

VISITOR'S INFORMATION

ALEX BAG

May 28 – August 14, 2011

Since the early 1990s, the artist Alex Bag (b. 1969, USA) has been one of the most interesting protagonists of video performance art. Today, an entire generation of younger artists regard her work as an important point of reference. She became known for her technically simple videos that address the entertainment industry and its various formats, but also the art system with its lingering romantic notions of the artist's life, and subject these sources to humorous treatment. Bag articulates her social critique with impressive precision, expressing a profound unease with our contemporary culture; an extraordinarily versatile actress, she usually appears in her own work, playing a great variety of roles. The migros museum für gegenwartskunst is the first institution to present an exhibition offering a comprehensive survey of Bag's oeuvre.

Two thematic fields that intersect at various points are central to the artist's interests: on the one hand, Bag examines interactions between high and popular culture; on the other, she analyzes structural characteristics and economic laws governing the art world. Several works explore how authorities or authoritarian structures shape artistic careers: *Untitled Fall '95* (1995) examines art school, *The Van* (2001) is about the market, and *Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum)* (2009) or *The Artist's Life* (1996) finally looks at how neoliberalism has institutionalized the pressure to innovate, perform, produce, and succeed. The formal framework for Bag's videos derives from a variety of formats of television culture—from documentaries, dating and talk shows across reality television to commercial breaks: everything is product, everything is market, everything lends itself to appropriation by the artist. Bag turns to the flood of images that fill the televised world and dissects them using various strategies of defamiliarization.

Wearing costumes, masks, and make-up, the artist plays most roles herself, aiming not at a naturalistic performance based on the attempt to feel the part (which is generally considered "good" and "professional" acting, in the tradition of Constantin Stanislavski's theory of the theater), but instead seeking out a moment of difference or surfeit (the roots of "overacting" lie in the comedian's performance) and unfinishedness. This Beckettian aspect of defamiliarization also serves to direct our attention to the spoken text, which is a central element in Bag's work. She writes the scripts for her own videos; her language mimics that of the various show formats she works with and occasionally feels like pure quotation. Her writing technique is comparable to the work of postmodern authors who use sampling in a critical engagement with the erosion of meaning brought on by the growing prevalence of repetition and linguistic templates in our society. The performance serves primarily to lend scenic articulation to the text. Bag eschews complex stages and settings as well as elaborate camerawork that would enable her to create exciting sequences in the editing studio. Bag's works deploy a video aesthetic defined by immediacy that is clearly distinct from the "artificiality" of Hollywood's cinematic aesthetic. Cheap to produce, the video image has stood, and still stands, for an intimate picture; the rise of video technology has been fueled primarily by private uses.

Alex Bag, in collaboration with Patterson Beckwith
Cash from Chaos / Unicorns & Rainbows
1994–1997, weekly television show
30', color, sound

Between 1994 and 1997, Bag, collaborating with Patterson Beckwith, who was then also a member of the artists' collective Art Club 2000, produced a weekly thirty-minute show called *Cash from Chaos* and later *Unicorns & Rainbows*; its broadcasting slot was always at 2:30 am on New York's channel 34.¹ The show consisted of homemade reports about everyday life in New York and footage taken from other broadcasts such as talk shows and soap operas, but also included "prank calls" to consumer hotlines and similar absurdities. The long-term project can be described as a "simulacrum" that "snuck back" into the world of television, seeking to develop a humorous posture to critique its object from the inside. In Barthes' definition, a "simulacrum" reconstructs its object by means of selection and recombination and effectively recreates it. To prepare for the exhibition, all episodes of the television show have been digitized; a selection will now be presented in the framework of an installation. The shift in media not only provides a fresh look at this major project, but also emphasizes its quality as the visual archive of an entire generation introduced to media in the early 1990s.

Alex Bag
Untitled Fall '95
1995
57', color, sound

With *Untitled Fall '95*, Bag rapidly became a leading figure in the 1990s video art scene. The video, which has become canonical, is persuasively simple in style. The protagonist is an art student, played by Alex Bag, who relates her everyday life at art school. The viewer follows the character over the course of eight semesters as she records a "video testimonial" at the beginning of each term, expressing her desires and hopes, which increasingly give way to disillusionment. Statistics show that only a small fraction of art students actually embark on careers as artists after graduating. The individual "diary entries" are interrupted by brief performances in which the artist's everyday life is the predominant subject. In the final scene, we see the character in tears, sobbing as Morrissey's *Suedehead* plays in the background. Whether this finale represents a reference to another work of art, Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971), or "merely" the character's mournful recognition that she is a mediocre artist, remains an open question.

