

Epilogue ELUSION_Story of a Smuggler“, p. 58ff (2019)

by Michael Hauffen (artist and art critic, Berlin)

Even as economic forces are driving ever onwards the process of globalisation, political structures continue to be determined by national states, who define themselves through borders. While technology, at the speed of light and in real time, is opening up virtual spaces and facilitating digital communication, national states remain defined by boundaries that refer to geographical spaces. And while cultures are increasingly mixing and intersecting, traversing one another's borders, national states are retreating back more and more into an imagined ideal type based on national traditions that translate the separation between internal and external into the dictates of a norm. The tensions and frictions resulting from these redundant contradictions cause a dialectic of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, generating productive uncertainties and sharpening the attention given to that which demands protection. However, the potential for adaptation, correction and compensation is increasingly being threatened by failure; crises are escalating and time horizons narrowing; the threatened dis-integration of viable societal structures is a dominant feature of contemporary experience.

A.D. is familiar with the dark sides of national borders because she grew up in a border region. Today she prefers to experience this dynamic – with its opportunities and risks – from the artistic perspective. In avant-garde art, uncertainties, dynamics and frictions are valued. Transgression seems to be a condition of creativity even. At the same time, however, there exists a need for an imaginary order that makes the unbearable bearable, that serves the anti-realism of feelings, and that stabilises the self no later than the point that lies just before its collapse. Therefore, art is always about viable constructs, about identity, and about duration, too. All these aspects can be found in A.D.'s works.

Practical Mimesis

Transgressive subjectivity is formed through nomadic world experience. Artists' trips in this sense have a long-standing tradition, within which the scale stretches from comfortable sightseeing tours to adventurous journeys into the unknown. At an early stage of her self-discovery/ self-invention, A.D. used a scholarship stay in China not just to marvel at the foreign culture, or manipulate it in a consumerist way – say in the sense of adapting exotic motifs – but also actually to inhabit it.

Xiang Mei

It is A.D.'s intervention in Chongqing that perhaps best demonstrates the experimentally interventionist way she has chosen for communicating with the foreign: inspired by well-known historical posters (from Shanghai in the 1930s), on each of which two women can be seen in a suggestively erotic relationship, A.D. created large posters on which she addressed in different variations the subject matter of these figures and interpreted them through drawing and painting. She then put these posters up on a concrete wall near a small market square – a non-verbal form of establishing contact with a community, presenting herself as a subject and demonstrating her sympathy for certain cultural peculiarities.

Ink Painting

Subsequently, A.D. not only turned more intensely towards the medium of drawing, but also engaged in ink painting, throwing herself into a sort of auto-didactic apprenticeship that naturally also required, in addition to practical craftsmanship, the in-depth contemplation of the great masters of this art. She came across the great importance of Chinese rice paper, which is still produced today in manual processes and in a variety of qualities, whereby the aim is to create certain structures that evoke certain aesthetic effects. For example, by mixing harder and softer fibres of different lengths, and in different positions and distributions, the aesthetic effect is steered without lending itself ultimately to being set. The creative potential that falls to coincidence in this process can then be tapped in the final selection process. The purchase of suitable pieces of paper – either from merchants or directly from manufacturers – is from this perspective the first decisive step in the artistic work with this medium, and it goes hand in hand with more or less non-verbal communication with people who have already made intuitive preliminary decisions regarding aesthetic qualities, and who, additionally, are also seeking an exchange with regard to their preferences – and this in itself already provides for both parties a form of aesthetic-communicative productivity. You could also define this as a kind of keynote that anchors art in cultural life, beyond abstract codes. (In this regard, the following parallel comes to mind: the Chinese language is known for the fact that not only sounds determine the meaning, but also the pitch in which they are articulated. Therefore, even very young children, who are not yet able to understand the actual meaning of particular sounds, can grasp, and reproduce, the articulation of the speech melody; as a result, Chinese children learn earlier to communicate using verbal rudiments. Julia Kristeva: *The Chinese Woman*)

Symmetry

In a step that follows, ink paintings come into being on such papers. By way of motifs that arise from irregular and unsettled micro-structures that seem to trace the sensual sensation of erotic pleasure, the compositions are split in a way that corresponds to the coexistence of the sexes (along the lines of the Yin and Yang motifs that are ever-present in China) and then developed into abstract landscapes (in the broadest sense) in which symmetrical forms of order provide a kind of architectural principle. At the end of this development there are formations of repetitively mirrored sections of images or textures, which then become – say in wallpaper – a regular wall-filling pattern. An ornamental structure emerges from the original motifs, which, while still allowing pictorial elements to be recognised, entrusts the latter to a completely different visual logic, in which experience of time and space has been suspended and has given way to flat and redundant abstraction. In this mode of perception, which is reminiscent of techno music, the possibility of completely immersing oneself in the pictorial world depends on how the visual parameters are directed – that is, on the dimensioning, arrangement and constellation of individual panels. The installation “Archive Part 1” (2017) marks the point of highest self-referentiality on this line, insofar as the autonomy of repetitive symmetry dominates here and creates a visual matrix which, in turn, creates an interior space that surrounds the viewers. This quality can also be experienced interactively by means of fold-out panels, which are attached to the wall in a

movable way, and can be viewed from both sides. While, in this case, the basic element is formed by a motif that is already in itself symmetrical, the similarly constructed installation “Beijing Sky” (2018) demonstrates that a photograph of the Beijing smog-sky is equally suitable for unfolding this very effect – albeit with other connotations.

Intervention

In contrast, another line of A.D.’s work is characterised by the intensification of the practice of intervention in public contexts, as described above. In “Archive Part 2” (2017) set in a local history archive of Wernstein/ Inn, A.D. placed between the existing exhibits a number of her own pieces from different work phases, doing so in a way that could be called minimally invasive, since her pieces did not change the existing structure, but merely settled in quasi-para-sitically. What counts for her here is the element of surprise, the subtle break with the given theme. Against the local frame of reference of the local history museum she sets her own processed travel experiences – testament to a process of becoming foreign – to form a subversive contrast that not only negates the localness, but also opens, or even blows, it up. The process of globalisation that is massively perceptible today is channelled/smuggled in as a counterpart to the familiar localness, and in this way corrects the reactive focus on the local identity.

Tension

A.D. presented these last two works in the context of the small festival “Many dots still don’t make a line” (“Viele Punkte ergeben noch keine Linie”) which she also co-curated. For the festival, she invited a number of artists and theorists to her home town in the border region and thereby unfolded, so to speak, a hand fan of artistic practice with which she identified as an artist. Within this field, she engaged herself on several lines that branch out and cross one another. Some of these lines have been mentioned here; all of them are characterised by a relationship between surface and depth that arouses curiosity and provokes questions. They smuggle irritations into the wrinkles of our reality, and this more than anything makes them a valuable contribution, because the latter requires our full attention.