



CLOSE-UP

REMOTE CONTROL

KERSTIN STAKEMEIER ON ANNE IMHOF'S *ANGST*, 2016



Above and left: Six performance views of Anne Imhof's *Angst*, 2016. Kunsthalle Basel, June 14–15 and 18–19, 2016. Photos: Nadine Fraczkowski.

"ANGST": In both German and English, the fraught title of this operatic exhibition and work staged by Frankfurt-based artist Anne Imhof encapsulates a universal and personal dread. With far-ranging references to nightclubs and avant-garde dance theater, to working out and work, via paintings, sculptures, drawings, performances, and (not least) the intermittent appearance of live falcons, "Angst" is epic. It is also *an* epic, if we look to the philosopher Frank Kuhne's claim that the form's modern function is to stage exposition as critique, as the recognition of the process of individuation, of the emergence of a mode of consciousness and its proximity to the object of critique, rather than to provide critical distance. Imhof's agitated *Gesamtkunstwerk* takes familiar contemporary commodities (a soda, a sneaker) and gestures (cell-phone use, smoking) and breaks down the actions, traces, and desires that are characteristic of normalized subject-object relations to propose instead a set of affective relations that run through individual bodies and things. The result is a meditation on contemporary power structures—social, capital, sexual—turned inward, into the body. The imprints of social exclusion and control are internalized into an intensification of desire within the show's materials, performers, props, paintings, *us*. And this libidization of bodies and things stages an onanistic and androgynous sex—an epic without gender or narration or resolve.

The first iteration of "Angst" was curated by Elena Filipovic at Kunsthalle Basel—it will evolve further as the project travels to Berlin and then to Montreal—and included a demanding opening program of perfor-



Above: View of "Anne Imhof: *Angst*," 2016, Kunsthalle Basel. Center, floor: *To Eau*, 2016. Center, hanging: *Angst (Ripped)*, 2016. Background, from left: *Angst (Cut)*, 2016; *The Lover*, 2016; *Restraint (Angst)*, 2016; *Angst (Cut)*, 2016. Photo: Henry Trumble.

Above, right: Anne Imhof, *To Eau (detail)*, 2016, resin, wood, 27 1/2 x 118 1/4 x 118 1/4". Photo: Henry Trumble.

Below: Anne Imhof, *Angst*, 2016. Performance view, Kunsthalle Basel, June 14, 2016. Photo: Nadine Fraczkowski.

mances. At the core of the thirty-five hours of performances over the course of ten days was a community of eleven performers, each signifying a character, consisting of a sexed but degendered set of gestures. We witnessed an androgynous "sideralism," to use the occultist artist Austin Osman Spare's term signifying representation that bypasses not only the strict social functionality of mundane life but also the ideology of subjective consciousness bound to it. Individuation was shared in an ongoing circulation of various intensities. Eight of the artwork's eleven acts, all between two and three hours long, were dedicated to introducing the performance's characters—the Prophets, the Diver, the Lover, the Choir, the Clown, and the Spitter—while two five-hour-long chapters, *Act I* and *Return of the Lover*, presented more epic expositions of their interrelations and shared life forms.

Immersed in *Angst*, we viewers were proof of a sidelined reality, the naturalized subjectivity of our own physical presence rendered uncannily inappropriate. Not only were *Angst*'s codes esoteric, but they never revealed a guiding narrative. A constant negation of our ability to make sense of the work's proceedings characterized its aesthetic pull. Accompanied by dark and metaphorically laden musical themes, including romanticist songs and an aria, the exhibition was the embodied totality of its media. Yet this is a totality that excludes us and inhibits our understanding of it: *Angst* demonstrates a publicly performed yet clandestine whole.

