

EN

Painter, performance artist, and sculptor Anne Imhof mixes subcultural references with an almost ceremonial rituality, and an extreme conception of the experience of time with a filmic sense of image construction and framing. *School of the Seven Bells* (2012–15), *Aqua Leo* (2013), and *Rage* (2014–15), to mention just some of her striking live pieces to date, as well as her newly commissioned *Angst*, evoke the gestuality in Robert Bresson's films (in particular his majestic *Pickpocket* of 1959), the coded languages of doormen at the legendary Robert Johnson nightclub in Offenbach, where the artist once worked, and the task-like movements of New York's historic Judson Dance Theater. Borrowing, extending, and revising the terms of each of these references, Imhof uses a combination of meticulously scripted protocols and deliberate improvisation to determine her performers' actions. Dripping liquids, objects with gestural traces, everyday behaviors, the eerie otherness of animals: these bodily and material elements recur in her pieces. The resulting performances "command time," as one critic rightly commented—something that few other artists of her generation do so effectively. And perhaps this is no better demonstrated than in *Angst*, her most ambitious project to date.

Angst, which premieres at Kunsthalle Basel, is an exhibition-as-opera made up of a multi-part performance, a musical composition, paintings, and sculptural elements that are alternately activated or still. The Latin word *opera* means "work," both in the sense of the labor involved and the result produced. Imhof doesn't shy away from the labor implications, using physical exhaustion, extended duration, and poses held beyond the point of easy control. But it is more in reference to "opera" as a monumental cultural tradition, an epic staged art form, that Imhof has conceived of the present undertaking. *Angst* does not, however, reference any known or historical opera; rather, its connection to a notion of opera hinges on its combination of music, text, and image as a durational experience. Also unlike most classical operas, there is no tale being told through language or words, and no stage separating the action and actors

ANNIE IMHOF

ANGST

10.6.–21.8.2016

KUNSTHALLE
BASEL

from the audience. Instead, Imhof turns the capacious upstairs gallery into a strange sort of sports training facility, where over the course of its first ten days, her exhibition-as-opera progressively unfolds through the incremental appearance of its different “characters.” Then comes their incremental disappearance: once the last of them has departed, their actions and inhabitation of the space persist via the continued presence of sculptural elements and paintings.

Descriptions of Imhof’s work tend to focus exclusively on her performances. And it’s easy to see why. They *are* transfixing—peculiar and mesmerizing reflections on human agency, interpersonal communication, power dynamics, and the secret codes that bind them. But the extraordinary charge that makes her work so compelling resides just as much in the way she scripts her intricate choreographies in relation to a cosmos that can only impudently be called a backdrop. Not merely scenography, and also not props for the performances or material traces of its existence (although they sometimes act in those functions, too), her objects are paradoxically both autonomous and operational—standing on their own but also structuring the relationships and movements of performers and viewers.

To speak of *Angst*, one must thus speak of visceral paintings and sculptures, arrangements of light and sound, as well as conglomerations of readymade consumer goods. Leather padded sports mattresses lie at the entrance to the exhibition and in a back room as if waiting for bodies to wrestle, rest, or exercise upon them. A series of elongated, leather-covered punching bags embossed with erotic images and marked with wound-like gouges dangle like uncanny appendages from the ceiling or walls, ever so slightly swaying. A central, resin-lined sculpture serves as a pool, a trough, and a meeting point of sorts for the performers and is filled during the performance with whisky and water. Set into the floor around the edges of the space are shallower troughs filled with milk during the performance, and empty for rest of the exhibition period. Metal rails of the kind that might direct the movement of a factory machine or an attached

livestock animal are affixed to the walls along the threshold between the main space and a backspace. Near them, a polished metal structure that evokes an opera balcony or loge sits as an obstacle; it is an object meant to shift perception and positions, since, depending on which side you stand on, you are either on the “loge” looking out or part of the spectacle to be seen from it.

