

Interview

Tanja Lelgemann in Conversation with Simone Zaugg about the Exhibition, "Parole Cadute – Gefallene Worte – Fallen Words", in the Swiss Institute, Rome, 2001

Tanja Lelgemann: In your video installation, "Parole Cadute – Gefallene Worte – Fallen Words" (photo p. 64-65/99), in the Garden Pavilion of the Swiss Institute in Rome, one can see a face, your face, in half-profile against a wall. One can hear knives hissing through the air, they aim and hit - where remains unknown and unseen. The eyes are intensely concentrated; at first full of anxiety, traumatised, then radiating calmness towards the threatening opponent. The face, in its composure, stands in sharp contrast to the flying knives and its unseen opponent.

What is the relationship between the seen and the unseen?

How far does this installation go beyond your previous works?

Simone Zaugg: The body, in this case the face, no longer serves only as the carrier, the transmitter of invented, staged situations, of fictive identities. My person becomes an experimental field. I no longer think myself in to situations but expose myself to them. The face is no longer used as a costume. It is a vulnerable, transparent skin that allows the physical and mental presence to be seen and felt in a direct way. The shift between reality, reproduction and image is subtler, and the degree of shifting is now the domain of the viewer. One is forced to determine the level of reality oneself. The relationship between the seen and the unseen, and not forgetting the audible, comes into play here. The material from which this tape is composed is minimal; 4 image sequences and 3 sounds. The piece exists above all in hidden work, or rather in the reduction and precise application of images, sound and cutting. The direct and unadulterated soundtrack provokes and evokes in the space where image information is absent.

TL: The gaze and the sound of the knives are focused and present, whereas the target of the gaze and the knives remains hidden. The ambivalence between real existing elements and omissions is emphasised in the falling words and images: the words are taken from different situations and used here in a fragmented form as selective insertions, which set one thinking. They remain hanging in the air and create in-between spaces. They have to be collected and understood anew by the viewer. The same goes for the images, in monitors suspended from the ceiling and derived from your Rome archive, which offer day-to-day experience. They, too, challenge the viewer to add their own images and construct a connection to his/her own history, as you have coupled your history with that of Artemisia Gentileschi. Jacques Lacan's theory, according to which, 'essentially the real cannot be perceived: it can only be experienced through the body, but the body is only first experienced as a whole when the child looks in to the mirror', is interesting in connection with your work.

What role does the mirror, the mirrored image have for you?

SZ: I will happily be a mirror, that is, a place where people, feelings, moments appear and are then reflected.

The mirror appears probably for the first time consciously in this work as a result of the close examination and analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi's self-portraits. The fascinating picture in which the painter touches her brush to the edge of the image and thereby leaves her representation, her mirrored image, hidden, was painted with the aid of two mirrors in order to present herself from this angle. The complex combination of subject and reality is also reflected in my installation. In a certain sense my installation interprets the principle of Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings in a new medium.

Earlier, I often used a mirror when recording, or attached the camera to a monitor which then functioned as a mirror. Now I no longer need the mirror. I no longer represent or emulate. Now I am again confronted with my self-images, which are newly constructed or deconstructed during the editing process.

TL: Lacan further says, 'the look in the mirror has the inevitable consequence that the real can only be indirectly perceived. The imaginary, the fictive exist likewise only in the mirror, and thereby the imaginary needs the symbolic as a connection to the real'. In this way the real remains unattainable for the symbolic and the connection between the two takes place through the imaginary.

You use your own body and become the subject yourself that on the one hand really stands opposite the knife-thrower. On the other hand, during your processing of the images you form in retrospect a story that is loaded with a general symbolism. The camera plays an ambivalent role in this case. On the one hand, it is a technical instrument; on the other it transforms snippets of reality into video images.

Wherein lies the transition to the imaginary?

What relationship do the real, the imaginary and the symbolic levels have during the development of your installation, during your work process?

SZ: The transition to the imaginary happens in thinking, contemplation, the invention and retention of ideas. At this point in time the work is purely imaginary. It has not yet had the opportunity to 'look into the mirror' and become real through the camera. The filming and the installation are moments that are perhaps both the most real and the closest to reality in my work. The installation brings the complementary parts, elements and extremes together as a whole. The three levels are shifted and layered between themselves and it's not always easy to define how they relate to each other. For example, the act of throwing the knife is for me, in the moment when I stand against the board, real and symbolic. Real, because it was a clear morning somewhere on the outskirts of Rome. I stood against a wooden board and knives were thrown at me. Symbolic, because I sought this situation out as a metaphor to transport the content, to translate imagination in to images and sounds.

TL: One could say that your work is similar to Artemisia Gentileschi's, that your own history meets, at certain points, her traces in Rome, that from a certain perspective it could be somewhat feminist. However, in the end the work is so minimal in the sense of a distancing from facts and real places that a universal human question arises. But in the end, the woman and the threat remain.

What is the relationship for you between your work and that of the traditional feminist works of Valie Export, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold, Marina Abramovic...?

SZ: I am interested in universal human questions. Questions about the duality of people between the extreme man and woman, passion and suffering, love and death. To begin with, I am a woman. From this fact, certainly, there arise connections with other women artists. My work does not, however, grow primarily from the need to react to social, gender-specific themes and questions of social coding, or to criticise them. The question of the female in art on the other hand, has an aesthetic dimension that interests me and which concerns me in relation to Artemisia Gentileschi and this installation.

For example, do women exceed the norm in order to achieve their own normality? Or in my case, how long can I stand this threat? How much anxiety, how much passion do I thereby experience? Is it enough if I do not move? Or could I then be hit?