

Notes to Simone Zaugg

From the outset, the art of Simone Zaugg has used the video medium to serve a multitude of functions in a multitude of ways, above all to record her work in the experimental field of her own body. In many cases it is her face that is shown, as conveyor of information or mask, and which subtly explores gradations between reality, reflection and image. The faces we see in the early video works invariably contain an aspect of self-portraiture. This places Simone Zaugg in the tradition established by early feminist video artists, whose artistic statements closely involved their own bodies. Friederike Pezold's reflective works in which she dramatises her body, and which merge the roles of subject and object, form one point of reference, while VALIE EXPORT's *Body Configurations* from 1975 form another. Above all it was Pipilotti Rist who succeeded in initiating a new and provocative discourse on role-dependent behaviour in relation to the body and sexuality. In her early works, Rist deconstructed the sexual stereotypes dictated by the media by the simplest possible means. Simone Zaugg picks up on the visual strategies developed in these videos in her use of reduced camera angles (*Parole Cadute – Gefallene Worte – Fallen Words*, 2001 (photo p. 64-65/99)), her paraphrasing poses (first and foremost the fairytale works *Einfach einmal ... (Simply Once ...)*, 2002 (photo p. 69), and *Schwarzes Märchen (Black Fairytale)*, 2002/2005), and in her embodiment of female stereotypes. This is particularly evident in the video *My Favorite Dish is Fish* (1992). "Visually duplicated, she eagerly plays with a fish-shaped piece of jewellery, thus sounding out the ambivalence of the symbol (food / libido / Christian iconography). Already in the early works, the stylistic means (movement sequences drawn out to the point of slow motion, duplication / reflection of the performer) indicate that the artist is concerned above all with the viewer's perceptual conventions and the issue of the relationship between the picture and the viewer," to quote from Jürgen Stiller's lecture in conjunction with the exhibition "Fear For Fascination", 2004 (photo p. 26-27) at the Dortmunder Kunstverein.

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Simone Zaugg adds further elements to the time-based film medium. In most cases her videos are incorporated into performative contexts or installations. They are accompanied by photographs and theatrical devices. The result is both video objects and video sculptures. Particular significance can be accorded to the most recent works, which mark a shift of focus in the artist's development. Simone Zaugg has expressed this succinctly in an interview: "The body [...] no longer serves as a vehicle, as a transmitter of pre-planned, staged situations, or fictional identities. It becomes [...] a field for experimentation. I no longer try to place myself in situations but expose myself to them" (Simone Zaugg in conversation with Tanja Lelgemann).

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The latent self-presentation of the early works has receded steadily into the back-ground. Simone Zaugg's primary concern is no longer images but rather the development of (sometimes anarchic) situations, in which the poetry of her restrained film images and journeys give way to the bold appropriation of public spaces. In this respect, her first ascent (photo p. 10/79) of the Harenberg City-Center in Dortmund is one of her masterpieces. The artist's physical involvement is not only the premise for this work, but also its theme. There is no reference to anything else. The viewer no longer sees a moving picture, but the real movement of the artist herself. The camera is an eyewitness to the

action, the video an edited report of an event. Although there needs to be some assurance that an action can be filmed, this in itself does not create primary significance. The real action replaces the pictorial activity.

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Movement and mobility in space are common to many of the artist's works. In this regard it is not always drastic intensity that Simone Zaugg aims for. Many of her photographic and film images are quiet, temporal and transient: an outpouring of words, which soon evaporate or fade beneath the undergrowth. Slow motion, repetition and juxtaposition are characteristics of many of her works since the 1990s. Zaugg latches onto a range of themes: travel, road movies, working with memory, the current of time. She regards her images as localities that allow the viewer to move through time and space. Ideally they should provide space for personal stories, shifting the process whereby the picture emerges to the viewer. The artist sees herself as a kind of vicarious figure, although she often exceeds this role, since the gaze of the camera, the editing, and also the absence of the artist, repeatedly lead back to her own gaze. (E.g. the photo series *Sleeploop Walk I-XIV*, 2003-2005 (photo p. 4/16/41-43).)