On the walls, new large-scale paintings made before *Angst* fully existed as such foretell of the movements and gestures that would be part of it. The canvases picture the figures of the Lover and the Clown, their life-size bodies standing, gazing, gesturing, or shaving odd parts of the body (a palm, a navel), surrounded by some of the branded commodities that they wear or use in the performance (Pepsi and Coca-Cola cans, tennis shoes with Nike’s recognizable “swoosh” logo, Merkur Solingen razors). Painted in cold, muted shades, their tones bring to mind bruised or sickly skin, while painted leather patches collaged to their surfaces echo the emphasis on skin elsewhere in the exhibition, as in the animal skin of the punching bags, or the gesture of showing skin in the performance. In the back rooms, three of Imhof’s large lacquered steel and aluminum “scratches” are built from successive layers of paint whose underpainting is revealed through a sgraffito process; it is impossible to look at them without imagining the violent gestures that made the incised marks (one can almost feel the action of a key held firmly in hand as it scratches a car). The smaller, more intimate back galleries house sculptures made from a combination of sporting equipment and swaths of painted leather made into stands for the falcons that figure in the performance. The entire ensemble, at once unsettling and strange, forms a spectacular backdrop for the bodies that circle within it during the performance, while also functioning as a proper exhibition when the living elements are absent.

Imhof’s ephemeral performance marks indelibly the material manifestations of every object in its space—her art gets “used”: spit on, stepped on, handled—and vice versa. But her paintings and objects could be said to have a life before the enactment of the performance,

another during, and yet another after. This phenomenon is intimately connected to Imhof's sense of the image. Originally trained as a photographer, she constructs her objects no less than her performances in such a way that still images are central to their functioning. Her performances are built from a set of mental images, with her performers trained to move from one highly constructed "image" (which takes form, then dissolves) to another. But the transitions from one to the next are unscripted: Imhof's only clear directives relate to the starting points. This way of creating a performance as partly structured and partly improvised is more than a recurrent technique or a methodology—it is the very conceptual foundation of her practice. The crux of her performances lies precisely in this relay between the author and her delegated actors, between authority and sovereignty, between the command of power and the forces that might seize it.

For the period of *Angst*'s performance, Imhof's various characters enact a choreography of cryptic signs and gestures "found" in real life, for instance distractedly looking at the screens of their smartphones, an act so ubiquitous in contemporary culture that one might wonder if it is scripted or a blasé interruption. In other moments, the performers embody and distort the runway walking one might recognize from fashion shows, accelerating or suddenly rendering still the characteristic postures and poses. Throughout, the performers take their places so as to form a pre-determined image, only to undo it by moving to position themselves for the next one. They also use arbitrary measures to determine how long to hold any one pose. Imhof trains her performers to make decisions based on entirely personal criteria: hold a pose until you are bored with it, or move in a certain way until it feels like the appearance of the gesture is pathetic or ridiculous and then push on further past that point. Of course, when one actor does so, his or her decision then impacts the group, shifting the fragile equilibrium that keeps everyone's movements related to the scripted images.

The same possibility for disruption through subjective will is true for the soundtrack. Music resonates in the space, making ref-

erence to recognizable genres such as the march, ballet, or waltz, even when the performance is not activated. But additional sounds, linked to each character as his or her "theme" song, are loaded onto the smartphones the performers hold and control. A performer might press her phone up to another performer's neck, hold it to her own wrist, or cradle it near her navel: there, wireless microphones bandaged to the performers' bodies transmit sounds, echoing them through the space. The soundtrack is thus layered and sometimes even catalyzed by the presence of viewers, who are at once listeners and agents who might inspire the performers to reconfigure the audio. For instance, a given day's performance might supposedly be centered on the Lover, but another character might spontaneously use her smartphone to play the sounds connected to her own character, entirely redirecting in whose hands the piece resides and who it might at any moment be "about."

