
SYNNØVE G. WETTEN
HOW

9 May–15 June 2014

Synnøve G. Wetten's solo exhibition *HOW* offers an oblique – not to say queer – angle on thought patterns we are all familiar with, but which could be so different. With an eye on activism and a commitment to practical politics, Wetten urges resistance to accepted categories and norms, and points out potential pathways towards change. She's particularly keen to present alternative identity- and gender-orientations, both individually and collectively: there are alternatives to our 'natural' dualistic view of gender.

But *how* can social and political change take place? The exhibition's title is not just a big, open question addressed to the public, but also a reference to Western colonialism. Native Americans have often been depicted with one hand raised in a caricature "Indian greeting", "HOW!" – a word hardly ever used by any tribe. *How* is a person's identity and status determined, Wetten asks. Who is it that defines us – *how* does one gain control over another's identity?

TRANS PANTHER DOCUMENTS

The artist considers all the works in *HOW* to be fragments from a larger archive, whose subject seems to be alternative identity and especially gender orientation from the pre-colonial era to the present. This archive belongs to a political, collective and inclusive movement that Wetten has named Trans Panthers, and which is coordinated by the artist herself. The films, images and text take a zigzag route between epochs and cultures. We physically move around in a mutating archive that is constantly growing, and of which only fragments are being shown at UKS.

"Trans Panthers represents liberation from oppressive structures, and demands rights and freedom for all," Wetten explains. "Its essence is sharing knowledge, which involves hacking and sampling material. Appropriation is central to the Trans Panthers archive. It deals with legal issues such as copyright, power relations, definitions of power and discrimination. It is continually expanding, and hopes to emerge as a changeable manifesto heading full speed into the future."

Wetten freezes selected moments and gives them a new charge by combining them as a collage displayed in a moveable vitrine. Fragments of Trans Panthers' manifesto are juxtaposed with appropriated photographs of indigenous peoples and contemporary drag artists, among other subjects; a stereoscopic Two Spirit design is combined with current news articles. The collage is unfinished: the display case can be opened and Wetten will add new images and texts during the exhibition period.

Wetten has abandoned any traditional sense of the word “archive”. Instead she twists the idea and presents an archive in constant flux, as online content tends to be. By using the archive as an artistic approach, Wetten echoes a trend in contemporary art and theory in which the notion of the archive is updated and reformulated according to recent digital developments. A special feature of Wetten’s approach is the *queer* angle in both form and content; the promotion of that which deviates from the expected and departs from the norm.

RAINBOW SPECTRUM

Wetten’s project expresses the desire for a more transparent society, with open information channels and a focus on community. With its roots in humanism, her oeuvre examines human nature with no regard for gender differences, but with empathy and care as the main principles. Her visual language has shades of a rainbow’s colour spectrum, a reference, perhaps, to hope, compassion or freedom. Transparency is also a key word in discussions around the internet as an archive and information resource, and in Wetten’s view, information flow and openness should be the conditions for a well-functioning democratic society.

Some of Wetten’s works are direct interventions in the exhibition architecture, reflecting her stubborn opposition to straight-lined regularity. The artist shows an inclination towards rounded shapes and a graded colour spectrum. The work *Fantasies cannot be censored* is a filtering of the daylight through an orange foil attached to the outside of a row of skylights in the innermost section of the space. A warm light can provide the experience of sunset or sunrise and, in the exhibition, creates the impression that the day is beginning or ending; the space is altered by the light. Down in the exhibition hall itself, the sound of breathing from a choir can be heard behind a theatrically lit curved wall. The rounded nook acted as a backdrop for the performance/concert held during the opening, but also an artwork in its own right: *FTM Girl Friend Edition* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htTaKllrYXU>. The curve – where previously there was an angle – softens the architecture and, in tandem with the sound, embraces the whole exhibition. The spatial intervention becomes a contemplative counterpoint to the sense of activity and speed which defines several other works in the exhibition, such as *Love Letters*; this small but intense projection of rainbow colours on the floor of the mezzanine is alternately triangular or square, depending on the viewer’s position in the space.

JONAS & NICOLE

Several countries now recognise transgenders as an official third gender. Wetten deals with this subject in her explorations of the pre-colonial Native American approach to the notion of male and female: they practiced a third, fourth and fifth sex, without utilising the West’s strict dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In both a lone photograph and the display-case collage one can see Two Spirit People, a collective term for different tribes’ understanding of a third gender. With Western intervention, ethnic peoples were faced with stigmatisation, which created uncertainty around this changeable and free form of sexual identity.

