consisted of a small environment, the walls of which were entirely covered with nails that the artist subsequently painted black. Once faced with the intimacy of the room, the visitor was made to feel like an intruder, with the spikes conveying a note of rebuttal while triggering a strange psychological effect of simultaneous fear and attraction. A certain fascination for imperilment gave rise to a subconscious and disturbing wish to put a practice like self-inflicted pain to trial. Characterized by a claustrophobic and vaguely scientific tenor, *Rejection* recalls a screwed-up version of a padded cell or insulated room – an apparently protective space that requests contemplation only to alienate its occupier.

The concept of testing the limits of her viewers' as well as of her own awareness and the art she makes is a common thread in Goscinski's oeuvre. Her work, which embraces and frequently overlaps a wide range of media including sculpture, photography, performance, video and readymades, questions basic values that form the cornerstones of modern society, like happiness, freedom and sanity, and presents them in a way which throws them into the fray with their evil counterparts (sadness, captivity, and madness) while balancing along the fine lines that demarcate them from one another. The video projection *I Love You* (p. 60), for instance, is comprised of three screens, upon each of which the artist spells out single words that, together, compose complete sentences. Shot in a rigorous, old-fashioned black and white, *I Love You* produces a somewhat sinisterly choreographed soundtrack, a vocal symphony through which the overall message is deconstructed so as to perfectly illustrate the ambivalence that often defines sentiment. The first screen on the left hand side in particular, with the word 'I, I, I' chanted in repetition, points toward the looping structures in the work of musicians like Steve Reich, and manifests an initial intention that can only be completed with the aid of the other two screens. While experiencing the video, an increasing sense of desperation is engendered within the beholder. All three of the represented characters give the impression of being similarly frustrated by their inhibitions. Nonetheless, the beauty of *I Love You* resides precisely in its fragmented nature, thus offering a touching reflection on how love can fundamentally exist only through a correspondence between two different subjects.

With premises such as these, it would be legitimate to suppose that Goscinski's existential investigations unequivocally verge on the dark side. Not so. Admittedly gloomy at times, her work is nevertheless capable of sudden twists of irony – an ingredient that seems to work best when she leans toward models that establish

a dialogue with aspects commonly associated with the mundane and the ordinary. This is the case with *The Liberty Pill* (p. 92), a gold engraved panacea tablet (or perhaps a recreational drug?) that place the goals of freedom, peace of mind, material security and physical health on the same level – regardless of whether they present aims which can be accomplished to produce a permanent fixture or to merely remain within the context of temporary escape. Or *Play Human Needs* (p. 84-91), a public art piece originally installed under a bridge close to Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich (a district notorious for banking and deluxe shopping), for which the cursors of fictional fruit machines, complete with corny digital sounds and flashy colours, were video projected onto flat screens, each spinning three reels featuring words like ‘Sexuality’, ‘Beauty’, ‘Safety’ and ‘Identity’, all randomly combined to produce no clear winning formula (and no reward). Although the arrangement of the words might appear to be casual, their selection is not – they were appropriated from an official list of basic human needs and thus feign to reunite the outcasts sheltered under the bridge with the wealthy people who live and work above in a common pursuit of happiness in a process so tainted with arbitrariness and unpredictability that it eventually assumes the dynamics of a gambling procedure. Similarly, *Insane Busy* (p. 76) splits the title to articulate the dilemma between keeping your own mind busy and maintaining mental health, with the words ‘Insane’ and ‘Busy’ moulded in brass, and adopted to serve as weights upon a two-pan scale.

If these works are based on the artificial or fortuitous maintenance of the promise of a better future, others, like *Siegespodest* (p. 94), are founded on its total betrayal. The three steps of the black podium of the *Siegespodest* are in fact water-filled tanks designed to encumber the steps of the athletes, somehow democratically resetting their standing. Another pedestal, *Golia or the pedestal which grew so high that it's useless now* (p. 67), is a single white column which bends just before reaching the ceiling, wittingly highlighting the limits of even the greatest power. More abstract but equally poignant is the photographic series *Rainbow Country* (p. 26), a group of eighteen pictures representing the colours of the rainbow, onto each of which the artist engraved a single letter to finally formulate the anti-climatic phrase ‘Major Depression’.