As is usual in Imhof's pieces, the performances are studded with friends, colleagues, and alumni who trained with such choreographers as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker or William Forsythe. Some of them look like fashion models; some actually *are* fashion models, occasionally walking the runways for the likes of Balenciaga. What they look like is as important as what they wear and how they do what they do. The performers speak recurring, enigmatic lines such as, "I just put my hand up for fun," or "Angst, come on." They have names like the Lover or the Spitter, the Diver or the Clown. But do not expect clear character development or narrative; Imhof's characters are without character, *per se*. They are attitudes or sensations rather than fully rounded psychic beings. Yet they do have particularities. The Diver longs to dissolve into something bigger than herself; the Spitter contains a violence within him, although he is lonely and looking for connection; the Lover (played by two different female performers) is like an empty can of soda, unfilled; the Prophets (played by falcons) are asked about the future but never with words, and the wild birds are meant to portend what is to come. The Clown walks slowly, his body, like the others, sheathed in the cotton and synthetic textures of sports

PERFORMANCE TIMES

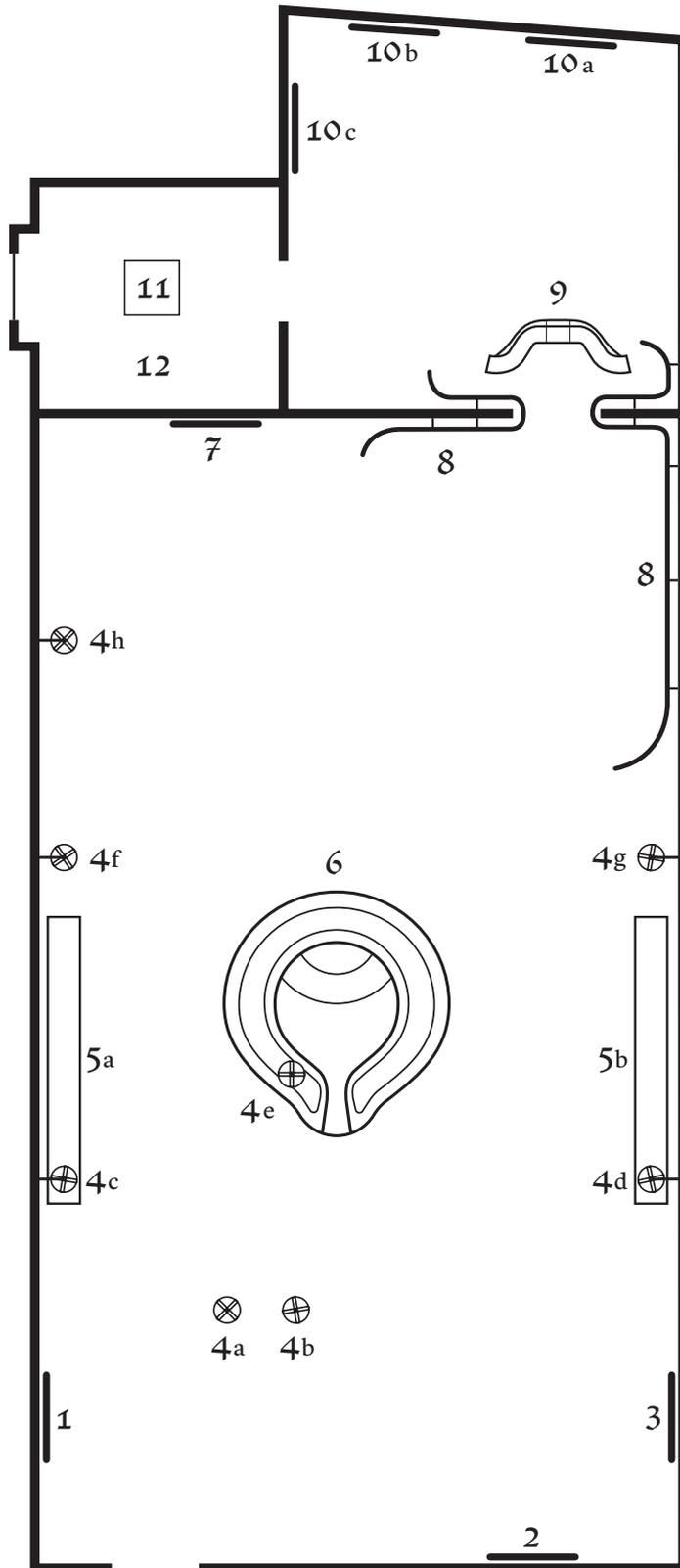
Thursday	June 9	7 pm – 10 pm	Opening with <i>Prelude (Prophets)</i>	
Saturday	June 11	3 pm – 5 pm	<i>The Diver</i>	
Sunday	June 12	3 pm – 5 pm	<i>The Lover</i>	
Monday	June 13	11 am – 2 pm	<i>The Lover</i>	
Tuesday	June 14	11 am – 2 pm 4 pm – 7 pm	<i>The Choir</i> <i>The Clown</i>	
Wednesday	June 15	7 pm – midnight	<i>Act I</i>	
Thursday	June 16	4 pm – 7 pm	<i>The Spitter</i>	
Friday	June 17	11 am – 2 pm	<i>The Spitter</i>	
Saturday	June 18	7 pm – midnight	<i>Return of the Lover</i>	
Sunday	June 19	4 pm – 7 pm	<i>End, 1st of at least three</i>	