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Movement is a precondition of the search for boundaries and undetermined, intermediate realms, which are forever shifting. Movement is also figuratively apparent in terms of temporal displacements. The motif of the swing, which Zaugg has used in two works (*Schaukel (Swing)*, 2003 (photo p. 7), and *Black Swings*, 2006 (photo p. 36-37)) symbolizes not just the oscillation between conditions and the hardly perceptible moment of immobility at the apex of the movement. The kinetic experience of swinging to and fro is also a symbol for the flight backwards into memory and a forward-looking striving towards the future, which is arrested only for a millisecond in the present.

Personal recollections and the collective memory of historic events can assume radically diverse forms. What kinds of physical experience can render them tangible? In the work *Playgrounds*, since 2002 (photo p. 13/49-53), Simone Zaugg seeks to retune her adult body to the apparatus of the children's playground and to reconstruct gestures of remembering through the medium of her body. But the task proves impossible, since the dimensions of childhood have shrunk. The slide that was once far too big is suddenly no bigger than her body. It is as if one no longer fitted into one's own childhood. In her installation *Fear For Fascination*, 2004, a woman wearing a blindfold cycles past an immense architectural construction on the island of Rügen, the seaside resort of Prora, which used to be one of the most extensive recreational facilities of the National Socialists. Her blindness makes it clear that the architecture and the ideology inscribed therein is simply too much for the human body to grasp. This self-exposure to the danger of an accident (cf. the legendary cycling accident in the work *Fall II*, 1970, by Bas Jan Ader) is fundamental to the tension of the situation. In her self-forgetfulness, the woman on the bicycle clearly embodies the discrepancy between seeing and knowledge, memory and forgetting. At the same time she becomes a figure full of allegorical connotations: time will uncover the truth. In her progress past the colossal Prora, the woman on the bicycle also has to contend with the headwind of the moving camera; just as the truth is polished in the river of time.

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Simone Zaugg's appropriation of public space gives scope for a wide range of questions and answers. How can we reclaim the free use of public space? What possibilities are there? How can we create poetic spaces? Simone Zaugg's actions are so convincing because they could function just as well without the art context. They take place in the social context of public space. The Harenberg City-Center constitutes a private challenge; it is redefined as a training ground, regardless of whom it might interest. Real experiences of physical and psychological extremes, such as knife throwing, aiming, shooting, walking, flying in a helicopter, bivouacking, clinging to a rock face, all exploit the yearning for authentic experience. The viewer encounters the artist no longer in the context of shared art, but in that of shared experience of life. In particular the two meet in the shared quest for extreme experiences, the anchor of modern subjectivity, which hold up a mirror to the empty and lonely human soul.

Precise use of the gaze, together with the various ratios between real and mediated dimensions – these are the themes that connect many of Simone Zaugg's video works. In this regard she develops not just systems of perception that are reflected in her perspective, she also finds various linkages between the video image as medium and genuine spaces. In one video installation on wheels (House, 1999 (photo p. 63)), the architecture is thrown off balance by the movement in the pictures. In the series Bonsai I-III (1998), landscapes and large trees become reminiscent of bottled-up genies by being confined to small LCD monitors. In the installation Tender Sights of Broken Eyes (1996), sequences of pictures from various sources and places mingle with one another, similar to the literary technique of dreaming – the "stream of consciousness". Everyday objects become windows onto the unconscious.

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In other works, monitors are replaced with projections that relate to one another in terms of spatial and dialogical situations, and which seem mutually to examine the means by which we measure what is real and what is filmed (e.g. Everybody Loves the Crime, 2002 (photo p. 54-55), Duell, 2000 (photo p. 90), and Dialog, 1999). In these works Simone Zaugg allows her artistic identity to recede into the background (especially in the collaboration with Christiane Hummel). The relation between inside and outside becomes an issue not in individual perception, but in the dialogue between the actress and the viewer, in the dialogue between spaces, and in the dialogue between the work and the viewer.

From as early as the Renaissance, the window was regarded as a window onto the world. With the invention of the television and subsequently of the Internet, the world has entered the home. In one of her most powerful works, Road Movie, 2003 (photo p. 74-75), Simone Zaugg makes use of a technique that has proved invaluable since the Renaissance: "framing". Road Movie is reality cinema and a surveillance post at one and the same time; it refers to the tradition of impressionist landscape painting in which the selected view constantly changes due to natural factors. Zaugg's works strike me as most powerful where they leave the media world behind them and plunge back into genuine reality.

Sabine Maria Schmidt