

Interview with Simone Zaugg: "My pictures are places"

Angelika Affentranger-Kirchrath: When I look back on important works from your past output, such as Gefallene Worte (photo p. 64–65/99), Everybody Loves the Crime (photo p. 54–55), Einfach einmal ... (photo p. 69), Fear For Fascination (photo p. 26–27), Erstbesteigung (photo p. 10/79), they all possess a certain dramatic pointedness. I want to ask what the initial spark is that gives rise to your works. Could it be that you are first and foremost a story-teller?

Simone Zaugg: Certainly I am a story-teller among other things. But what distinguishes the important ideas, or more accurately, those with a multi-layered potential, from mere fleeting fancies is that they etch themselves into the screen inside my head as situations, as "open-ended" pictures. This is what happened when I saw the Harenberg tower in Dortmund. I immediately had an image of myself working my way up the facade on route to the summit (the building's roof). What I developed from this vision was the performance Erstbesteigung. It was this visual idea that I referred back to in my careful preparations. In my inner vision, I saw myself climbing the office block dressed in a red rock-climbing suit. In the work Road Movie (photo p. 74–75), a cinema showing a non-stop live film with original sound on the Simplon Pass, it was the image of the traffic roaring along the pass road that captivated me; lorries groaning up the hill, guttural motorbikes and the whine of cars over-taking. I found watching the road like watching a film. The only thing that was missing was a cinema. So we built an auditorium like a "white cube" in the middle of the lush green mountain landscape, from which one could watch the reality of the road through a window with the proportions of a wide film screen, creating a cinematographic experience.

AAK: The way you describe the impulse for your work suggests that the significant factor is a striking visual experience – a kind of point around which perceptions crystallise. The condensing of time – rather than sequences of events. That makes it natural to ask whether you see or have ever seen yourself as a painter intent on getting as close as possible to the "mystery of the image".

SZ: I have never seen myself as a painter in the sense of someone preoccupied with the medium of paint and the act of painting. And yet it's true that I relate very consciously to images – fixed, static pictures (photography, in which the picture's substrate plays a vital role) and "moving" pictures. By moving pictures I don't mean only works on film, but also installations and performances that constitute a kind of "tableau vivant" (Schaukel (photo p. 7), Einfach einmal..., PARADISE (photo p. 29-30) etc.).

AAK: This implies your works are momentarily "frozen" images derived from situations, or scenes. They are often pictures from memory or imagination (to the extent that they also happen to be in motion). Above all they are also vehicles for content. They refer to something beyond themselves. They are laden with psychological, political and social implications.

SZ: Yes, for me pictures are locations, where the viewer can move about through time and space, relating to visual perceptions, associations and implicit linkages, but also to historical quotations and subversive perspectives. At their best, pictures open doors onto individual, personal narratives, which are allowed to intermingle with the pictorial events that I present. Viewers are drawn into the pictorial process, which generally refers directly to the situation at the exhibition venue, which it captures, records, analyses or questions by means of a two or three dimensional translation.

AAK: You speak of your personal stories and perceptions. That which is personal or unique to the individual constitutes a natural point of departure for all kinds of art. But in your case you also appear in your works as an immediate physical element. In many cases you are the principal actor, the protagonist, so to speak. What does Simone Zaugg the picture figure mean to Simone Zaugg the artist?

SZ: The artist views the actor in the image as a symbol, a "human form", who transforms the isolated situation and the selected picture angles of the reality into a dialogue between the private and the public, the personal and the collective, the individual and the world. There are works in which my visual standpoint, my chosen material, my dramatisation are self-sufficient and the absence of the picture figure is compensated for by my subjective gaze. In the case of longer projects the experiences of the picture figure during the work process form part of the artist's strategy and determine how things develop. Physical and psychological experiences create the foundations for the dramaturgical dimension of these works, which are staged as installations, pictures and sound collages.

AAK: You mention the boundary moment, a concept that seems central to your work. You move between the periphery and the centre and explore borderlands. You also construct borderlands within your works – where the public realm touches the private (and vice versa), or the invisible becomes just as important as the visible. Here I am thinking in particular of the role you most recently adopted in creating a perfume. PeriphAIR (photo p. 35), the fragrance you invented, appeals in the first instance to the nose, and the images it produces are not concrete so much as imagined.

SZ: For me there is something incredibly beautiful about boundaries. Grasped in the right way, they have a connecting quality. In this sense, periphAIR produces an opportunity to combine various senses, thus allowing a situation to arise that corresponds to a reality that is neither momentary nor spatial nor temporal.

AAK: In other words, you explore boundaries in order to dissolve them, to make them permeable by means of your art. Boundaries also exist between individuals – and you push at these as well, not least when you participate in group projects, and especially in the planning of collaborative works – such as those with Pfelder and Christiane Hummel – in which the "signature" of the individual artist is no longer recognisable. What do boundaries mean for you in these cases?

SZ: Provided I have a territory of my own where I can be my own boss, I'm quite happy to leave it for temporary collaborative projects with other artists. Important in such projects – and what makes them interesting – is that the fusion and interweaving of ideas has to be capable of supporting one's personal artistic identity, while also producing and allowing new, collective, shared processes. When this happens I find well-focused collaborative endeavours to be very enriching. Even so, my work remains firmly rooted in the individual artistic explorations I undertake as "soloist".

AAK: As "soloist", absolutely, but certainly not for the sake of a soloist image, for the sake of self-presentation. It seems to me rather that your multi-layered, multimedia work is all about enhancing the viewer's sensitivity for situations and especially localities. By introducing yourself into zones that were hitherto undescribed or faceless you render them perceptible. Fear For Fascination, Sleeploop Walk (photo p. 4/16/41–43), Erstbesteigung, Schaukel – to name just a few – function according to this principle. In

the opposite direction, you also succeed in questioning and infiltrating the fixed localities of our expectations and inner worlds ultimately rendering them transient. Examples of works where this happens might be PeriphAIR, Einfach einmal ... or Everybody Loves the Crime. Accordingly, our talk has revolved around your work in a way that opens it up to the viewer.

SZ: I am always concerned to confront my viewers with realities in a way that lets them penetrate surface appearances so as to glimpse the depths and the heights of the world both they and I inhabit. Some of my works are subversive; they get under the skin and leave traces that transcend the picture, the exhibition or the reality of the actual situation. I use art to see things that cannot be perceived or experienced without it. <