- 12 *Mattress III*, 2016
Mattress IV, 2016
Mattress V, 2016
Mattress VI, 2016
 Cotton, foam, leather
 Dimensions variable

- 11 *Untitled (Falcon Stand)*, 2016
 Leather, steel
 134 × 120 × 91 cm

- 10 a *Angst I*, 2016
 b *Angst II*, 2016
 c *Angst III*, 2016
 Aluminum, lacquer paint, steel
 Each 325 × 200 × 5 cm

- 9 *Loge (Angst)*, 2016
 Aluminum
 99 × 220 × 79.7 cm



- 8 *Restraint (Angst)*, 2016
 Razors, stainless steel, titan
 Dimension variable

- 7 *The Lover*, 2016
 Acrylic, leather, and oil on canvas
 300 × 190 × 5 cm

- 6 *To Eau*, 2016
 Resin, wood
 70 cm, Ø 300 cm

- 5 a *Basin I*, 2016
 b *Basin II*, 2016
 Resin, wood
 Each 4.5 × 49.5 × 400 cm

- 4 a *Angst (Black and White)*, 2016
 b *Angst (Black and White)*, 2016
 c *Angst (Reversed)*, 2016
 d *Angst (Hollow)*, 2016
 e *Angst (Ripped)*, 2016
 f *Angst (White)*, 2016
 g *Angst (Cut)*, 2016
 h *Angst (Cut)*, 2016
 Leather, resin, wood
 Each approx. 380 cm, Ø 34 cm

- 3 *The Can*, 2016
 Acrylic, leather, and oil on canvas
 300 × 190 × 5 cm

- 2 *The Navel*, 2016
 Acrylic, leather, oil on canvas, and pencil
 300 × 190 × 5 cm

- 1 *The Lover and the Clown*, 2016
 Acrylic, leather, oil on canvas, and pencil
 300 × 190 × 5 cm

- Landing
-  *Mattress I*, 2016
 -  *Mattress II*, 2016
 -  Cotton, foam, leather
 -  Each approx. 200 × 120 × 5 cm

The works on the Landing and numbered 4 a-h, 6, 10 a-c, and 12 courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

The works numbered 1, 2, 3, 5 a-b, 7, 8, 9, and 11 courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York

gear (their brands visible: Everlast, Adidas, Gore Windstopper), a single arm rising and finger signaling at a certain moment, as if in a clandestine communication. But who is he addressing, exactly, and for what purpose?

The performers' actions do not tell an actual story, but communicate by working within and around and sometimes even against Imhof's highly codified movement lexicon. Questions of agency and control, power and repetition, illicit transactions and human currency, thread through this piece, as in so many others in Imhof's oeuvre. With their gnomic expressions, affectless speech, and simple movements (gazing, walking, whistling, spitting seeds) executed in either shotgun accelerations or almost painfully slow decelerations, the performers will not necessarily impress you with acrobatic moves or emotional outpourings. Indeed, their deliberate evacuation of the traditional stuff of theater might appear to confirm one critic's characterization of them as zombie-like. That description isn't exactly wrong, but not to wonder about the implications of this is to ignore what Imhof's army of beautiful mutants articulate about our contemporary society and commodity culture—as much through the loaded gestures like navel shaving (symbolically exfoliating one's identity) as through the more banal moves like crowd surfing (symbolically releasing one's body and control to the masses).