When it comes to the installation of her work in a solo exhibition setting, Goscinski is attentive to how her three-dimensional and bi-dimensional pieces resonate with each other, and with the space they are called upon to inhabit. This is particularly evident in *Spielecke* (p. 97), another spray-painted wooden panel, by means of which the artist made the best of the existing structure through signalling the presence of an improbable and cramped play area beneath an industrial stairway; or in *XXX* (p. 56-58), a mosaic of 375 mirror weaves that result in a break up of the surrounding architecture and a respective disorientation of the viewer while delivering a compendium of suggestive words like ‘lust’, ‘perversion’ and ‘desire’. When it was exhibited at the Kunstraum Bernsteiner in Vienna in 2011, the mirrors of *XXX* captured and partially dismantled another remarkable piece in the show titled *Head in the Closet* (p. 55), a set of two toilet bowls vertically mounted on the wall to face one another. By openly referencing Marcel Duchamp’s seminal *Fountain* (1917), and, to a certain extent, Giulio Paolini’s *Dimostrazione* (1975), *Head in the Closet* plays with the significance of the phrase *in the closet*, the gay community jargon for those still in denial or reluctant to publicly declare themselves for who they are. The symmetrical display of the two objects is an analogy for identical DNA, while also pointing toward the existence of varying statuses – with one object presented in its normally accepted position and the other reversed to suggest a menacing helmet, once again emphasising questions of social difference and isolation.

Language plays a pivotal role for Goscinski. Either in the shape of words spoken during video projections or performances, or in written form in installations and photographs, one-liners are recurrent, and integrate the hermetic quality of her work. Although the majority of these are penned by the artist, they are sometimes locatable, having been extrapolated from other contexts (often those of street life), a factor that guarantees their success due to their proven communal function. This is the process that informs the aforementioned

Please Mind Your Head, or *Free Dirt* (p. 82), a banner found in Los Angeles during a three-month residency at the Mountain School of Arts founded in 2005 by Piero Golia and Eric Wesley.

Goscinski's tendency toward experimenting to the full with the objects she creates or finds generates, by her own admission, mixed results. Sometimes their multi-faceted presentation produces a contingent body of work that, upon second inspection, might never see light – not because of any doubts in their intrinsic merits, but because they fall short of producing the necessary 'push over the edge' when compared with the originals. Other times, they can transcend the intended meanings to spawn unexpected variations or even instigate collaborative projects, as was the case when the psychedelic rock band Skull Thong and the Magnolian Shine asked her to use *Rejection* as the set for their music video 'Dis-Tanz' (2010). Finally, they can contribute toward expanding perspectives and casting new lights upon initial intentions. Bruce Nauman paved the way to this methodology in the early 1970s when he made *Green-Light Corridor* (1970-71), a restricted space between two walls that was illuminated by a bright green light. Installed in the proximity of a monitor showing the artist cussing his way through the screen, the piece could be experienced on three different levels – 1) as a video, where Nauman could be seen staging his performance; 2) as a sculpture, and 3) as a vehicle for the spectator to re-enact the artist's performance, giving the work a circular narrative.

Rejection, in its different forms of total installation, scenery, photography and performance prop, is certainly a fitting example, but the most effective scenario is possibly provided by *Headbox* (p. 20), the black wooden box Goscinski exhibited at the Zimmermann Kratochwill Gallery in Graz in 2012. The piece could be perceived mainly as a sculpture – a coffin-like box with sliding doors on top and a loophole in the middle to accommodate the head of the user. Goscinski used it to perform herself, burying her own head and reciting a rather agitated mantra wherein every opprobrium, accident or restriction one can meet in life was declared to be avoidable if approached 'without head'.

The correlated fourteen black and white photographs that constitute the Headbox Series (pp. 12/22/24) were largely inspired by Goscinski's performance, and feature a man imitating some of her poses and gestures.

The size of the box, which is significantly larger than that of a human skull, is a powerful allegory for how Goscinski sees the brain – an entity that transcends the physical space it occupies and which represents a capacity that requires a much larger container. Indeed, this is where one of the most interesting contradictions emerges. The brain is regarded as a burden, a negative force to rail against, an obstacle toward achieving a sense of inner peace. Yet, it is precisely its power to engender negative considerations that provides the foundation for any critical discourse. Goscinski's work is a constant aide-mémoire of the benefits and disadvantages of a lively, intelligent mind. Blessedly, it hardly matters what the outcome is, as there is no trace of judgement in what she does, which is simply to offer a philosophical response to, coupled with a half-resigned, half-enraged discernment of, the fact that a mind can control but cannot be controlled. A bitter-sweet situation. And, although there is no solution in sight, the conclusion is plainly stated – *please mind your head*.