

Along the Interfaces

In her multimedia work, Simone Zaugg moves between the periphery and the centre, pausing here and there to feel her way along interfaces, to explore borderlands, and to render them permeable.

She has spent periods in Rome and New York but now lives and works between Berlin and Bern. Thus, without question, she is attracted to the centres of activity. Yet no less often, she pitches her tent in peripheral locations. In her work she brings a spirit of urban life to the provinces, while in the reverse direction she lends the metropolis a new complexion, exposing its more conservative, inhospitable underside. Simone Zaugg explores undefined borderlands, turning them into locations for her art, locations which in many cases one only begins to notice, experience and comprehend as a result of her interventions and actions. Her artistic projects tend to be responses to architectural, historic and social circumstances that are already there. She soothes dramatic situations with lyrical sounds and reveals powerful tensions in the harmlessly mundane. Simone Zaugg is not committed to a single medium. She works with photography and video, builds installations, and often uses herself as an artistic element in her performative interventions. Her starting point is ideas that condense into images in the process of refining a work. Little by little these images produce open-ended stories with a range of protagonists, on the one hand, the artist herself, on the other, her audience, whose involvement is directly presupposed.

Of perfumes and sounds

Recently Simone Zaugg expanded her field of artistic expression by designing a new perfume. The fragrance she envisaged would combine both pleasant, light, flowery notes with a range of more ponderous city odours. Working together with a trained parfumeur, she thus created periphAIR (photo p. 35). The artist herself presented the slender cylindrical flask with the unusual fragrance to passers-by in the small German town of Zwickau in a kind of performance work. A young woman who adorns herself with this perfume might become aware of unexpected moods and associations. She might find herself transported to a street corner in Paris, Tokyo or London, or have the impression of being immersed in the stagnant air of the Métro, the smog of the streets, the body odours of a bustling crowd – for elusive moments all this seems close enough to grasp, and yet it remains as remote as a vague promise. In the next moment the delicate scent of flowers reasserts itself, a fragrance more typical of suburban gardens. With this work – as unassuming as it is absorbing – Simone Zaugg takes another step in a balancing act that pushes the horizon of experience further back. What she creates here is no longer art for the eye, but ephemeral art for the nose. That such art can prompt images will be attested by anyone who gives periphAIR a try. At the same time as she was presenting her perfume in the centre of Zwickau, Zaugg's creation was also being visually promoted by means of a poster campaign. On advertising hoardings across the town, the artist was pictured in the moment of launching herself into the air, as if lifting off into a realm of pure fragrance.

The action *Sanfte Parkgeschichten* (Gentle Park Stories), 2006 (photo p. 38–39) was also a source of unusual experience. Visitors to a park were invited to step into a sedan chair and to let themselves be carried in seeming weightlessness through the park. Through a window-like opening with the proportions of a cinema screen, the passenger's gaze was concentrated on life in the park, while a headset delivered sounds and

words that transported the traveller into a virtual zone. Lost in a daydream, one floated between a live film, which fetched outside events into the carriage, and the soundtrack, which reinforced and transcended the given atmosphere. Like the artfully artificial cinematic creation, *The Paradise Institute*, shown to great acclaim at the 49th Venice Biennale by the Canadian artist duo Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Simone Zaugg's sedan chair cinema blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction. With her intervention *Viale del Vento*, 2005 (photo p. 32–33), Simone Zaugg made a similarly gentle appeal to passers-by. At the height of a Roman summer, she arranged 39 ventilators like a guard of honour along the edges of a path in the grounds of the Villa Celimontana. In the evening, illuminated by red light, the rotating fans became exotic artificial flowers that contrasted strangely with the lines of palm trees behind them. With their spinning blades they provided a hint of wind, a gentle breeze, wafting a pleasant coolness over those who strolled past, like a hand gently stroking the skin. In these "air works", the artist is absent as a visible player. Her art is no less effective on the visual than on the acoustic or olfactory level. She creates an atmosphere which, when one becomes accustomed to it, appeals to and enchants every sense. Hot air is cooled, the external world mingles with one's private, inner world, the small town is transformed into a metropolis full of smog and impressions of the exciting, hectic life of the big city.