Alex Bag
The Van
2001
12' 55", color, sound

First shown at the Armory Show art fair in New York in a "van" set up at the booth of the gallery then representing Bag, American Fine Arts, *The Van* (2001) examines the ecology of art fairs, among other things. Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, the art fair has become an extraordinarily powerful sales and communications platform at the center of the contemporary art system; in particular, it controls access to visibility on the stage of art. The video follows Leroy Laloup, a rising young gallery owner who behaves like a pimp, and his three shooting-stars Honey, Fiona, and Fox, who fight over who gets to show her art at the coveted art-fair stand (in the case of Laloup's gallery: the inside of the "van"). The work not only articulates the expectations of the young artist entering the art market, but also how she would like to position herself/himself in the art system. Quite in keeping with Leroy's motto: "Between us, I want you to be greedy. I want you to feel the greed. This art fair is the first step in getting everything you want!"

¹ The broadcasting slot was available thanks to an initiative known in the US under the title "Public Access Television." Local so-called PEG channels ("Public, Education and Government channels") provide broadcasting slots during which members of the public can show their own productions. The slots are often scheduled at unfavorable times of day. A comparable phenomenon in the German-speaking media landscape would be the so-called "Bürgerrundfunk" ("citizens' broadcasting").

Alex Bag
Coven Services
2004
14' 40", color, sound

Consisting of a video piece and several wall works, the installation *Coven Services* is designed to look like what is left of a fictional advertising and image-consulting agency. Television spots for corporations such as the pharmaceutical manufacturer Eli Lilly, Halliburton, or Chase Bank, so-called "mood boards" used primarily in advertising, research pin boards: Bag brings them all together in this complex work. The artist not only examines the "art" of advertising, but also takes a close look at the global players that promote the "new spirit of capitalism" and determine how the individual must adapt to it. A fan of AOL Time Warner, for instance, fervently recounts: "I'm embarrassed when I think about what my life was like before AOL Time Warner was in it. I was such a loser. [...] I didn't pay any attention to the world of media that was all around me. But everything changed when AOL Time Warner changed me. Their television networks, magazines and internet services rush a steady stream of warm, sticky infojaculate right into my eyes. Now I know everything there possibly is to know about the big hot celebrities, the latest blockbuster movies, rad TV shows, spectator sports and the politicotainment industry. And porn. I can't forget the porn [...]"

Alex Bag
Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum)
2009
38', color, sound

"You're broken. It's hopeless," the fluffy dragon observes with malicious glee as its interlocutor, a depressed television-show hostess dressed in white "savior's" garb, slumps over her standing desk, visibly exhausted. So concludes one of the final scenes in Alex Bag's half-hour video *Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum)* (2009), which looks like a classical children's show and turns out, after no more than a few minutes, to be its bitter antithesis. Instead of arousing the curiosity of its young viewers and taking them on a journey of discovery—the stated aim of such formats—the video is haunted by vestiges of structural elements from the original format. Bag stages herself as a character from the creative industries who is caught in a profound midlife crisis as an apocalyptic sequence of pictures, inserted using greenscreen, plays out behind her. In the dialogue scenes, the hostess recounts her crisis to the animated stuffed animal, which has taken on the role of reason materialized, serving as a psychological corrective of sorts. The woman's case history repeatedly touches on the art business, bringing up issues such as the pressure on artists to produce for exhibitions or the problems time-based art faces in light of an ever more competitive economy of attention. Reading between the lines, we can recognize in the character's dilemma an actual analysis of an artist in crisis.

Curator of the exhibition: Raphael Gyga

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE:

A first comprehensive monograph documenting Alex Bag's oeuvre, featuring contributions by Raphael Gyga, Bruce Hainley, and Glenn Phillips as well as a glossary compiled from statements Alex Bag has made in interviews and transcripts of selected videos, will be published by JRP|Ringier to coincide with the exhibition opening.

LECTURE BY SERAINA RENZ:

On Thursday, June 30, 2011, at 7 pm, the art historian Seraina Renz will deliver a lecture based on the exhibition about emotions, spectacle and the female subject in video art.

PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS:

The migros museum für gegenwartskunst offers public guided tours in German, English, and French. Attendance is free of charge.

German: Sunday, May 29, June 19, and August 14, 3 pm.

English: Sunday, July 3, 3 pm

French: Sunday, June 12, 3 pm

VISITORS' ADDRESS:

migros museum für gegenwartskunst / Hubertus Exhibitions
Albisriederstrasse 199a
CH-8047 Zürich

Tue / Wed / Fri 12 noon–6pm, Thu 12 noon–8 pm,

Sat / Sun 11 am–5 pm

Free admission Thursdays 5 pm–8 pm.

hubertus-exhibitions.ch / migrosmuseum.ch

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The migros museum für gegenwartskunst is an institution of the Migros Culture Percentage.
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