The fact that the brands we buy, we are shaped by, and that we are even branded by (Nike, Pepsi, Diet Coca-Cola, Mark1) appear so prominently in *Angst* speaks to this, too. Its portentous title reminds us that that fearful feeling is both a timeless aspect of human nature and perfectly topical at a moment when the daily news point to threats of terror and the very real angst it creates in us. In the end, to watch (which is in some way to participate in) *Angst* is to understand that its critical force accrues as much from the fiercely casual physical precision of Imhof's choreography as from the singular cosmos she constructs. And, like a (zombielike?) body fastened to a restraint track, inexorably connected to it and guided along its rails, *Angst* is thoroughly imbricated in the questions of agency and power that govern it.

It should be said, Imhof does not perform herself in *Angst*. Instead she uses cell phone text messages to comment on the action and send directives while it is taking place. But true to her piece, in which agency is a prerequisite, it is up to the performers to heed her instructions or, simply, ignore them. Power, you see, is in the hands of those who seize it.

Anne Imhof was born in 1978 in Gießen, DE; she lives and works in Frankfurt am Main, DE.

Postscript I:

From its opening on June 9 and then through June 11–19, the various characters of the opera are being introduced progressively. Each day will be different, featuring a distinct part of the whole.

Postscript II:

On June 15, from 7 pm to midnight, *Angst* reaches an epic pinnacle with *Act I*, spread over five hours, with all of its characters, including several live falcons, appearing together.

Postscript III:

Imhof has a predilection for specifying that some of her performances are the “1st of at least X” and sequentially changing the numbers each time the piece is performed. Here it is in her title for the performance on June 19: *End, 1st of at least three*. The promise or condition of there being other versions makes the piece’s potential reproduction, reiteration, and restaging a fact while also acknowledging that each experience of the performance in a particular place at a particular time is unlike another version of it elsewhere.

Anne Imhof
Angst, 2016
with Franziska Aigner, Billy Bultheel,
Katja Cheraneva, Frances Chiavereni,
Emma Daniel, Eliza Douglas, David Imhof,
Josh Johnson, Mickey Mahar, Enad Marouf, and
Lea Welsch

Curated by Elena Filipovic

Music: Billy Bultheel
Dramaturgy: Franziska Aigner
Choreographic assistance: Frances Chiaverini
Production: Laura Langer and José Segebre

The exhibition benefits from the generous support
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Valeria NapoleoneXX.



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Emily Sundblatt, Jürgen Teller, Ilka Tödt,
Henok Tsehaye, and Martin Wenzel

Angst at Kunsthalle Basel presents the first part of
an opera in three acts, whose later acts will be
exhibited at the Hamburger Bahnhof–Museum
für Gegenwart–Berlin from September 14–25, 2016,
curated by Anna-Catharina Gebbers and
Udo Kittelmann, and at La Biennale de Montréal
from October 19–30, 2016, curated by Philippe Pirotte.
The project is co-produced by Kunsthalle Basel
and the Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
supported by the Freunde der Nationalgalerie
with the collaboration of La Biennale de Montréal.

The June 18 performance *Return of the Lover* is a
collaboration with Art Basel's Parcours Night.

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German

- 12.6.2016 Sunday, 1 pm
curator's tour, in English
30.6.2016 Thursday, 6.30 pm
guided tour, in English

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

- Children's tour *I Spy with My Little Eye!*
14.8.2016 Sunday, 3 pm
A tour and workshop for children 5–10 yrs.
In German, by registration only, contact
kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find
a selection of publications related to Anne Imhof
and her artistic practice.

More information at kunsthallebasel.ch