

# «Occupy ORF»

a playground with a cultural mission

by Prete Maier

Austria's national public broadcasting channel ORF is often strongly criticized for failing to realize its educational and cultural mission and developing the majority of its programs with an eye on ratings and so neglecting both education and culture.

There is not much evidence to refute this critique - except for the fact that, in ORF's enormous central broadcasting station on Vienna's Küniglberg, there is a sort of Gallic village that calls itself ORF III that has begun to realize its programming mission.

Not least with its Artists in Residence series: «occupy ORF». As part of the series, Swiss artist Nina Staehli occupied the ORF TV station with her sculpture family that evidently considered the national public broadcaster's headquarters a public restroom. For many years Staehli has been giving birth to sculptures infused with stories, thereby transforming the sculptures into actors who categorically resist a straightforward judgment.

An unsettlingly cheerful, irritating and thought-provoking urge to do so reveals a powerful speechlessness, compelling each viewer to make his or her own association.

Yoshi and Moshi, the heroes of the eponymous film, seem to be largely unaffected by the ultra-symbolic activities of their friends. In their apathy and listlessness, they represent, in the artist's view, an expression of a society without values, characterized by abundance and a lack of imagination: the norm of a lost generation whose only purpose in life is to consume.

The two exude an aura that makes them rather endearing and so it is hard to imagine Yoshi needing to consult his calendar to find time to spend with his friends; unfathomable that Moshi would take out consumer credit or beg his acquaintances for money; unthinkable that Yoshi and Moshi would go on a shopping spree or sit in front of the TV to watch «Dancing Stars». The two of them may be archetypes of the coming generation: hollow, burned out consumerism junkies for whom even the act of consuming is too much effort, exponents of a «day after» to come.

Their bizarre friends turn out to be lively and active characters: they not only arrange a feast for Yoshi and Moshi in the ORF building, but are also ceaselessly performing the strangest of activities.

**Ruby Dean** lives in the snow whenever she's not busy occupying the ORF TV station. She can frequently be seen going into squat position, lifting her pretty dress and peeing out little piglets, the likes of which soon decorate the entire Küniglberg, from the forest of satellite dishes in front of the building to the recording studios and the canteen inside. In the meantime, **Mount'n Dean** picks his bombs from a small tree, contemplates them intensely, and then reconciles them carefully in his wicker basket.

Then there is **Hero**, who plants cabbages everywhere, reaping a sizeable harvest - even in big flower pots - and who believes that it is his duty to water the world with his yellow watering can; and **Gloria**, who plays with her puppets, gazing dreamily at the giant posters of ORF stars; and **Sparrow** and his little sparrows, who are only too happy to manipulate ORF III's managing director Schöber; and **Enzo**, who has tattoos of Yoshi and Moshi on his upper arm and writes and scribbles all over walls, floors and sheets of paper.

Finally, *Holy Pig* also finds its way to the station. Usually it's traveling the world, inviting observers in prominent locations to write down their wishes and desires on scraps of paper and leave them to posterity.

Staehli documents her sculpture family's occupation of the ORF station in a 30-minute-long feature film. ORF becomes a playground for the voiceless, an effigy of a frantic and directionless society.

Clattering printing presses then churn out posters of the actors and, during a hiatus in the occupation, the feast's guests show up in the Austrian Parliament on Vienna's opulent Ringstrasse, hanging up posters of their own portraits printed at ORF. The question as to whether they are running for office to create a better, more just, world or to document the idleness of a democratic institution in the post-democratic era is left unanswered.

Back at the ORF TV station, the action escalates in the studio where episodes of «Dancing Stars» are being shot, in the «Bingo» studio, in the props room which turns out to be a hall, in the endless corridors of the TV studios where the characters meet an excited dog and cannot tell whether the dog is furiously wagging its tail or the other way around, in the canteen... wherever they are, they seem to be a part of the building, constantly on a search for meaning.

A quiet, eloquent mirror for a society that is moving at an incredibly rapid pace - away from any meaning, sense of community, solidarity or responsibility.

A thimblerrigger in a pinstripe suit; Narcissus atop a landfill of casinos, measuring the greatness of his gods based on the amount of money in his bank account; wandering shopping bags, talking hysterically into their phones on a futile search for themselves...

Staehli's sculpture family can then be seen preparing their feast for Yoshi and Moshi in the ORF canteen.

There are several bottles of champagne on a set table with no glasses, and all of the friends bring presents.

Bombs, cabbage heads, scraps of words and lollipops. The small group celebrates a grand feast for Yoshi and Moshi in silence: calm and civilized, they enjoy the reward of the void.

Would someone watching this party through the keyhole be shocked by all this?

Staehli creates graceful images full of poetry and melancholy, images that remain in our memories, raise many questions and, in short, make us think. Subtly, without moralizing, she pokes the open wounds of a society in which the hyperactive hustle and bustle suggests more and more that our only goal is to avoid stopping for five minutes so we can examine, and question, our actions.

These living sculptures - or figures, as Staehli calls them - originated as independent, individual beings, each with their own history and character, and it is only with time that they have merged into one cohesive group: from strong, playful «Is» into one dominant «We».

Having evolving over an extended period of time and progressed in constant intellectual motion with its creator, this piece radiates its captivating effect while quietly and firmly urging us, backed by the artist's deeply humanitarian position, to feel respect, esteem and responsibility.