Words by Riccardo Conti

THIRD PERSON SINGULAR
A convesation with T.W.

Tanja Widmann. *Girlfriends (Tom)*, 2025.
Courtesy the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: repro-photo.net

To understand Tanja Widmann's work, it is best to start with a production credit. Her exhibitions are credited as "Tanja Widmann. Produced by Johannes Porsch", just like an album or a film: the artist's name has not disappeared, it has simply been moved from the centre, becoming a credit amongst the credits. Widmann (born in Villach (Austria) in 1966; she teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich) has developed one of the most sophisticated and intellectually rigorous approaches to contemporary art by methodically stripping away everything that the art world demands be displayed. With her collaborator Porsch, she works within production frameworks that recycle the exhausted materials of the twentieth century: conceptual art, minimalism, appropriation, feminist theory and desire. Forms that were once radical, now clichés: that is where they begin to interest her. The method starts with the script, an object found, a text or an image to be activated through repetition, translation or movement. Second-hand material – or rather, third-hand: Richard Prince's *Girlfriends* reprinted using inkjet technology, *Madame Bovary* reissued with essays on feminist theory, the Hermès aesthetic drawn upon not as a luxury good but as a source of semiotic inspiration. On the subject of appropriation, she pointed out to us that even writing this interview is a form of reproduction (of texts already written, of books read, of press releases) which, she explains ironically, "reproduces myself all over again". For an issue devoted to absence, she was the ideal interviewee, but there was no room for misunderstanding: Widmann does not believe in emptiness as an heroic act. She is wary of radicalism and sceptical of fantasies involving rule-breaking and transgression. In these pages, absence is not an empty room: it is a voice that has learned to say 'I' in the third person.

Many of your exhibitions are credited as "Tanja Widmann. Produced by Johannes Porsch", and in the past you worked under the acronym TJW/, which also included other names. In an art world that thrives on signatures, you treats your own as a canvas to be emptied. What remains of an artist when his or her name becomes a function, a production credit, as in the film industry?

Produced by refers to the collaboration with Johannes Porsch. TJW/ was an earlier version: a way of pointing out that authorship and production (at least in my case) are always heteronomous and dependent. Johannes has co-produced much of my recent work. *Produced by* draws on Walter Benjamin's notion of the artist as a producer, according to which the artist cannot be separated from the conditions and relationships associated with production. But for us, it also refers to music production: a producer is someone who creates a sound, a beat – someone who takes the available material, reworks it and adapts it for the club environment.

There are various ways of understanding the concept of production in contemporary practice: which interpretation is closest to your work?

For me, production is inseparable from consumption and recording. I usually work with what I call a script: a found object, a text, a film, an image. The script is "source code" for production and reproduction, a continuous process of decoding and recoding. It provides the raw material for a translation into another format, another form: an (art) object, a film, an exhibition. And then, of course, there is the question of what underpins the work, of what keeps it standing.

Johannes's work focuses on the creation of exhibition structures that function as performance spaces. These are objects that reflect on the conditions of their own visibility and which are rooted in post-minimalist and post-conceptual strategies and so prioritize function over autonomy. Rather than conveying fixed meanings, they generate relationships, anticipate events and oscillate between presence and potential. They challenge the conventional notion of an object and reveal the interdependencies and interactions that underpin forms that appear to be self-sufficient.

From the very beginning, production has been shared, interdependent and integrated. Autonomy appears to be nothing more than a pretence: a claim that crumbles as soon as the production chain becomes visible. Work, time, access, repetition. The name, however, continues to define the work: it generates value while consuming labour. Labels such as *Produced by*, or previously TJW/, are attempts to question this relationship, without actually resolving it.

The change of ownership, therefore, is not merely a change of medium or format, but a shift in authorship. It allows me to view the exhibited object (whatever it may be, however it may be situated in space) as something that no longer relates to me. The work becomes something I can encounter as something other than myself. It is a way of repudiating my own act: not to erase authorship, but to suspend its authority just enough for the object to reveal itself from another angle, with another voice, from another position. In this sense, every change of ownership, every produced by credit, introduces a moment of free indirect speech.

In the *Lying Daughters* series, you draw on Richard Prince's *Girlfriends*, which in turn were taken from biker magazines: an appropriation squared, produced – moreover – using a digital printer, without even the nobility of an analogue tool. Sherrie Levine re-photographed Walker Evans to challenge the male gaze. What are you questioning by reissing the Prince series: the photographer, the male desire embodied in those images, or the fact that this critical act no longer shocks anyone?

