

THE PERFECTONIST, 2005, Production 010



an Interview with

JULIAN  
ROSEFELDT

THE PERFECTONIST, 2005, Production 011



# WAVE THE FLAG

THE PERFECTONIST, 2005, Production 011



by **SONJA STÜSSEL** *Black, red and gold are the colors of the season. Football championships or Olympic Games bring out our inner nationalism. It's a funny thing, national identity, so easily forgotten in the routines of daily life. What constitutes our myths, the stereotypes we have of other cultures? These are some of the questions occupying Julian Rosefeldt. The Berlin-based artist disguises his observations of our funny habits and attitudes as aesthetic, well-staged film installations. While he is currently preparing for his new teaching job at the Munich art school, Rosefeldt found some time to meet with DERBEIT to dissect roots – ours, his, and his art's.*

**"We thought we were incredibly original. Looking back we weren't"**

KRYLUM, 2001/2002, Production 010

*You say that studying architecture was the "the better way to study art" for you. What do you mean by that?*

**Julian Rosefeldt:** I didn't study architecture out of the desire to build houses. I understood it as a "gesamtkünstlerische" education in the Italian tradition of architectural study, the idea of learning to be the creator of an aesthetic environment.

*So how did you get from architecture to film?*

My early works were very much part of the zeitgeist of the mid 90s, when it was kind of common sense among artists to recycle instead of producing more original images. We thought we were incredibly original. Looking back, we weren't. For a few years I collaborated with a friend on projects using found footage – most of them still connected to architectural issues. My first solo work was about soap operas. In collaboration with the Goethe Institute, about 60 institutions from all around the world sent me footage – from Kazakhstan to South Korea. At some point I realized there was no truth to the idea that every image had already been created. Apparently, there were a lot of original images in my head that wanted to be put out there. That's why I started directing.



Probably not that much today – but that's a recent development. Early digital cameras had no depth of field, the black was more a kind of grey. Also, you need much more light to expose celluloid, so you start working with it creatively. I think that even if you're not able to understand these differences between digital and analogue analytically, you still feel them.

*Why is the DIY look of a lot of video art not an option for you?*  
It becomes an option when I want to make work that calls for a video aesthetic. I don't want to put film above video, but I am critical about contemporary political video art that often has this reporter-like feeling. Some of those artists presume to be good journalists, but they're not as good as investigative reporters or documentarists.

*You prefer shooting on celluloid and put a lot of effort into the production of your films. What would they be lacking if they were shot digitally?*



BY HORN IS A BOSS AND CUSCO-HUNG LANDS, 2011, Production 2012

Each and right AMERICAN NIGHT, 2010, Production 2012



over-staged film about our way of being caught in clichés. It's a thin line between experimentation and falling into the kitsch trap. Some

probably misunderstand it by thinking that I idealize foreign cultures. What I really emphasize, however, is our idealized view of other cultures – the way we have to over-kitsch the unknown, to take it as more exotic, more erotic – we're all tempted to do that, especially here in Germany, where compared to other nations, cultural differences are still the exception. People think a minaret in Cairo is beautiful – but they don't want it built in their neighborhood. One example in "Asylum" is that scene with the prostitutes, who are dressed very sexy, it's really edgy ...

... some of them are cleaning the long necks of crane sculptures ...

Exactly, I love it when people can laugh about that, but a lot of people think you shouldn't do that. You should: There is maybe no point in saying through art that prostitution is bad. It's much more interesting to make the average Sunday museum visitor realize how involved he is in the issue himself, because he sees these sexy

"exotic" woman and the issues they bring up at the same time.

Your work is often about national identity, like in "American Night", and clichés about nations, as in "Asylum". When does national identity become a cliché?

What interests me is not just nationality or national identity itself, but the myth thereof. In "American Night", there is the myth of the free man with his revolver who takes the law into his own hands, the idea of the free nation that has become an absurdity nowadays, considering the foreign policy of the USA. The Western genre created strong clichés and distorted reality. When somebody quotes the Western myth nowadays – like in gangster rap or the gestures of George W. Bush, when he puts his cowboy boots on the table while receiving visitors, it's not a reference to reality but to the image communicated by cinema.

You keep breaking with the myth of the frontier with contemporary elements like napping cowboys who chat about Godard. What purpose do these stylistic devices serve?

"How far do you have to drift from the normal to be considered crazy?"

I combine the current situation with the founding myth using the sudden, the unexpected. Like in the picture with the familiar Western town suddenly invaded by a helicopter and GIs as if it was Fallujah or Baghdad. It creates a very direct, maybe even crude image where the US literally battles against its founding myth. To me, "American Night" represents the dusk of a receding world power about to take itself down.



For "American Night" you chose the faded Western to question American identity. What best represents German identity to you?