Of knives and gunshots

The beautiful, composed face of the artist fills the full expanse of the film screen. Her gaze is concentrated on someone in front of her. Just occasionally her eyes twitch – at the precise moment when a knife whistles through the air and embeds itself in the wall just a hair's breadth beside the face. In her video installation *Parole cadute – Gefallene Worte – Fallen Words*, 2001 (photo p. 64–65/99), Simone Zaugg shows that she can strike yet another note in her art, indeed, that she knows how to generate considerable dramatic tension. The face we see on the video screen ringed about with knives is flanked by four monitors hanging from the ceiling showing a steady stream of image fragments, accompanied by a sonorous counterpoint of chanting, lyrical texts. Words fall like knives, mundane and extreme experiences follow in quick succession, mingling in a stream of consciousness that escalates into a moment of acute suspense. It is a moment that draws its energy from the trust with which the artist yields her face like a sacrificial victim to the knife thrower (and ultimately to art) and his gestures of controlled aggression. We too throw glances, and words, at this outsized, disturbingly calm face, echoing its involuntary twitches as if we too were facing the knives. During a residency in Rome, Simone Zaugg became fascinated by the life of the baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 to roughly 1653). Her response is a subtle homage to a woman who had to work under the most difficult of circumstances, and who was ultimately exposed to knives in both the literal and the figurative senses. Yet in her video installation Zaugg also demonstrates how self-determined a contemporary female artist can be. If danger threatens, then at least it is a danger of her own choosing.

A penchant for dramatic situations is also evident in the video installation *Everybody Loves the Crime*, 2002 (photo p. 54–55). "In the case of *Everybody Loves the Crime*," the artist says, "the starting point was the alarmingly perfect, seemingly idyllic front gardens of the suburban houses in Münsterland. The sight of these seemingly lifeless homes exerted a peculiar fascination on me; there was a hint of a void lurking behind their meticulously artificial gardens." In a video our gaze is led across a well-kept suburban garden. This moving picture is one component in an installation representing a conservatively furnished but inviting living room. The tranquillity of the situation is

suddenly broken by gunshots, introduced by a second video projection onto the opposite wall. At this point, startled and alarmed, we catch sight of a hand holding a weapon. Suddenly events no longer seem like mere fiction projected onto a screen; beyond the garden gate and the front door lies the scene of a crime, which encompasses the very room in which we happen to be standing. This work clearly shows how fluid the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between the consumable crime story and real events, have become. The idyll turns into a nightmare, and the unthinkable happens almost like something incidental, hardly noticed by anyone.

A quieter note is struck in *Einfach einmal... (Simply once...)*, 2002 (photo p. 69). In this work Simone Zaugg assumes the guise of Snow White, who has fallen into a deep sleep after biting into her stepmother's poisoned apple, so that now everyone takes her for dead. She has laid herself to rest in a coffin, which stands on display in a gallery space reminiscent of a glass cabinet. Dressed in a bonnet, her eyes closed and hands folded, she languishes like a faux corpse. As such she is well placed to eavesdrop on her audience and thus to gain a genuine sense of the reactions she prompts in her adopted role. The exhibition venue in the small German town of Bad Ems suddenly takes on the aspect of a morgue. Once again, Simone Zaugg has introduced a borderland experience: how do I perceive myself as corpse in the eyes of others? As this memento mori she breaks into a world which in other respects belongs to the shoppers strolling past.

The idea for the performance event *Erstbesteigung (First Conquest)*, 2004 (photo p. 10/79), in which the artist climbed an office block fitted out with ropes and a red jumpsuit, came from the name "Harenberg" (= Mount Haren), which adorns the highest building in Dortmund. Untroubled by vertigo, the artist was coached by professionals for three weeks in the "art of climbing" before taking the name literally and climbing the facade of the building as if it were the rock face of a mountain. In this way she constructed a figurative bridge to her country of origin, alpine Switzerland. Here again she exposes herself not just as an individual high up on the facade of building, but also as an artist shaking up the concept of art as such and probing its limits. Filmed and photographed for posterity, this was a work that called for extreme personal exertion and allowed the artist once again to introduce an existential ingredient into her art. As an admirer of Cindy Sherman, who assumed a wide range of roles and identities in her early photographic works, Simone Zaugg also demonstrates a highly protean ability. Simone Zaugg, however, does not fully mutate into her "alter egos" but remains herself even in the different roles she assumes, whether as Artemisia, Snow White or the rock-climber. She is interested not in mutability as such, but rather in the ways her adopted roles affect our perceptions. In this respect she is closer to the performance artist Marina Abramovic, whose expressive actions invariably articulate liminal experiences. Like the latter, Simone Zaugg always hits the ball back to the astonished spectator as a final gesture. Women's identity as a phenomenon in its own right never becomes a focal issue, and despite the sensitivity of her work, in this respect she keeps company with Rebecca Horn, who has said about herself: "I see myself as neither male nor female; I see myself as an artist and move on the margins."

