



Shifting Sitting

...slowly one by one joining the collective séance,
each picking up and acting out a role...

Assessment by Amrout Al
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London of 2003

Shifting Sitting, Aernout Mik

(a work in progress, in anticipation)

Shifting Sitting is a multi-channel video installation to be installed at a Western parliament. The piece consists of two different scenes that are taking place at different moments in a courthouse.

Scene 1:

The first scene takes as its starting point one of the trials against Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, regarding allegations of corruption. By exception, he appeared himself in front of the court to defend his case.

In the video, the real Berlusconi plays Berlusconi. He is accused together with four other men that all share visual similarities with him, although they are not identical. One has more hair, one has turned grey, one wears a moustache and one is much younger. However, as members of a group that stand close together in the courtroom, they form a remarkable unity.

Other groups and sub-groups are present in the courtroom: interrogators, various lawyers that assist the Berlusconis, security personnel (both in uniform and in civilian clothes), press and the public.

An absolute impasse occurs in the courtroom. It appears that major clashes ignite between the various forces in the room. Now a desperate and silent equilibrium hangs in the air. Interrogators are speechless and stare ahead. They seem to be waiting for something. The exhausted Berlusconis are looking in all directions and their body language is alternately insecure or defiantly arrogant. The audience appears paralyzed but sometimes erupts into small waves of anger, mocking the Berlusconis, while at other times they shower them with support. The security personnel are tense and nervous. The various cameras are registering both the obscure moments and the behavior of the people and also the room—for them there is no difference anymore between center and periphery. At times the cameras suddenly become extremely close to the bodies of the actors and even disappear temporarily into the cavity of their mouths.

Within this enduring conundrum, a few small incidents abruptly interrupt the static order. For instance, some of the Berlusconis are covering their faces with their jackets, another provocatively puts a balacueva over his head. In reaction, certain interrogators and people in the audience mimic the Berlusconis by putting their hands over their faces. A bit later, the Berlusconis throw insults around, make jokes and demonstratively go sit down all together on the floor. After a short while hanging in indecision, without any conviction the guards pull the Berlusconis up to their feet. But the Berlusconis let themselves sink to the ground again. A section of the audience gets up from their chairs and hysterically praises the accused, but then quickly switches to pointing blame at them; another section of the audience raises masks with Berlusconi's face printed on them to their faces, then lowers them and sits quietly in a row with their arms crossed. The guards are trying to restore the order and pick someone from the audience to inspect his/her clothes. The interrogators are locked up in a sudden internal dispute.

But in the end it all remains just a tense immobile situation where it is completely unclear who really has the authority and what the final outcome of the trial will be, if there is one at all. In this situation of extreme stagnation, the divisions between the various opposing and conflicting groups seem to dissolve.

Scene 2:

The second scene takes place in the same courtroom, but after the sitting is over. Some of the audience and some of the press remain there hanging around in the mostly emptied space. Maintenance technicians and cleaning personnel are doing their jobs. Most of the workers are young except for one older gipey lady. A few of them have a north-African background. They find the Berlusconi masks that were left behind on the chairs by the protesters in the audience and jokingly start wearing them. Others react by starting to behave like interrogators and judges and together they playfully imitate the day's events. A few of the still present members of the press and public are laughing and slowly, one by one, join the collective séance, each picking up and acting out a role. But at this point, the tone of the spontaneous ritual gets more harsh and heated up — it feels that something shocking and unexpected could suddenly happen within the crowd, especially when the people that took the Berlusconi masks demonstratively start sitting down on the floor. But considering how spontaneously the whole scene came together, it now miraculously disintegrates again when, one by one, in good spirits, the individual workers return to their original duties.

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