

Lars Laumann, *Berlinmuren* (2008)

Unless you have turned your back on the world, you probably find yourself surrounded by a global culture industry in which art is a commodity like any other and the internet is omnipresent. One can heave a sigh over the system this entails or one can fall in love with the possibilities of such freely exchanged information. The Norwegian video artist Lars Laumann (b. 1975) has done the latter.

In several of his video works, Laumann draws his inspiration from the internet. From chat rooms, fan culture or obscure homepages, where the information on offer is uncensored and passionate. Almost to the point of obsession. One of Laumann's earlier films, *Morrissey Fortelling the Death of Diana* (2006) is about the conspiracy theories that circulate on the internet. More specifically, its theme is the unanswerable question of how, on the album *The Queen is Dead* by the group The Smiths, lead singer Morrissey managed to foresee the death of Princess Diana eleven years before it happened. How was this possible? The work is a video montage composed of picture material from existing films. In a voice-over that accompanies us through the entire film, the links between Morrissey's song, video and cover material on the one hand and Diana's death on the other are meticulously presented. It is intense, absurd and claustrophobic. Laumann's latest film *Shut up Child! This ain't Bingo* (2009) also focuses on a story of the more obscure kind, even if in this case reality remains somewhat closer to hand. We are introduced to Laumann's colleague Kjersti Andvig, herself a Norwegian artist, and learn about the relationship she built up with death-row convict Carlton A. Turner, who was executed in Texas on 10 July 2008. By means of interviews we are drawn into the love affair, the desperation and – ultimately – the religious and supernatural fantasies to which Andvig turned, in a situation of sheer urgency during the days just before the execution. But we are also drawn into the bizarre and self-destructive aspect of Andvig's relationship to Turner, something that makes Laumann's use of his material all the more absorbing. *Shut up Child!* is neither a political statement about the death penalty nor a love story pure and simple; rather, it is first and foremost a story about obsession and the convictions, or mania, if you prefer, that go with it, reinforced by Andvig's growing belief in Turner's rebirth. "I had a powerful sense of really, really wanting Carlton to love me as I left the prison," Andvig says at one point in the film, "but I don't know whether this was because I was in need of love or he needed someone to love."

The work Henie Onstad has chosen for the second Art in the Auditorium series, *The Berlin Wall* (2008), was greeted with deserved acclaim at last year's Berlin Biennial. Among Laumann's archive of curious tales from the margins of the cultural world, this is probably the most curious. The film is about the relationship between the Swede Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer and the Berlin Wall. In other words, not quite your standard love story. Laumann came across the story on Berliner-Mauer's own website, where Berliner-Mauer describes how she was first attracted to the wall due to her object sexuality, how she married "him" in 1979, and how – quite understandably – she experienced "his" fall in 1989 as especially traumatic. "We have been together now for many years, spiritually if not physically. Like every married couple, we have our ups and downs. We even made it through the terrible disaster of November 9, 1989, when my husband was subjected to frenzied attacks by a mob. We may not have a conventional marriage, but neither of us cares much for conventions. Ours is a story of two beings in love, our souls entwined for all eternity," she says. In Laumann's film, Berliner-Mauer describes how she feels attracted emotionally and sexually by objects. Objects, she claims, have feelings, intelligence, and can communicate in much the same way as people and animals. For large parts of the film, Laumann allows Berliner-Mauer to explain her story and orientation in frank and sober terms. In this way he exposes us to one of the internet's more marginal underground stories, which for a brief moment mainstream culture has made its own.

Whether it is a matter of a singer predicting the death of Princess Diana, the relationship between an artist and someone condemned to death, or a Swedish woman married to the Berlin Wall, Laumann has an eye for weird stories and a talent for telling them. The artist uncovers the eccentric, what lies beyond the pale, while at the same time allowing us as viewers to be swept along by his sometimes nerdish fascination for these phenomena. With video as his ostensibly preferred medium, in his more recent films Laumann creates explorative documentaries, partly by presenting his characters as interview subjects. He probes the boundaries between the private (the stories of Berliner-Mauer and Andvig are unusually personal) and the documentary investigation thereof. At the same time Laumann keeps the gaze of his camera at a distance: The result is never compromising.

In *Shut up Child!* Andvig refers to the concept of “suspension of disbelief”. The world of fiction presupposes that we believe in premises that we would not accept in reality. In the genres of fantasy and science fiction in particular, things happen that we would not believe if they appeared in a newspaper or were presented as fact. In order to draw pleasure from such narratives, the audience has to engage in the “suspension of disbelief”. More or less consciously we ignore what we do not believe and accept the premises for the story as true for as long as it lasts. Provided it insists on its truthfulness and does not push the boundaries too far, of course. As a committed storyteller, Laumann dives into the more obscure human passions and re-emerges carrying peculiar tales about one aspect of the world – here and now. The fact that we also believe what Laumann’s films tells us is a credit to his method of communication and its inherent plausibility.

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