The show filled the four adjacent spaces of the kunsthalle's upstairs gallery—a landing, the large

main space, a smaller back room, and a tiny repository, the layout perfectly suited to the dichotomy between part and whole that continually broke down one's perspective as an observer. Spatial hierarchy was sharply mirrored in the choice of works in each space. On the landing, two white-leather-covered sport mats alerted the viewer to the fact that she was entering a site of action, while the main space was framed by eight sculptures—narrow punching bags made of wood, resin, and more soft white leather—which dangled motionless from the high ceiling of the grand late-nineteenth-century building. Delicate in color and material but aggressive in association, these defamiliarized boxing implements were all in some way diminished: tapered to one side, skin ripped or cut, and imprinted with small, sigil-like erotic drawings, personalizing the desire that adhered to their specific form without giving it away.

Imhof frequently imbues standard or predetermined artistic forms with a more affective charge. Here, we found varnished shallow troughs installed in the ventilation grids of the main room's side walls—Minimalist objects built from resin and wood and filled, during the performances, with milk—and a Matthew Barney-esque, teardrop-shaped basin in the middle of the space, which was filled with water and whiskey throughout the performances. The pool carried a central social function, too, serving as a site of congregation, exposure, symbolic nourishment, and observation for the performers.

But Imhof handled none of these allusions as appropriated aesthetic forms. Instead, they were



Above, left: View of "Anne Imhof: Angst," 2016, Kunsthalle Basel. From left: *Falcon Stand (HOLE)*, 2016; *Loge (Angst)*, 2016; *Restraint (Angst)*, 2016. Photo: Philipp Hänger.

Above: View of "Anne Imhof: Angst," 2016, Kunsthalle Basel. Floor, from left: *Mattress III*, 2016; *Mattress IV*, 2016; *Mattress V*, 2016; *Mattress VI*, 2016. Center: untitled (*Falcon Stand*), 2016. Photo: Philipp Hänger.

The performers' sly poise and familiarity with one another heightened the sense that we were witnessing the public actions of a secret society.

expropriated as symbolic sources of life within the hermetic world of the performances. The same could be said for the third group of works framing the main space: four paintings in which the Lover and the Clown are depicted in larger-than-life-size poses prefiguring the performances, alongside some of their critical tools, such as Pepsi cans and razors. All appear isolated on white grounds, in different stages of figuration. The slender human forms are rendered in an almost Symbolist fashion, with pale grayish-green skin tones, sharp outlines, and sexed—but hardly gendered—bodies reminiscent of Ferdinand Hodler's painterly anthropology. The Swiss fin-de-siècle artist worked obsessively with dances and dancers to establish an alternative aesthetic understanding of the human body and its sexes. Indeed, his was a decidedly effeminate version that countered industrialization's cult of virility. Imhof, on the other hand, employs dance to establish an aestheticism that moves outside the capitalist body's infrastructural understanding of sex, toward a shared androgyny in which desire appears distributed across bodies rather than bound to their gendered identification. Like Hodler, Imhof negates the economic idea of progress through siderealism. For Imhof, this also entails constantly undermining

our role as audience or public, undercutting any position of distanced, critical judgment through subtle assertions of control.

The main room's installation withheld any ideal viewpoint, and we were forced to continually reposition ourselves during the performances. The two smaller spaces at the rear intensified our sense of dislocation, turning the beholder from a bystander into a trespasser. Two large metal works led us into the adjacent room. Two large metal works led us into the adjacent room. *Restraint (Angst)*, 2016, a handrail made of razors, stainless steel, and titanium, framed the passage into the smaller room but was positioned and curved to discourage any use, although the performers did lean against it; and *Loge (Angst)*, 2016, a bulbous aluminum object shaped like a stylized opera-house balcony, inhibited a direct view and entry into the smaller space but served as another point of congregation and observation for the performers. The viewer had to consciously intrude into the antechamber, which, decorated only with three large black etchings (and a falcon stand jerry-built from a steel baseball bat during performances), primarily served as a transitional space toward the final gallery. Filled with four white leather mattresses and a second falcon stand, this last tiny space was completely whitewashed with surgically bright light.