I am interested in a form of production characterized by deterioration, degradation, base materialism. For *Simple Lines (Girlfriends)* (2023), we used several pages from Richard Prince's publication *Girlfriends* (1993) as source material for the reproduction. Not as a tribute, but as a way of refreshing those pages. The result is not glamorous or glossy in appearance, but is characterized more by a sort of overwhelming pressure: too few resources, too much affection, too many small circuits of desire tied to images, objects and situations. Reproduction here is not an abstract concept, but what happens in everyday life: relationships, sex, informal exchanges, even derived values, microtransactions and business dealings.

The material that functions for me as source code is always social as well. It has already passed through countless pairs of eyes, exchanges and distribution channels. It has already been worn out in circulation, crystallized, and reduced to a cliché. In this sense, Prince's publication was the ideal material precisely because it was already fairly worn: a series of appropriate photographic reproductions that had already circulated several times through the market and the art world. An image-body that is already over-coded, so permeable that it can function as a script for me: first for the exhibition *Lying Daughters. Produced by* (2023), then, in 2025, for the publication with the same title. Another reproduction cycle, set in motion by a moment that is at once different and similar. For me, it's very simple: I'd love to be one of those "Girlfriends". I want those Girlfriends. At fourteen, at twenty-five, now. Perhaps the question is not so much what is being attacked as what remains active: desire, authorship, value and the economic systems that hold these images together.

As an artist, what is your relationship with the Pictures Generation? Levine, Kruger, Prince himself? In various ways, that movement viewed the images that Pop Art had mythologized with disillusionment, yet returned to figurative art through conceptual devices. Now that images seem to have lost every last trace of authenticity and authorship itself is in crisis, what role can images still play?

The Pictures Generation is, of course, an important point of reference for me. I'm interested in its conceptual approach to images and the way it tackles representation. Circulation, reproduction, the creation of value: these are all issues that concern me too and that shape my work. At the same time, when I look at Richard Prince's work, I see a certain revitalization of the image within this process of reproduction: a return to, or even an intensification of, glamour, fetishism and symbolic value. And it is clear that this initiative contributes to the creation of value in the art world.

In my own work, however, I tend to wear down the images even further – images that I already consider to be worn out. It's a process of material degradation. If glamour or fetishism find their way into the work, they are structured in such a way as to simultaneously reveal a lack. I'm interested in the image precisely because, in today's world, it has already been exhausted by circulation, consumed, emptied of meaning. When an image, or text, or any other object becomes a cliché: that's when it starts to interest me.

The languages of reduction (minimalism, conceptual art) seem to have run their course: emptiness has become just another style, ideal for pretentious flagship stores. And yet you work specifically within that tradition. When does the form of the void cease to be radical?

I have always been wary of radicalism as an artistic claim. All too often, it stems from fantasies of rule-breaking and transgression. My work takes its starting point from what is already exhausted, already a cliché. It consumes and reproduces that condition, so I wonder: just how radical can it be?

In the exhibition Johannes Porsch *-1, plus One*, the Hermès horse bit served as the "source code" for the exhibition: a luxury item, a fetish, a tool for controlling bodies and movements. And on the buttons engraved with "Hermès Sellier", you deleted some of the letters, leaving only "her sell". In your work, does emptiness spark desire or stifle it?

Both. Or neither?

Tanja Widmann, *Lying Daughters*, *Produced by Johannes Porsch*, 2023.
Courtesy the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna.
Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com

There's one thing I've only just realized: the first of your works that I saw was *Jonny 2 (from the series from or for) (2022)*, which shows the silhouette of a female figure on horseback. Then there is the Hermès bit, which draws on the French fashion house's saddlery tradition; in *Madame Bovary*, the famous scene in which Rodolphe seduces Emma takes place during a horse ride in the woods; and, after all, even Prince's *Girlfriends* are "riding" a saddle. Is this presence-absence of the horse merely a coincidence, or does it have a specific meaning for you?

More than the horse itself, I'm interested in what the horse brings with it. For *Jonny 2*, the starting point was a still image from a pretty mediocre TV miniseries, *Godless*. The series is set in a town in New Mexico inhabited, supposedly, solely by women. Or so the advert claimed, at least. We are in what is conventionally known as the American West, in 1884.
But by 1884, the land was already under siege, there was no common land left.

The still image I used shows an artist (a lesbian) riding naked through the town on horseback. She only has a minor role in the series, yet the image encapsulates a whole host of clichés: the founding myth of America, inextricably linked to extreme violence; the history of European colonialism; the figure of the artist as someone who transgresses all boundaries; the fantasy of freedom projected onto the West. I could go on.

With Hermès, a similar story comes back from a different angle, through a different object: a disciplinary fetish. The work brings together luxury branding, algorithmic logic (the rider/horse relationship as a model for a feedback system based on command and control), S&M bondage, and so on.

