

From place to place

Gestures of the memory – imagination and reconstruction

The versatility of the narrative ego is at once a liberty and a balancing act. The playful handling of archived experiences that circulate inside us – sometimes wildly, sometimes in a structured manner, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously – is part of the mosaic of which our lives are composed. Memory counteracts the elusiveness of the moment.

And the versatility of places? At first glance, they refer to real attributions and to real experience. Yet places change in our perception when stories that we have experienced add atmospheric aspects to them. In this sense, every place is a place of reminiscence, bearing within it levels of objective facts and personal experiences which sometimes stand in an ambivalent relationship to each other.

In the work of Margot Zanni, particular emphasis is placed on unremarkable locations and lives, which in turn offer a great deal of scope for projection and speculation. Places become reasons for stories that redefine the concept of place in a surprisingly different way, enabling us to experience them. The confrontation of life described with authentic places is at the center of all Margot Zanni's artistic work. By means of dramaturgic intervention in documentary material and by piecing together objects and found footage, she develops new interpretations of places. Unforeseen correlations emerge at the interface between authenticity and fiction, opening up a new cosmos. The complexity of Zanni's choices of media in her work reflects the complexity of the possibilities of interpretation.

Films as places

In earlier works, films with place names as titles are the point of departure for artistic exploration. These works refer to the word "location", which echoes the original meaning of a real place and a real location, but in cinematographic terminology also signifies a place of artificial media production.

The Locations refers to the cult films *Casablanca*, *Cape of Fear*, *Fargo*, *Paris, Texas*, *Twin Peaks* and *Zabriskie Point*. In their dramatic composition, the locations in which these films are set appear unreal, exaggerated, disconnected from reality. Zanni embarks on a journey with the aim of discovering these places outside the realm of fiction. From the local tourist boards, she acquires postcards, which in turn represent the place in question not as an authentic depiction, but in an idealized manner.

The postcards are declared as readymades. At the same time, they serve to prove that these places do indeed exist. The associated images from the films are laid over the images of the real locations – for those unfamiliar with them, these are the first and only impressions of the regions in question. The experiment with the conversion of what in these cases was originally fictitious into reality – which while of secondary importance is still discernible – is defined in everyday situations. As a description of situations experienced, “Like in a film” implies that reality often transcends the imagination, and that we can always reckon with real “film” moments.

A further work is dedicated to the three main characters in the road movie *Paris, Texas*, Travis, Jane and Hunter, and intervenes in the cinematic lives of the protagonists at a real level by fulfilling their dream of at last being able to be together. The names Travis, Jane and Hunter are chiseled into one of the stones that pave the square surrounding the small-scale replica of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Texas, USA, reflecting the custom of the inhabitants of the town of engraving their names into the paving stones. Invented characters thus escape their fictitious destiny, finding a place amid the names of existing people from this place, whose life stories, however, remain in obscurity.

Imagined places

A constructed location, whose individual fragments refer to real places and specific travel experiences, is offered as a surface, a space on which to project our own ideas, fantasies, dreams and travels. For *Terrasse* (Terrace), Margot Zanni lays out an artificial landscape in an exhibition space that, while stable in itself, is nonetheless fragile; only in our minds can we walk on it. Books bound in green covers, whose titles and content refer to distant, exotic lands, landscapes, gardens and journeys, are arranged in piles around the room.

In this stepped building constructed from books, a small monitor is installed on which Zanni herself can be seen from behind in a static shot as she observes the horizon. The view of the horizon, and beyond that of the human being – who has become a figure –, motivates us to ascertain a new definition of possibilities. The power of the imagination envisages a location, and in that location extended possibilities as part of our own story.

The work in progress entitled *Back Pages* shows how universal the gesture of watching the horizon is. Video stills show images of individuals and couples seen from behind. The sky is open, wide and blue before them. They are probably at a vantage point in a city or in the mountains. The people dwell, pausing for a moment. Like sculptures, they are in harmony with themselves and are disconnected from their everyday lives. Their clothes and hairstyles provide a discreet indication of their possible cultural associations. Individual stories are not

required here. People in different places and without any connection are united as they gaze into the distance. In this series, the figures have in common vast expanses and the unattainable. Concentrated contemplation.