In many ways, this room served as the heart of *Angst*. Performers entered and withdrew from their "stage" through its back door during the performances, reclined on the mattresses, and formed impenetrable, close-knit groups that spatially dissociated them from observers. From this white cubicle, only the Lover faced us in some of the chapters. Positioned behind the falcon stand (which sometimes held a live bird), she stared outward, one elbow held by the other hand behind her back, shoulders straightened, as if becoming an image, while other performers crouched on the mattresses.

The alienating effect of living bodies appearing in image-like, static poses contributes to the sense of decelerated temporality in Imhof's performance work over the past five years. A whole series of other recurring gestures and actions have been established to intensify this effect, including smoking and the one-handed opening of Pepsi cans on the floor. More strictly choreographic forms of deceleration were also in evidence, such as the orchestrated falling and gradual lifting up of one character by a group of others, producing dramatic images along the way, as if the group moved from still to still, frame to frame. At other times, episodes of movement were rushed and then drawn out, as when all the characters marched

around the main space and suddenly fell into slow motion, which dramatically enlarged each persona's respective gestures in that scene. Although the characters were distinguishable, they shared most poses and maneuvers, just as they shared youth, slender bodies, and athleisure wear, all of which made them appear as a congregation, a communal picture rather than a set of individual actors. Even the allusions to Judson Dance Theater through instructional solo dances (a reference also found in Imhof's *Aqua Leo*, 2013) served not to single out those figures but to create intensified miniatures of *Angst*'s ritualized proceedings. And this, in turn, resembled what Jean-Luc Nancy, writing about Claire Denis's French Foreign Legion film *Beau Travail* (1999), has identified as "a-religion," an atheist aestheticism that strips religion from its context and expropriates it as form in order to tighten a bond that defies the social order of the surrounding reality.

This altered sociality extended to the artist's role during the performances. In a departure from many of her earlier works, Imhof did not perform with the group but was nevertheless present: She and her troupe used text messages to coordinate specific movements and wireless microphones attached to their necks, wrists, or navels to amplify the music composed by Imhof and performer Billy Bultheel. Her performing group of friends and loved ones, a gang of highly professional authors in their own right, were responsible for other central aspects of *Angst*:

Franziska Aigner as dramaturge and Frances Chiaverini as assistant choreographer. This is not a collective but a band of initiates—professional dancers, directors, composers, painters, theoreticians—some of whom have participated in Imhof's works from the start. Their sly poise and familiarity with one another heightened the sense that we were witnessing the public actions of a secret society.

In this, Imhof's work resembles another Symbolist endeavor, the *Salon de la Rose + Croix* of 1892–97. Initiated by Joséphin Péladan, for whom androgyny lay at the core of all spiritual and aesthetic sensibility, the salons assembled select groups of distinguished artists of all fields, among them Hodler and Erik Satie, to "ruin realism . . . and create a school of idealist art." In Péladan's case, that ideal excluded women; in Imhof's, we are witnessing the idealist art not of an androgynous gender but of an androgynous sex. *Angst* "ruins" reality by putting our linear temporality out of joint and populating it with bodies whose individuation defies our subjectivity. The angst, then, is not least of all our own. □

The second act of "Angst" is on view at the Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Sept. 14–25; the third will be on view at La Biennale de Montréal, Oct. 19–30.

KERSTIN STAKEMEIER IS A PROFESSOR OF ART THEORY AND ART MEDIA-TION AT THE AKADEMIE DER BILDENDEN KÜNSTE NÜRNBERG.

Visit our archive at Artforum.com/imprint to read Victoria Camblin's "Openings: Anne Imhof" (October 2013).



Above: View of "Anne Imhof: *Angst*," 2016, Kunsthalle Basel. Background, hanging: *Angst (White)*, 2016, Foreground, hanging: *Angst (Ripped)*, 2016, Floor: *To Eau*, 2016. Photo: Henry Trumble.

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