That particular bit model from Hermès is used at the highest level of classical dressage. It requires an exceptionally skilled rider and a horse that is equally well-trained. There is a history of class and privilege behind it. For us, the piece also serves as a commentary on artistic production itself, on the gallery as a "stable of artists" who showcase their bodies of work. We added small bandages with lead seals to the bit, bearing the logos of FELIX GAUDLITZ and Cell Project Space. It's a level of irony on a par with the (glory) hole in the glass panels. Just as low, perhaps.

What interests me is precisely this particular condensation within the cliché: the way in which historical violence, desire, discipline, luxury and class are compressed into an image or an object that has been completely consumed. And Richard Prince's *Girlfriends* series is, of course, inextricably linked to the *Cowboys*. So yes, in a way the horse is a coincidence – and at the same time it isn't at all.

Flaubert invented free indirect speech: the author who disappears into the character's voice, without quotation marks. In the book *Lying Daughters*, you and Porsch have reimagined the classic *Madame Bovary* alongside Prince's images and texts on feminist theory. What interests you about Emma Bovary: the woman shaped by the novels she reads, or the writer who, in order to tell her story, had to cease to exist?

Class, desire, fiction, mimesis, breaking free from oneself: all of this lies at the heart of my work. Kay Gabriel's poems also play a crucial role in the book's structure. This is a series of letters on sex, exchange and social space – themes that also run through everything I do. The montages in *Lying Daughters. Produced by* function as forms of indirect speech. Rather than Flaubert, it is perhaps Pasolini who springs to mind: the way he describes the camera as a tool for free indirect speech, not only through shots and angles, but also through editing. *Lying Daughters* has become a sort of road trip through my corrupt *Éducation sentimentale*.

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Tanja Widmann, *-1, One plus (Derivatives). Produced by Johannes Porsch*, 2025. Courtesy the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: Damian Griffiths

Tanja Widmann, *-1, One plus (Bit). Produced by Johannes Porsch*, 2025. Courtesy the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: Damian Griffiths

Today, the art world asks artists (and female artists in particular) to put themselves on the line, to speak out, to lay themselves bare. Your work does the opposite: "I am (not) that person", as it says in *Lying Daughters*. Is your refusal to reveal yourself your form of autobiography?

Perhaps. But it's a confession that constantly unravels. "I am (not) this person" lies at the heart of my work: a constant shifting of authorship, a form of artistic autofiction in which the first-person perspective is both asserted and withdrawn at the same time.

In the video *Hard Currency*, presented at Manifesta 8 in 2010, you edited together excerpts from the Polish writer Gombrowicz, Tiqqun's *Teoria della Jeune-Fille* and clips from the reality TV show *Germany's Next Top Model*. Fifteen years on, the Jeune-Fille has triumphed: constant self-promotion is the basic condition of existence, even for artists. Under this regime, is withdrawing still a viable option, or is it merely a luxury, a sort of "Hermès attitude"?

For me, withdrawal does not mean absence, and nor does it mean radical denial. Withdrawal is a change in grammatical position. It means taking on a different role: speaking indirectly, providing a script. In *Against Nature* (2023), for example, I wrote the introductory text, drawing on discussions with Andrea Fourchy, Nicole Antonia Spagnolia and Felix Gaudlitz, and provided a script for the exhibition. The works I produced for that occasion are deliberately unstable, both as objects and in terms of authorship. This strikes me as far more interesting (and more controversial) than simply leaving the room: which, after all, is indeed a luxury.Similarly, *Derivatives Affaires* (2025), at Schleuse in Vienna, was conceived as a spatial and temporal montage: a reworking and reimagining of earlier works. A form of self-exhaustion rather than self-expression. A conversation with Ken Okiishi in Munich, the work *SL (Girlfriends) Outline B-side (Product)* (2025) exhibited by Schiefe Zähne in Berlin, and the exhibition *–1, plus One* at Cell Project Space in London had continued to resonate with me. In particular, the "glory hole" – as a point of entry and exit for systems and desires – seemed to me to be worth exploring in greater depth. So I screened Ken's film, *Vital Behaviors* (2021), alongside the most damaged fragments of his other works. When Ken's film began, the other objects faded into the background.

You teach at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. Art schools train students in presence: portfolios, artist statements, visibility. Can absence be taught? And how do you respond to a student who asks you whether he or she has the right not to be there, not to participate, not to produce, not to respond?

Negation, I believe, has its own kind of productivity. The most interesting question is whether refusing to produce is the same as being absent, or withdrawing. I don't think it is. In any case, it's above all a good starting point for an interesting discussion… with a student or with anyone else.

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Tanja Widmann, *Simple Lines (Girlfriends), from the series Lying Daughters. Produced by Johannes Porsch*, 2023. Courtesy the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com