The ego as a place

People photographed on the street wear T-shirts that were manufactured as mass products, yet in this case are a specific expression of individualism. The T-shirts printed with the faces of 50Cent, Bob Marley, John Lennon, TUPAC, Che Guevara and other idols refer to the cultural and political identification of the people who wear them.

Double Take offers a specific confrontation with people and their personal, ideational positions. The ego is exalted in the portrait of its idol, although a discrepancy becomes apparent between the presence of the actual person and the portrayal of the idol. While the likeness of the idol refers to physical strength, beauty and intellectual values, the people wearing the T-shirts seem almost fragile. Their own life plans and options in no way resemble those of their idols. The printed portraits of the supermen, revolutionary leaders, film and pop stars become the symbols of a place in society craved by the wearers. The subjective importance of identifying with symbolic figures hence enjoys a high status in terms of communication, and encourages group-specific coding. The place of the ego becomes the place of immediate associative recognition in a media-oriented world of global iconographies.

The collective place of memory

The state-subsidized residential buildings of the *Linden and Boulevard Project* in Brooklyn, East New York dating from the late 1950s appear unapproachable and cold. A place; a non-place. Once designed on the drawing boards of the city planners as a flourishing district, following the serious unrest of the civil rights movement and the resulting urban decay, many of the Italian, Jewish and Afro-American inhabitants had left this neighborhood by the mid-1970s. Since then, this district has been home almost exclusively to the black population. The former inhabitants were scattered to the four winds and lost touch with each other. The <http://www.astralgia.com/enyprojects/> website was launched in 1998, thanks to a private campaign. In the chat room, former inhabitants share their memories and revive their former local community in virtual terms. People reassure each other that they are not lost: "I'm not lost, I just split." They still perceive themselves as part of a bygone urban history. Myths and real experiences intermingle.

The reconstruction in cyberspace of this place, where the users spent their childhood and youth, serves as the basis for Zanni's video entitled *Flatlands Av*. Real people cannot be seen. The forcefulness of the location and a human voiceover engender intensity. In this work, the narration stands for the endless movement of memory, lending dynamism to the depersonalized place.

For this subtle work, fragments of conversations from the chat room were combined as a text collage. Spoken by an actor, they simulate recordings on a telephone answering machine. Ostensibly, trivial details are exchanged. The conversations revolve around the first kiss, secret cigarettes, and confrontations with the police, racial conflicts, friendships and disappointments. Although the sentences relate to each other and form a conversation between Johnny, Jack, Steve, Scott and Harvey, separated by a bleep, the words directed at an interlocutor withdraw into an ominous, impersonal void. The voice remains monotonous and has no individual timbre.

This echoes the timeless anonymity emanating from the tall façades of the buildings shown in the video. Static photographs of the apartment blocks hint only vaguely at lives lived within. Bare branches sway noiselessly before rigid walls. The streets and sidewalks are deserted. Nothing allows us to put this place in a precise context. The fragments of the housing estate, filmed at sunset and in heavy snow, underline the revocation of accuracy. The irritation of our vision by the flurry of snow and the increasing darkness symbolizes the hazy, indistinct moments during a process of remembrance.

Short scenes from Scorsese's *GoodFellas* featuring the young Henry Hill are inserted into the video. The film is set at the time invoked in the chat room. Both in real life and as a film character, Henry Hill is a classic gangster from Brooklyn, East New York.

In the scenes from *GoodFellas* used here, Henry Hill represents the young men of the district; he gazes dreamily out of the window, leaves the table at which the family is eating, and waves to his mother from the street.

Zanni's combination of found footage and her own video material raises the question of whether the lives of the people who meet in the chat room could also have turned out differently. At the same time, this work refers to our tendency to romanticize our own history and to dream of living our lives as film heroes.

By combining the documentary material from the chat room with the pictures, the artist succeeds in creating an atmospheric intensity that does not reproduce an easy-going lightness of being. Instead, a doubt – perhaps even the fear of not having been noticed and thus of not having existed – is formulated in the emphatic question, “Do you remember me?”

