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“BARBIE and KEN are HIV-positiv”

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An art project in public space.
By Franz Wassermann in collaboration
with HIV-positive tested people and AIDS patients.

For the project "Barbie and Ken are HIV positive" the Austrian artist FranzWassermann directly collaborates with HIV-positive tested people and AIDS patients who supplied him with 2000 objects they use in their daily lives (pens, lighters, money etc.). These objects are sealed into transparent plastic and labelled with "imperatives of attention": hold me, love me, hit me ... These "files" are then marked with a green dot (most hospitals use green dots to mark the AIDS patients' files) and collected in folders. The development of the project, the negotiations with sponsors and their reactions are continuously documented in the Internet (World Wide Web) and will be published in a catalog.

"Barbie and Ken are HIV-positive." The archetypal couple of postmodern society as it is defined by our desire-producing industries is infected with the lethal virus. This statement starts a thought-process that illuminates the relationship between the isolation of HIV positive tested people/people suffering from AIDS and the reluctance of the "others" to become involved with them.

It is a process that displays the facts.

Death is a transformer.

Barbie and Ken.

All children play "Barbie and Ken".

Like "Joseph and Mary," "Adam and Eve," or, simply, "Man and Woman," Barbie and Ken, these two dolls that can be bought in every toy store, have come to stand for the archaic couple in our postindustrial society. Barbie and Ken are role models for our children: tall, blond, skinny, fashionable, flawless. Barbie and Ken embody Health and Normality. Barbie and Ken embody sexless sexuality. It is a sexuality that does not have to question the categories of "male" and "female" and that transcends all ambiguity. "Barbie and Ken are HIV positive." This statement both constitutes a paradox and a parable. The paradox: dolls cannot be infected with HIV. The parable: HIV affects people.

"Barbie and Ken" as a metaphor for all people, no matter what class, ethnicity, religion, culture or sexual orientation they belong to.

Everyday objects.

The objects should be looked at and touched.

The objects that have been used in the daily routines of HIV-positive tested people and people suffering from AIDS are symbols of contact. "Art is perception, perception is contact, contact is sexuality." This central statement, which has also been realised in various former projects by the artist, serves as the basic idea in "Barbie and Ken are HIV positive." Contact, non-contact, as well as



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the fear of contact are the main focus in the confrontation with AIDS. The "objects of contact" symbolize the daily confrontation with the illness/the infection. "Harmless" objects ("harmless" in the sense that these objects cannot transmit the virus) become associated with danger and isolation by sealing them into transparent plastic. They are given new meaning as they become polyvalent objects of art.

See-through plastic: transparent and sealed up.

No skin contact is possible.

The objects are sealed in transparent plastic and collected in a folder - body of evidence for various biographies. The objects thus covered can be looked at and touched. The paradoxical precautionary measure of sealing the objects suggests danger where there is no danger. This contradiction becomes a metaphor for isolation. We do not touch cutlery, pens or banknotes. We grasp taboos like the decay of the body, sexuality and death.

Imperatives of attention.

The audience reActs.

Hundreds of "imperatives of attention" (e.g. "carry me," "shave me," "chain me") are xeroxed on transparent plastic in red font, then cut out and put on the covers. The irritation between the text and the sealed object creates tension.

The Green Dot.

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What is information to some means isolation for others.

The plastic covers are labelled with the same green dots that are used in hospitals and prisons to designate infected material and the files of HIV positive tested people. The green dot becomes an everyday object for the persons affected, like the spoon, the pen, the banknote. It is a sign that stands for a general mechanism of signification/stigmatization. The artist deliberately chooses the green dot as a stigma, as the sign used in the city where the artist lives. As a symbol, it stands for a general code that is differently manifested all over the world.

Files.

A depot.

The transparent plastic folders are archived in files and thereby become a "loose-leaf collection" for multiple biographical combinations. The files contain the pieces of evidence. Any illusion of fictionality is dispersed. Life as a collection of hoarded objects. The folder as a container of biographical fragments.

Public Space: Places.

AIDS affects everybody in the same way at the same time: now.

To avoid isolating the project in the protected environment of traditional art consumption, the public space serves as a gallery. Shops, restaurants, banks, public buildings, and the media are used as a stage for enacting contact. The green dot on the poster



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connects the information with the object and becomes an omnipresent signifier.

Public space: internet.

World-wide access.

A special homepage is installed on the World Wide Web that serves as forum to communicate about the project in progress. The information is continuously documented and updated.

WWW-ADRESS:<http://www.culture.net/thepoint>

Public space: the media.

A private affair.

Television: The objects will be displayed in TV studios.

Newspapers: Photographs of selected objects will be published with comments by affected persons. The public space pervades the living room via TV and the newspaper.

T-shirts: on the skin.

The signifier of isolation becomes a mass movement.

This project can be worn on one's own skin. The wearers themselves function as parts of the project. The stigma of HIV infection is aestheticized, thematized and thus reintroduced into the everyday context.

Documentation.



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The project is documented in a catalog. The various activities in diverse public areas are filmed on video.

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