Of places and non-places

Once again we find ourselves moving with the artist. This time we are watching her in a large-scale video projection as she cycles along a road wearing a blindfold. We see her cycling past a seemingly endless, monumental building. This is "Prora", the immense holiday facility that Hitler dreamt up for the German people. In this "strength through joy" project on the island of Rügen, one confronts, as it were, the "paradisical" sibling of the Nazis' war machinery and murder industry, which, like the latter, was also designed

for bulk processing. By means of a curious inversion, Prora is reminiscent of a concentration camp, in which the individual no longer plays a role. This massive chain of buildings has survived a number of demolition attempts, including the use of explosives. In *Fear For Fascination*, 2004 (photo p. 26–27), the artist articulates the ambiguous significance of this architectural monument. Even with one's eyes covered, it retains a virulent presence. As a memorial to an era of terror, it cannot be suppressed or concealed; if anything, it possesses a newly explosive potential in the contemporary political context.

This conscious reaction to a historical situation also resonates in the intervention *Grüne Grenze* (Green Border) (photo p. 19). On the Kibbelsteg bridge in Hamburg, where the border between the city, the warehouse district and the duty-free port used to run, Simone Zaugg drew a new demarcation line by creating a wooded green zone that was subtly evocative of former territorial divisions. The trees she planted were an unobtrusive means of making passers-by aware of how many boundaries we cross in our day-to-day movements, boundaries that are very real, even if many of them only exist as mental exclusions and inner rejections of peripheral zones and marginal groups. The multi-part photographic work *Sleeploop Walk*, begun in 2003 (photo p. 4/16/41–43) guides us to a variety of nameless places in an urban landscape that has turned inhospitable. Like a symbol, a "human form" (Zaugg), the artist just happens to be there in these desolate nonplaces,

for instance in a pedestrian underpass, or in front of some massive high-rise building.

This personal presence is important, but again, not on account of the person as such, but rather as a "medium". She renders visible things that are often overlooked in our weirdly wonderful urban landscapes due to their monotony. It is this human figure that helps us to become aware of how soulless these concrete zones really are. Inherent in this picture series is a dangerous latent force. What we find here is an accumulation of what Alexander Mitscherlich has analysed as "the inhospitality of our rebuilt cities, merging together horizontally rather than rising boldly upwards, monotonously rather than melodically

composed, [which] finds expression at their centres no less than on their fringes; there, where the horizon of the town thrusts ever further outward rendering the distant landscape unrecognisable, where the city dweller's view and future seem equally blocked." Whereas Prora is a place that serves to keep memory alive, what is articulated here are regions that lack memory and a face.

In contrast the artist strikes a more joyful, playful note in the images of her longterm photographic project *Playgrounds*, begun in 2002 (photo p. 13/49–53). Here she wanders from one playground to the next, swinging on the swings, sitting on the slide – for which, as an adult, she is a little too big – or in a climbing frame. Despite the attractive colourfulness of some of these pictures, guaranteed to raise the pulse of many a child (and many an artist to boot), their serial arrangement also highlights the stereotypical aspect of these places. Here we see little to thrill the childish imagination. If anything, these standardised pleasure parks seem designed to prepare youngsters at an early age for the uniformity of the urban landscape that they will later have to negotiate as grownups. This work is therefore close in spirit to the series *Sleeploop Walk*. The artist succeeds in formulating her critical standpoint in a way that avoids moral sermonizing and creates instead memorable, challenging formulae appropriate to the age and circumstances in which we live. By appearing in her own pictures, she animates the anonymous city environments and invites us to study them.

In *Schaukel* (Swing), 2003 (photo p. 7), we see the artist swaying back and forth on an over-sized swing high above the steady current of a river. The swing is suspended from the arch of a bridge that links two parts of Bratislava. Long ago a synagogue stood on one of the banks at the centre of what was then the Jewish quarter. Such exemplars of multicultural coexistence have long since been relegated to history. Massive prefabricated

buildings now rise from the earth like musty mushrooms. This is a work that contains the message of Simone Zaugg's art in a nutshell: here again, she exposes her-self as both person and artist – not stiff and forced, but with ease and a ready playfulness, with the rhythmical sense of a melodious composer. It is a work that refuses to linger self-indulgently on the artist's own person, but shows her instead as a figure of rebuke, alluding to other things by means of the moving art image – to historical and political events. Yet these she does not recount. She merely touches upon them, fetching them into the realm of art and living memory in virtue of the power of her poetic visual language.

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