The symbolic place in 5 of 19 million chapters

Taking taxis is unavoidable in Cairo; getting from place to place like this is a matter of course. A taxi ride connects driver and passenger for a restricted period in a moving time capsule, which frequently exudes the atmosphere of a private room. The rug on the dashboard, prayer beads dangling from the rear-view mirror, transfer pictures of Mecca stuck on the glove compartment, photos of the children among boxes of Kleenex and plastic flowers bear witness to the driver's life. Recitations from the Koran, classical Arabian music or pop can be heard when one gets into the car, acoustically rounding off this small entity that is home to the driver for endless hours every day.

The city passes by. The view from the window is like a film bearing the title *Mega City* and in which scenes of the most contradictory kind succeed one another. The power of the imagination and fantasy paint bright colors between and on the brown of the houses, and breathe stories into the bustling crowds of people – a rebellion against an unapproachable urban architecture, against the impossibility of grasping millions of lives. Cairo scarcely allows concentration on individuals. Seen as a whole, this city consists of many layers of all manner of impressions, which neither reveal nor explain themselves. One city; an infinite number of stories; and even more secrets.

Driving/Telling is an attempt to resist the impossibility of doing justice to these stories; to resist anonymity; and to break open the city as a place of many places. In this work, the taxi serves as the point of departure for the smallest component of a place. It is a space that is screened off, and yet linked with the outside world. A space from which we break out in narrative terms in order to penetrate the depths of a city, in order to approach it with personal stories that breathe life into the rough, urban setting.

In this work, the stories of the drivers are not time-fillers in the frequently faltering flow of the journey; they are not the inexhaustible sources of new rumors. No, the driver's person is in demand. The service agreement is reversed: It is not the passenger's destination that is important, but a place that is important to the drivers. They are called Mustafa, Mohammed, Mamdouh or Ali and Youssef, like many others. Each name conceals an individual life story that can be multiplied, with minor variations, thousands of times.

From the topography of their lives, the taxi drivers draw on events from their childhoods, failed and past loves, cares shared under the influence of alcohol, and the various stages of an escape. The trips become narrative journeys into the past. They are linked to places that remain cloaked in secrecy beyond their visible destiny, yet are subjectively and emotionally charged for the drivers. The destination itself is not scrutinized; rather, it is nullified in that it recedes behind the narrated story, which thus replaces it.

These places symbolize formative experiences that influence life and have become established. Reminiscence has a place in the memory. It is not the precision of what really happens that it brings to the fore, but our altered perception in the mirror of the present. Schematic sketches expose individual stories in a strange city, revealing a small part of their secrets. These biographical fragments reveal what is inscribed in the ostensibly anonymous urban sprawl, lending it fateful, human characteristics.

Revisiting places from the past can be an agonizing experience, but it can also be a healing one. Places themselves change in the course of urban development, and remain what they once were only in our memories. With places that are not linked to a specific event in the past, but were constructed for the memory, it is a different matter.

Mohammed lives with many ghosts of the past. His daily visits to the cemetery assure him that he remains close to his deceased wife. He draws his vital energy from her memory. Cairo's City of the Dead is not only a place of the dead. People from rural areas and poor townspeople have settled there and developed improvised habitation. The people who live there are guardians of the graves and of the dead. In conversations, the stories of the dead are revived; they intermingle with the stories of the living – in a place that they share.

When Youssef is on the way to the Sayyidna-Al-Hussein Mosque, he prepares himself for a moment of inner peace. As for many other believers from near and far, praying in the immediate vicinity of the reliquary casket in which, legend has it, is preserved the head of Al-Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, has a special intensity. Here, Youssef comes into contact with higher powers, knows that he has a place in the divine order. The spiritual place offers space, and is the source of peace and new strength in a life driven by hast and cares. On feast days he is particularly charged with energy. At the beginning of Ramadan and on the birthdays of Mohammed and Hussein, thousands of people gather on the square in front of the mosque. Faith is celebrated in this holy place with bright lights, loud music and ritual prayers. As immaterial as faith may be, it finds material form in symbolic interpretation. From the mosques, the holy places, radiates the "baraka", the blessing in whose undulating diffusion people hope for divine relief and miracles – for themselves and for those people they think about, and whom they remember.

The Locations

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