That's difficult for me to say as I am part of it myself. When you work as an artist in Germany, there are certain topics you can't escape – not just National Socialism, but all those complexes it created. "The Ship of Fools" was made directly

In the worst case the result is a kind of concerned kitsch. When they do a reportage on the discrimination of the Roma, for example, these artists often seem satisfied by the feeling "Wow, that's extreme!". They take a shot of their subject and bring it home to their domestic art world. This art falls flat in two ways: On the one hand, because you can tell from the work that the artist did not get deep into the affair. On the other hand, because the white cube audience is always d'accord with what the artist has to say. Art galleries are a safe place when it comes to political articulation. The very select population who attends exhibitions usually agree with the political stance of the artist. So the work doesn't challenge its audience, it only confirms their opinions.

Your works often have a political dimension. What differentiates them from those kinds of videos?

I'm interested in questioning the way political art articulates itself today. In "Asylum", I didn't want to approach the subject of asylum seekers as a documentarist would – it's been done so often, and maybe to a higher standard than I could. So I decided to make an almost



RIGHT LIBERTY KANAL, 2010, Production 2012

RIGHT LIBERTY KANAL, 2010, Production 2012

## "We have a lot of rituals so that we don't start smashing each other's heads"

Installation view  
BAGC Centre for  
Contemporary Art  
Gateshead, 2004

after the FIFA World Championship in Germany. Back then, the feuilletons made a big issue whether we were allowed to shout "Deutschland, Deutschland" and wave our flags. It fascinated me that this was still an issue to be discussed at such a high intellectual level. Shortly after that, I received an invitation to Schloss Sacrow, where artists were asked to make the castle the subject of their artistic exploration. That was just what I was waiting for, as this place is so historically loaded – in a good and in a bad sense. In the Romantic period, it was a kind of "artist in residence" program, people like Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy composed there. On the other hand, it was the house of a high NSDAP official and during the GDR, it was part of the border strip – the Wall passed right next to it, its church served as a watch tower. The greens were used to train watch dogs – all these things were open to be dealt with.

*You've also done a piece for the Jüdisches Museum called "My Home is a Dark and Cloud-Hung Land"...*

It's about the forest, or the Germans' relationship to it. Sounds boring at first, but if you think about it you realize that we still have a special relationship with nature in comparison to other nations. It showed after Fukushima, when all political parties agreed on the nuclear phase-out. Voters want to know that their walks through the woods are safe.

*Do you catch yourself sometimes living a cliché? The cliché of the German or the artist?*

Of course. This analytical and self-critical conversation we're having right now might be an example.

*Critics repeatedly mention Sisyphus when discussing your work, especially in the "Trilogy of Failure". What fascinates you about the daily routine, the hamster wheel?*



I often observe my own rituals, things that we perceive as normal, and I notice absurdities on the streets. We have a lot of rituals, rules,

parameters, that structure our lives so that we don't start smashing each other's heads. I think it's funny how much we are still victims to biology and social influences. The question is: How far do you have to drift from the normal to be considered special or even crazy?

*Your work requires a lot of cultural knowledge. How does the reception of it change when you exhibit in places like Taipei?*

I'm not sure how differently they're being read. I remember that two Indian women once ap-

proached me. They'd seen "Lonely Planet" (ed. note: a film work following a backpacker through India) and didn't find it funny at all. They thought it reflected the way Germans see their culture, though I was more making fun of the backpackers than the Indians: Looking for the "Lonely Planet", but falling into one kitsch trap after another. In the end, most of the people they meet are fellow "Lonely Planet" readers. I even met people in India who said that they went to Goa not for the beach, but to watch hippies.

*Your characters are either part of a group or on their own. There's usually no exchange between just two people, no dialogue. Why?*

I'm just guessing, but it might be because of my

pseudo-scientific approach, like a behaviorist. I want to have a look at the species and for that I either take one example of it or a group.

*When you say that your work takes a critical approach to film, does that mean that you're more film or more art oriented?*

I used to say that I had all my sublime art experiences at the movies. Cinema is a very strong medium that grabs you right away, no

## "In a way the white cube is a prison"



THE SHIP OF FOOLS, 2008. Production still

matter how good or bad the film is. You sit down in a movie theater, worry about that tall guy's head blocking your view, hear the popcorn rustling next to you – but as soon as the film starts, all of that is gone. Maybe that also happens with music, but in the art world it's extremely difficult to achieve. I try to recreate this cinema experience in my art, in the way that I present my work and also through this principle of endurance and the visual power of the images.

*Have you ever flirted with the idea of shooting a film?*

I enjoy the art world because it doesn't force you into a certain format. It does force you into



THE SHIP OF FOOLS, 2008. Production still

the white cube, which is a huge problem. One motivation for shooting a film would be the limited audience of the white cube. In cinema, that's different. Of course, when you watch an ambitious film d'auteur there's also a certain audience selection. But I think that the black box of cinema is a far more democratic environment than the white cube of the art scene. In a way the white cube is a prison.

*Have there been any exhibitions that didn't make you feel caged?*

There's lot of exhibitions that I hold dear in memory. But the "white cube problem" is a fundamental issue I have with the whole art scene. Just now, I'm receiving emails saying: "We'll see each other tomorrow in Kassel." It's like a camel train moving on, first to Kassel, then to Basel, etc. A small, narrow world. ●

JULIAN ROSEFELD is represented  
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