In the story of American identical twins Nicole and Jonas, the theme is brought up to date. In this photographic work, Wetten appropriates a press image of Nicole (formerly known as Wyatt) – who even before puberty began hormone therapy to change to a woman – together with her brother. A piece about the twins appears in the fanzine *She Is My Brother*, along with fragments from the Trans Panthers manifesto, appropriated photographs, text about Two Spirit People and a poem by Wetten herself. As viewers take away a copy of the fanzine, the archive is disseminated from UKS's closeted rooms out in the world.

VOGUE

Time and tempo is another of *HOW's* recurrent themes. The entrance to UKS's main hall is obstructed by a huge, confrontational presentation of the film *The Uprising – Soft Rebels*, a life-size dance sequence roughly edited by Wetten. The vogue dance style originated in New York in the 1980s. It is competitive, dramatically expressive, and allows a great deal of play with sexual identities, and was popularised by Madonna as well as the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990). *The Uprising* shows the sensuous movements of a transsexual dancer in slow motion. A young person slides in and copies the dancer's movements, as an improvised reflection of "the other". The use of slow motion highlights a wide range of details and becomes a tool that invites the viewer to dwell on the unique, the unconventional and the *queer*.

The film *Silent Speech* is a close-up of Camilla de Castro's face. In 2005 the Brazilian transsexual porn actress and television personality threw herself from the eighth floor of a building, allegedly after receiving a positive HIV diagnosis. We see her eyes, nose and mouth moving in slow motion, but her words are inaudible.

In contrast to this slowing-down of time, there are other found and re-edited voguing movies in which the dance moves are shown at their realistic, violent pace. In *Shangela Dip*, a dancer performs a classic vogue move: a convulsive backwards-fall called the dip. The film is screened on a laptop, Wetten's own work tool (with a sticking-plaster that demonstrates the artist's reluctance to be watched by Big Brother through the computer's camera lens). In *Shangela Dip* we encounter the body entirely differently from the ones in the slowed-down clips. The confident collapse onto the dance floor constitutes a kind of activist statement. At the other end of the room, *Bodybrainbody* demonstrates the same convincing physical mastery, but at the same time addresses another of the show's key points: our mania for recording. The audience's arms gradually stretch up towards the dancer, documenting her on their smartphones, each from an individual viewpoint. We increasingly contribute to the collection, storage and distribution of information in our individual portable archives, where the distinction between private and public is fluid.

AUTOMATIC WRITING

Like the angrily dancing figure on the wall between them, the drawings in the *We* series portray bodily movement, primal and intuitive. These works, spread around the walls, are

in Wetten's own energetic hand. The expressionistic use of pencil lends a personal touch, as well as a more intimate aspect, to the archive. Surrealism's use of automatic writing is an obvious reference, as is the use of abstraction as a liberating tool.

As you turn into the main room, a woman in a hijab and bright pink sweater is bent over her work. She is priming – or perhaps painting over – a piece of canvas or cloth. *New Member of Trans Panthers* is not appropriated material, but a photograph taken by Wetten while the artist was organising a political workshop in Göteborg in 2011. More than any other work, this unequivocally speaks of activism, the collective, a united “we”, and represents Wetten's ideal of a close relationship between art and life. But at the same time it is open to opposing interpretations. Could the inscription on the protester's chest suggest resignation or termination, or is it a battle cry aimed at an adversary? Why is she painting over the canvas instead of writing slogans in big letters? Can a blank canvas also utter a *how* and cause things to change?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Synnøve G. Wetten (born Oslo, 1978, lives and works in Oslo) graduated from the Art Academy in Malmö, 2009. She is a member of the queer activist movement Trans Panthers, and often appears as part of the duo Fine Art Union with Annette Stav Johansen, who recently participated in the Sydney Biennial. Wetten co-founded FRANK, a platform for artistic and curatorial projects currently run by Sille Storihle and Liv Bugge. She has published texts in the anthology *Gruppe 12* (Kolon, 2012) and elsewhere. Previous exhibitions include Sørlandets Kunstmuseum (with Fine Art Union, 2012), Gallery St: Gertrud in Malmö (solo, 2011), Tidens Krav in Oslo (solo, 2011) and USF in Bergen (solo, 2009).

All exhibitions in UKS's main programme are juryed by UKS Jury and curated by Johanne Nordby Wernø. Co-curator of Synnøve G. Wetten's *HOW* is Jenny Kinge.