

Katharina Dunst and Markus Schwander Imprint, Trace-Tracking and Prophecy.



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*The following exchange of thoughts is in reference to the common engagement of Katharina Dunst (K.D.) and Markus Schwander (M.S.) in explications Georges Didi-Huberman made in *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung*.¹*

In the discussion on Schwander's work, a leitmotif became visible that runs through the whole oeuvre: the imprint. At an interface between theory and practice, Didi-Huberman's thoughts created a common interest and a basis for discussion. He pays detailed tribute to "the imprint as an independent form of the picture" and stud-

ies this phenomenon within the framework of art history.

K.D.: What makes the imprint into a special kind of image is that it emerges liberated from any directive from the eye or the mind. It is a non-rational image that is generated without any briefing. It is neither invention nor fantasy, but rather coincidence.

A body by its trace, for instance, registers a place and a time in the past, yet the encounter with a body's imprint has something direct and immediate about it.

The fact that I can touch the material that was touched during its imprinting works like a speed-up in time. Presence and absence are one. Past and present are proximate. The imprint in its property of being fixed, frozen or fossilized promises that an assessment of it has been made possible. It is a manifestation, perhaps even a witness. It was there when it happened and is still there. But can it transmit anything beyond itself?

M.S.: Imprints and similar, randomly generated forms (such as lifelines and handwriting) are things I used at the beginning, in order to get people to participate in my works. However I very quickly realized that the issue for me was not the personal expression of the participants. In contrast, say, to the works by Gillian Wearing where people had to write down their opinion or by playing air guitars had real possibilities for doing their own thing, I was always on the lookout for a pattern. We are at the mercy of our own lifelines as an expression of our body. We can't compose them ourselves. By means of the anonymity of the imprint-donors, the question of meaning is thrown out of joint. With the lifelines, for example, the signs show differences that are interpretable. But without the rele-

vant person, the analysis of the drawing is meaningless. We are at the mercy of what we would like to believe, or we decide to see what we want to see.

K.D.: Several of your works that have been mentioned here go through a process in which one single activity is played through by different people. Data is then collected. This reminds me of empirical scientific methods. In this way a great amount of information can be brought together, horizontally. But in order for order to be imposed on the collection, the researcher needs a question to which, by his actions, he will find an answer. And just such a wish arises in the viewer or reader of this kind of 'study', a wish for conclusions or results. In the case of the signatures, people were asked to write the name 'Markus Schwander'. One handwriting was dynamic, another intent on beautiful script, haste, force, etc. Whoever reads these signatures is confronted with a riddle; he becomes a detective, for all these signatures claim to represent a certain person via their handwriting. One is inevitably on the lookout for the true, the right trace of Markus Schwander.

Reading within this system would mean making a choice, and the prize would



Signatur, 1997

be switching off the flicker of all possibilities. The desire is great, the evidence slight; a gap ensues.

M.S.: Very early works, e.g. *Stumme Zeugen* [*mute witnesses*] from 1989, I cast in black wax. The material, together with the color, induces insecurity. I was often asked whether it was allowed to touch these sculptures. But, to me, the much more essential question is why anyone would want to touch the sculpture and what they get out of it. I still think that the sense of insecurity, actually an essential component, is suppressed by touch. It is different with touch as an act that becomes form in a simple and direct way. A casual gesture creates new facts. Something comes about from this that can continue.

K.D.: The pieces of chewed and spit-out chewing gum, despite their clear markings, are blanks. After a specific row of teeth has chewed around on the soft mass, which after some time takes on visible marks, the process of ongoing form-creation is halted. Namely, when the taste has disappeared, not when it has taken on an especially effective form. It is thrown away, and nothing determines the place and form. A piece of chewing gum on the floor only says that something that made it what it is has gone missing. The being-thrown is what is there. In the models in which the spit-out chewing gum has been retrieved and newly positioned, what is missing is replaced by society and the environment. In green surroundings the white spots are sheep, in the gray hilly landscape, they could be cars in passing mode and, finally, the colourful individuals that stand in a row, school kids perhaps, or a team. Suddenly the single pieces are symbols that are a part of an encompassing system, which gives them meaning.

M.S.: When I was a child, instead of the

word 'pissing' we used the more decent expression 'making a fountain'. That's the way I understand Duchamp's *La fontaine*. The pissoir, by being exhibited, is removed from its function. It is now meaning only and has only half its capabilities. The physical act of pissing makes it whole again, i.e., a fountain. The models that I build are not preliminary sketches. They must not be carried out. They are an occasion for the viewers' imagination. If the viewers give the model their ideas and accordingly have an idea, the model then gives them their own ideas back.

Translated by Jeanne Haunschild

1 Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung, Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks*, Cologne 1999



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Konferenz, Installation view Filiale Basel, 1995



Stumme Zeugen, 1989