

Zen For Hand

The body that says "I," in truth says "we."
- Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*

I once read of a principle of unrest that crisscrosses all of human history. As far back as one can look, everywhere there is movement. Day and night. This restlessness has unsettled all orders and lines from time immemorial. In Sebastian Stumpf's new works as well, a series of analog photographs (*Fences*) and a video projection (*River*), movement, lines, and order play a central role.

A human being is located in urban surroundings. The city is huge and apocalyptic - rundown parking lots, modern residential architecture, palms, and many fences indicate extremes of escapism and solipsism in nature, culture, and politics. Los Angeles is the urban dialectic par excellence, as Quinn Latimer writes in *California Dreaming*. In Stumpf's repertoire of motifs, we can make out a schematic figure with its back turned toward the camera. Standing before these photographs, I find myself taking on just that posture, standing straight with my arms hanging at my sides. Because we are looking in the same direction, we enter into a kind of pact with one another for a certain period of time. But while his figures are standing on fences, I am standing with both feet on the ground. My perspective remains a different one, like that of the subject behind the camera. I am participating, but I wasn't there. I thus remain a stand-in, witness, and voyeur: my gaze moves through somebody else's city, somebody else's device, someone else's head.

1961: at Städtisches Museum Wiesbaden, Nam June Paik used his head to paint a line on a strip of paper on the floor. His face is not visible; he lies at the end of the wavy paper on his stomach. Next to him there is a plastic bucket smeared with paint. The performance had probably just come to an end.

The famous performance *Zen for Head* refuses the canvas: there was enough audience in attendance to attest to the event. Afterwards, Paik transferred this witness to a black and white photograph. We can see the body of the artist on the floor, his face covered, there is no audience to be seen. The photograph makes clear to all viewers (whether they were there or not) that they weren't there. The photograph realizes the event in retrospect and makes it possible for the future. *Zen for Head* begins each time anew: "...you witness yourself missing again. ...The mechanism of retelling... can stand... as yet another call."¹

Sebastian Stumpf does not immerse his head in paint, but in the blue emptiness of the Californian sky over and over again. His actions are not witnessed by anybody initially. That sounds like daydreaming and Sisyphus, like "getting nothing done." Whether the figure wants to overcome the fence remains an open question. What the figure is actually looking for remains unclear. Through repetition, the motif of the paradoxical is emphasized. As soon as the figure has disappeared in the Los Angeles topography, rich in contrasts, it emerges in my thoughts. In any case, it is soon impossible to forget, its order takes control. I find it in a disorderly palm and in its own verticality. It is so obvious that it becomes unnoticeable. Referring to the subtle violence of power relations, Robert Musil once said there is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments.

Urban and lonely, the figure stands repeatedly in largely visible invisibility at the center of the image. Because the figure has no face, it also has no name. What is not named cannot be

¹ Rebecca Schneider, 'Solo, Solo, Solo'. in: Butt, G., Ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, 2005

translated, just counted. In *River*, for example, a body floats down a narrow waterway: suddenly, surprisingly, repeatedly, small and parallel to the cars that rush by on the highway above. The event is looped and becomes predictable, countable, narratable. The schematic quality and its visibility, placed under interrogation here, seems to make the figure a utopian stand-in for everything that ever had to do with waterways or fences. As Adorno writes, in contemplating a universal, or even reconciliatory language of abstraction that could overcome our empirical situatedness and create a certain community, the artist was to be a stand-in for the “total subject.” One could argue that the works by Sebastian Stumpf, with their supposedly simple composition, touch on the sphere of friendship and animosity, ethical-political concepts that each trigger strong affects. But what I’ve seen is a single body balancing on a fence and motionlessly drifting now a canal. At issue here is a consciously naïve point of departure. The works deal less not so much with a universal or speculative claim, as with a subjective, empirical, and sometimes paradoxical reassurance of one’s own existence. Despite the repeated ordering of the bodies, spaces, and lines, in light of the concrete person it cannot be about a purely abstract dimension. Monuments today are too closely examined. The artist speaks in his own name.

With the motif of the solo and repetition, *Fences* and *River* take up key positions of post-modern performance art. They deal with issues of witnessing and surveillance. At the foreground of the performance, however, there is the stubborn search for something direct, for an experience of the world “as it is” and not “as it appears.” This works best when several parameters of the order do not change: which is why Sebastian Stumpf’s figures stand alone wherever they are. His actions are conceived without human witnesses on site. Behind this decision lies the awareness that the essence of the world is not accessible to us, and our notions of reality are created through translation, language, and images. This is why the actions are made visible and receivable through documents after the fact (photographs, videos). If I step up closer to the image, in each image I can see a cable, a filigreed line that refers to the way the images were created. The figure on the fence closes his hand and presses a button for the shutter to take the picture in just the right moment. The picture was taken - *Zen for Hand* - without a subject standing behind the camera. In the analog enlarged photograph, the artist later will see himself looking out into the apocalyptic cityscape for “nothing.” “There can be no community of those who are there,” Tiqqun write. The photograph translates the event retroactively, and in the future as well one can, without being there, move for a tiny, extended moment through somebody else’s head or a certain Los Angeles. This order needs no explanation; it is the explanation.

I briefly wandered off in my thoughts. My left foot replaced the right and vice versa. This will keep me from falling, or so I thought. If nobody was there, over the short or the long term stories of disappearance emerge. But in the photographs, the stories have come to a standstill in the moment they are shot. These pictures began ever again anew. The fences never stop. Have I gone too far? I thought I could learn more from these stories that constitute these photographs but cannot be seen. Did fear once take hold? Was there someone watching from the shadows? Was a movement to be seen, or a sound to be heard, did the bones crack upon jumping? Linda Boström Knausgård writes in her novel *Welcome to America*: “But that isn’t wanted. One doesn’t want one’s wishes fulfilled. That would disturb the order: the order that one really yearns for. One wants to be hurt and to struggle to survive.”

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