

SCREEN TEST

OPENING
6-8pm
10 MAY

CONTINUES
11-26 MAY
12-6pm
WED - SAT

CHRISTOPHER
KÖLLER
ELIZABETH
PRESA



TEST 508

Ground Floor,
30 Guildford Lane,
Melbourne VIC
Australia 3000
T: +61 3 9012 5351
info@screenspace.com
www.screenspace.com

SCREEN SPACE

Participation in art, if it is to do justice to the demands art makes, seems to be determined by two different aspects. Once they have been told apart, it is difficult to reconcile them. For, on the one hand, participation in art requires immediacy, which lies either in the belief triggered by what is represented in the artwork, by its content, or else in a belief in the artistic representation itself, in the work of art as such. For example, one watches a film and before one is really able to understand it, one feels that there is something there, that there is something significant about this film. Perhaps such a belief, whether it is triggered by the artwork's content or whether it is a belief in the artistic representation itself, cannot be separated from a belief in the body and the world, a belief which, according to Deleuze, may be regained in modern cinema. On the other hand, however, participation in art requires mediation, since a distinction needs to be made between art and non-art, or, to use the terminology of traditional aesthetics, between art and nature. When one participates in a work of art, one must be aware of that fact that it is indeed a work of art, not a product of nature.

[...]

Antonioni's concern with the two aspects of participation in art appears in a film he made in 1965 as a kind of preface to *I tre volti* (1965), a portmanteau film consisting of two different episodes. His film is known as *Il provino*, which means 'The Screen Test', and also as *Prefazione*. It circles around a secret screen test that takes place in the middle of the night at the newly built studios of producer Dino De Laurentis. The screen test is meant to mark the beginning of Princess Soraya's career as a film actress, as if the German-Iranian royalty had been looking for a new role for herself. One of the journalists and photographers who has got wind of the project and has besieged the studio, answers the question of why Soraya is trying to become an actress by saying that she is probably tired of playing the role of a princess.

[...]

Being, in *Il provino*, is also the kind of Being art produces. It splits into the production of a film, visualized as a creative process that begins with a screen test, and the result of this process, the film which Antonioni has made and which is almost a documentary. The spectator sees how Soraya's face is placed against a background; one of its two halves is masked deliberately, so that the other half can be observed more closely. The spectator sees how makeup and lipstick are put on, how mascara is applied to the eyelashes, how a number of wigs, displayed on a shelf and captured in a tracking shot, are ready to be selected, how a studio employee uses an iron to put finishing touches to a red cocktail dress. While the faces of Soraya and the friend who accompanies her are filmed frontally or in a mirror, so that they look straight into the camera, and while Soraya studies herself in a series of different outfits and on one occasion even throws red fluid at the mirror as if she were angry, the face of the producer played by Dino De Laurentis, remains invisible. Either the position of his body is such that he turns away from the camera, or else other bodies come between it and the spectator's field of vision; sometimes the shot allows for the face to appear only in profile, sometimes the producer's head is seen only from behind, thus suggesting that power does not have a face, only a voice that utters decisions, or that faces are expressive and that power must be without expression. When Soraya arrives at the film studio, the neon lights that form a canopy over the driveway have all been switched off. Only the flash of a camera which belongs to the photographer from Paese Sera illuminates the scene. Very briefly, the spectator sees a group of people. They hurriedly move from a car to the entrance hall. Later on, the journalist and the photographer will be disappointed, for they will realize that the pictures are worthless. There was no luck during the blind haste; the images don't show the princess's face. As Soraya is getting ready for her screen test in a long and arduous procedure that makes her smoke many cigarettes, her friend reminds her that she has been brought up to hide her feelings and that now she will be asked to exhibit them. It can be gauged from this remark that in the present case the exchange of roles is not simply a transition from one role to another but rather a reversal. Why? Because in the world of the powerful there is not just one form of inexpressiveness; there is the inexpressiveness of power exercised and hence invisible, but there is also the inexpressiveness of power represented and hence visible, of power over oneself and over others. For this reason, the split between production and product becomes particularly apparent where it corresponds to the split between expression and inexpressiveness.

Inasmuch as Antonioni's representation of a screen test keeps alerting the spectator to the fact that art is something produced, brought about by an artist, two sequences in his film must be considered that try to elicit an unmediated participation on the spectators side. On the one hand, Soraya's preparation for her screen test is interrupted by a phone conversation she has with her mother. Speaking in German, she asks her to rush from Munich to Rome on the next available flight, as if she couldn't cope with her life any longer, or as if she no longer wanted to play a role, the role of a princess driven into exile or the role of a budding actress. It seems unlikely that this scene elicits immediate participation. On the other hand, the actual screen test ends with a series of close-ups and long shots that show Soraya wearing an elegant evening gown, a princess who is playing the role of a princess. A spiral staircase has been built on the brightly illuminated set, which resembles a small sunny island in the middle of nowhere. Although there is no upper floor, Soraya comes down this staircase and walks into a large room filled with plants, pieces of furniture, knick-knacks, a chandelier and a Persian rug. Wallpaper with a floral pattern covers thin wooden walls. The princess exposes herself to an unexpectedly strong draught that penetrates into the room through the French windows and makes the net curtains inflate. The draught is produced by the large tubes of a wind machine. Romantic piano music is playing but does not succeed in drowning out the noise. Though Antonioni never allows the spectator to forget that this is a screen test in a film studio, and though the artificiality of the situation is underlined by the stark contrast between the false English-style living room and the functional space that surrounds it, it is as if the simulated mood communicated itself to the spectator. This mood is the abstract remainder of melodrama, of an exaggeration of emotions that prompts the two aspects of participation in art to diverge in opposite directions, in the direction of an internal view and in the direction of an external view that cannot be reconciled any more. The mood here signals the beginning and the end of immediate participation.

[...]

From the essay "QUASI: Antonioni and Participation in Art" by Alexander García Düttmann, in *Antonioni Centenary Essays*, edited by Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes, BFI Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Elizabeth Presa, in participation -

"A shabby and mysterious mood"

>> PRODUCTION CREDITS

KITTY GREEN

Director of photography, camera operator & co-director

MATTHEW STANTON - gaffer, grip & still photographs

MARK EDWARDS - sound

ROD MCNICOL - voice coach

LACHLAN SMITH - editor & sound design

REBECCA JEFFREY - poster, catalogue & invitation design

Shot at Barkly Street Studio

Christopher Köller is represented by

Fehily Contemporary

www.fehilycontemporary.com.au