

The Will and Sense of the Body

If the human body was once considered 'the measure of all things', in the modern age it has come to be perceived as the last place for authentic experience. After the image and the art of representation were plunged into crisis in the 1960s and 1970s artists like Valie Export, Bas Jan Ader and Bruce Nauman discovered the experience of their own bodies as one of the few remaining truths. - The body became a living image as well as a medium to be exploited, while a second medium was required to record the traces of this experience - the camera (photography or video).

If we look at the recent works of Sebastian Stumpf we find this same interplay between performance and the recording of performance, between the execution of a physical act and the documentation of it by means of a camera. The young artist operates in two distinct realms: in the empty spaces of contemporary art institutions and in urban settings with their preexisting orders. Stumpf's appearance before the camera strikes the viewer as both artistic and subversive. An inconspicuous architectural detail suddenly becomes the catalyst for a physical exploit that astonishes, appalls, inspires laughter or troubles us. The art gallery becomes a space for action. Or by an act of functional mobilization the city and its walls, columns, trees, garages, bridges and passage ways become a kind of practice field.

Sebastian Stumpf's interventions are physically impressive, but they also contain elements of slapstick humor, making clear that the artist is not interested in outwardly demonstrating the experience of his body. In this way his photographs and videos do not possess the existential pathos we find in many works of the 1970s. His experimental movements are 'willful' in more than one sense. They violate conventional codes of behavior in public spaces - climbing small trees along a promenade or jumping from a bridge - and they are essentially simple. The body tests its own physical processes as well as the laws of physics themselves by means of a direct experience, the same way a child might jump from the same step over and over again.

At the same time Stumpf's works are not just actions but also precise images and reflections on the image. His interventions in museum spaces are shown in the same places where they have been created, thus exist in their own projection. The central element of these works is a paradoxical jest in which the artist's body enters the (image) space only to remove itself again. The body moves ghost-like through the projected image on the wall as if the physical dimension of the performance did not exist. On the other hand the viewer is very much present in front of the image - not in the manner of a passive observer, in reserved distance to the artist (as in a live performance), but as an actor whose own body is placed in question: Can this really be done?

As the protagonist of his own photographs and videos Sebastian Stumpf examines art spaces and urban utopias - locations where the human body is only conceived as an abstract mathematical value in a planned structure. He feels out the clefts and crevices, the openings and blind alleys. In the 28-part photo series Sukima (2009), for example, his upright body appears squeezed between the strange geometry of the façades of buildings in Tokyo like a whimsical revenant from Le Corbusier's architectural system based on the Modulor (the figure that stands for the modern human being). From this perspective the presence of the artist in the images can best be described as that of a body attempting to calculate its own dimensions even as it remains resistant. An artistic and critical attitude towards these locations that has little to do with nonsense and everything to do with self-will.