

A Feeling for the Earth

The Body as a Way into Landscape in the Work
of Sandra Man

*"Looking inward. Localizing.
We have to think from where we are standing to reconstruct the future. [...]
Let us not just receive and accept concepts. Let us build it from the ground."
(Oyèrónke Oyěwùmí)¹*

My work with the artist Sandra Man as part of her project Aeon III, which was shown as a series of performances and an exhibition during Berlin Art Week 2022 in urban space and in the Tanzfabrik Berlin, and which I will discuss in the following, resulted from our shared interest in space. In her artistic work, Sandra Man places the media image, text and performance in a spatial relationship to one another. Her multidimensional approach as an artist, writer and choreographer allows an openness in visual language, which in the presentation of her work as "live art installations", gives the audience space to co-create the work. The fundamental concept of my curatorial work starts from this point too: the exhibitions are designed in such a way that visual (over)stimulation is avoided, the mental and physical space of the audience's perception is considered too and an active attitude is stimulated in them. The focus is on addressing several senses in order to enable a feeling for the artistic statement more than a rational "scanning"². Visually speaking this means offering space instead of restriction, emptiness instead of abundance, quietness instead of being loud.

Kathrin Becker and Jean Lassègue discussed such counterfactual thinking and the inclusion of a "second horizon" [of the audience] in the epilogue to the Berlin Biennale 2022 and illustrated its contrast to the (in)capabilities of the digital: an algorithm is based on data and numbers, and on the basis of this evaluates the possibility of involving a counterpart, but without giving room for a veto. The digital merely informs and leaves out the space, in other words the body and the context in which we live and with which we smell, taste, touch, feel – and based on which we communicate and act.

Body is space, and both are crucial for Sandra Man's working process. With her oeuvre, she balances out what, according to Kader Attia regarding the effects of digital development, "makes us hungry, because something isn't right, but we don't know what it is."³ The performers she works with physically assimilate the texts and become "speaking bodies". Detached from the everyday use of information and from the theatrical speech of characters, a verbal language is created that exists in the body and in a certain sense is articulated as a kind of body language and therefore can also be felt.

¹O. Oyěwùmí, in URL [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NRbvqeY1xw> min. 46:45] 25.09.2022

²Jean Lassègue describes this phenomenon in conversation with Kathrin Becker using the example of how we read: we now longer read and write the way we are accustomed to. We are becoming "aliterate" and have been robbed of something alive, in that, instead of holding a book in our hands, we write with the help of machines and "scan texts" instead of reading them. In URL [<https://12.berlinbiennale.de/media/epi-log-jean-lassegue-katrin-becker-daming-the-divide-thinking-counterfactually/>] 20.09.2022

³Ibid., 20.09.2022

With the presentation form of the “live art installation”, Sandra Man clearly distances her work from the conventional format of the theatre with actors, spoken text and stage set (image) on the one hand, and the expanded concept of performance within the visual arts and its conventional focus on subjectivity on the other. It is a genre that conveys a new way of looking at the body and the environment, dissolving the audience space and the stage space. Here, installation and performance, the constant and the dynamic, repetition and the new are combined.

The artist doesn't want to convey anything, but to allow it to arise.

So it happens that during the live performance of Aeon, named after the mythological god of eternity and the unit of measurement for geological ages, the audience and the performers Lisa Densem, Joséphine Evrard and Laura Siegmund find each other on one of the last and most beautiful wastelands in Berlin. The audience moves freely in this unfamiliar expanse and depending on the position and perspective, the landscape of the wasteland appears as an image or as a real, bounded environment. The visitors align themselves with the space as well as the distance to the performers, approaching or moving away. In the spaciousness and the simultaneity of everything happening, the bodies of the audience, like those of the performers, become a landscape. They are all actors, because the performers speak and move not only in resonance with the landscape, but also from a connection to the audience. Feelings of closeness, support and emotional security alternate with moments of being exposed, insecurity and cold. Circumstances seem to dissolve again. The vast space merges with the small figure, the single voice balances on the sound of the rush of traffic. The landscape becomes a body. But it gives the scenery its own sense of time. While the spoken texts repeat annually like a ritual since the first presentation of Aeon at Tanznacht Berlin 2020 during the performances at sunrise and sunset, their context changes, namely the landscape and the present time. What does the line spoken by Joséphine Evrard, “We will go onto the street,” mean in the context of the pandemic, climate crisis and war?

The exterior becomes the interior and the interior becomes the exterior.

The principle of repetition and change is condensed in the three exhibits of the parallel exhibition at the Tanzfabrik Berlin. The drawings from the series “Stille”, shown for the first time, the three bodies of text of the poem “Brache” and the video “Nackte Erde” seem like organs in an abdominal cavity in the enclosed darkness of the room. Here they are the constants and orientation, and the visitors are the dynamic element. Their movements, caused by the way the exhibits are arranged in the space, are cyclical. They make circles as a form of repetition and change in the space.

In the darkness, the feeling for space and time changes. Laura Siegmund's movements and words in the video “Nackte Erde” form a link to the series of performances on the wasteland. The sound of the rush of traffic drifts into the exhibition space. From the slowness of the dancer's physical gestures and the spoken words of the titular poem by Sandra Man, a feeling for another, deeper sense of time arises. Spaciousness reaches those watching here through the calm that emanates from the video, through closeness and relationship to the ground, to the earth and one's own body.

It feels like you've escaped gravity and are on another planet.

Finally, the three bodies of text of the poem "Stille" allow the audience to enter an imaginary space of quiet. Sandra Man's texts are not easy to read. Her writing style is unfamiliar. The lines of her poems are not a logical sequence of sentences, but rather draw the contours of an atmosphere, a space and a time between the words and lines, into which the reader can enter. "In order to be able to represent the logical form, we must be able to set ourselves up with the proposition outside logic, that is, outside the world," ⁵ wrote Wittgenstein, and, he continues: „ He [the reader] must surmount these propositions, then he sees the world correctly."⁵ For Wittgenstein this language is movement and therefore non-definition, it is experience and process. Umberto Eco calls it "an adventure of openness" and in Lassègue's sense, it's a counterpoint to the non-literary of our time.

⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 4.12; In: Umberto Eco, Das offene Kunstwerk, Suhrkamp 1990, p. 227.

⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 6.54; ibid., p.228