The Reference has Vanished

I have experienced it as a challenge of publicness to react on the combination of at least two different addressees, the concrete person one speaks or writes to, and the intangible and unknown audience. The idea of the other in the role of a recipient affects my presence, so that I cannot ignore his/her expectations, though they are merely imagined. When I decided to work with the situation of being confronted with the demands of a future audience, with the need to come into appearance by addressing and being addressed by others, and to involve the self directly into the artwork, the experiments with the camera have quickly entered my practice. The task to include the description of both means and conditions of production into this approach led to a series of videos. I would like to mention two of them here, Model of the Figure and Auto Description Model, in which I am explaining a kind of self-made theory while drawing a diagram.

Initially, the diagram videos had not been conceived as the performative gesture as which they appear in the presentation now. On the contrary, they are rather due to the avoidance of a live appearance, a detour in order not to speak in front of an audience. The point of being in the public has been put forward in time, into the anonymous as well as protected space of a dialogue with the camera. The camera is more than just the mere documentation medium of a performance, though I am formally using it as such. In this set-up the eye of the camera does not symbolize the perspective of an artist showing the viewer a certain perception of the world. I rather interpret it as a representation of the viewer's position, which nevertheless is limited as I am defining the circumstances under which my actions become documented. It allows me to turn the audience on and off, to anticipate its presence and reactions while working, but also to exclude it. If becoming public is linked to the idea of visibility for instance, it could be understood literally as being inside the camera frame, which becomes evident when I sometimes interrupt the lecture, moving out of the picture and leaving the viewer alone with the diagram. Working with a recording instrument and not performing live, promises metaphorically to recapture control, which seems to get lost in a public situation, when one is committed to the passive presence of the audience. But by anticipating any kind of listener it also allows to activate an idea of publicness and belonging though working in a segregated situation.

The performance is scripted, yet staging the text causes me to speak in a different manner. I become my own double. The ambivalence lies in the undertaking of presenting oneself as a speaker and as a narrative figure at the same time. The acting in front of a camera changes to the extent by which the medium itself brings contextual parameters into play, such as temporality and linearity, live and edited, presence and absence; the camera embodies the viewer and it creates a stage. When starting a recording the sudden effect of being as concentrated as self-conscious, prompts a vigilance for the here and now and for the virtuality of the potential reception. Is it possible to claim the camera disciplines the person moving in front of it? Or is it the viewer who is being disciplined, not only because his/her time is being organized, but also because the status as addressee is being defined? What kind of presence of the other is evoked with a camera that could be also used as a mirror?

While having developed both of these videos the drawing had become an essential tool for the very construction of the spoken text. When I focus on the structure of a certain communication form, e.g. a letter or a speech, it often appears being an exemplary model. In its abstractness it lends itself to be applied and attached to various realities. Analysing such communication forms by drawing and thus spatializing the different positions, like addressee and observer, social conditions and technical means, enables to visualize and therefore clarify constellations that interest me. In a process of having conversations and rehearsals, of placing notions on a paper and connecting them via the movement of drawing arrows, the final diagram is constructed. The pleasure of explaining in diagrams is the simultaneity of notions. In contrast to the chronology and linearity of a text the spatial order of notions allows to display the undecidable, just by materializing and visualizing the circles that any contradiction in thinking provokes. Yet it follows its own dynamics, and seems to infect the whole procedure of developing the theory itself, when I start to comply with the logic of the graphic and the attraction of intersecting lines. Are there specific necessities implicated, that grow out of the logic of the diagram as an image? Does the aesthetic of the graphic have a impact on the direction of the speech?

The attitude of seriousness evoked by the quasi-academic gesture of both diagram as well as lecture promises a certain grade of objectiveness and knowledge. But the more seriously I take the task of explaining the more it leads the model into absurdness. The model could appear strangely bare, even arbitrary, as if the original reference that prompted its abstraction has vanished. In the end it seems as if the diagram does not refer to anything any more, but only creates increasing connections, even though it is the relation to the other that remains as the basic experience.
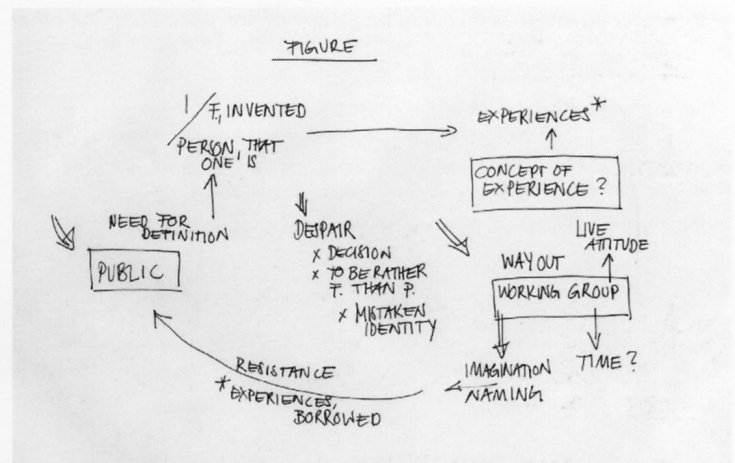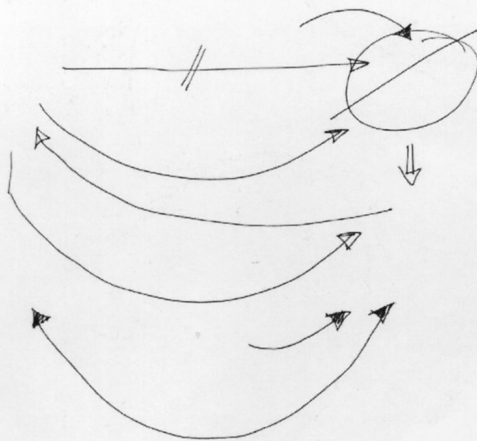
Auto Description Model

If there could be a model, then it might look like this:

There is me and there is the other, who is just not present.

This absence is not his fault, but it prompts me to write to him.

It is the first step which is not that easy to see.

In fact, it poses the question of who am I writing to, so who is the other:

I am probably thinking of someone specific who just is not present, but – because this person is simply not present, I do not know exactly who he is.

And that is why I have to invent him.

Which implies that I already think of at least two different persons.

On the one hand, there is the addressee who is the one I mean, the one I think of and also the one I invent.

On the other hand, there is also someone I would now call the receiver, someone who actually receives what I am writing.

After all, there must be someone who might receive what I'm writing.

And this person does not or maybe even cannot be the same person as the addressee?

That is the question.

But these two different others read along, and above all they write along:

Someone is looking over my shoulder.

That is to say, addressee as well as receiver influence me insofar as I try to be responsive to them, though nobody is really there.

They co-write what I am writing, insofar as I start to anticipate any possible expectation.

And if the other is already a divided person then there might be several persons.

Let's say, there are x readers, and they are fictional.

Sometimes it seems to me as if these two positions of me and the other are interchangeable: as if I could be placed on the position of the other as well.

Thus the whole thing is going in circles.

And this would become a soliloquy, because I am interchangeable.

But for the conversation to occur it would, in any case, need the other.

Model of the Figure

When demonstrating the model of the figure, I assume that the self is a divided one. In fact, the self is divided into the person that one actually is and into the figure that one invents. Of course, you can make up several figures, but that still will be accompanied by certain problems: It might result in despair, because you are not able to decide. You no longer know who you are. Also, it might drive you into despair because you prefer being the figure to being the person. That is resulting from realizing that the figure's experiences are not your own.

It is probably quite naive to believe that one has to undergo these fictional experiences in reality. But it implies the issue of defining the concept of experience. And this is exactly where a way out of the dilemma is presented, namely when the person and the figure join into a working group and influence one another. The working group questions, so to speak, the concept of experience which is based on a form of live-attitude. At this point another problem is to be introduced, namely that the person can be taken for its figure. But at the same time, this mistaken identity serves as a sort of hideout or simply as a way to react to the expectations of the public, which are imposed through the live-attitude on the self. At this point, there is something that becomes undecidable. For example, when the self can no longer clearly be located within time.

This confusion may also result in the self staying in an interspace – in-between the idea of the figure and its naming. This interspace in-between the imagination and its realization opens up the idea of resistance to the public, as far as the need for definition on the part of the public. This need for definition is mostly expressed in the question of what it is that makes up a person. And within this working group of figure and person an exchange takes place. The person borrows fictional experiences from the figure, for example the figure's memory, and thus opposes to the public's aspect of time. Hence, the working group is situated in this interspace and pits the need for definition against the live-attitude. Thus, it results in a shift which allows for a form of resistance.

Karolin Meunier