

Processione

The public realm as a setting for artistic debate is central to the work of Nina Staehli (*1961), who lives and works in Zug and Berlin. She expresses this via performances, which she documents using still or moving images in the public realm, and which she in turn incorporates in her sculpture cycles. An example of this is *Narziss* (2007), a group of works in which she is seen on a bench in Berlin's Herrmannplatz metro station, the talisman-like figure of a stylised pig in her arm. Another instance is the walks she takes in the snow on the Bernina Pass and in various urban settings in Berlin, or posing in the vastness of the American landscape while wearing various costumes developed from her alter ego, Ruby Dean (*Ruby Dean and the White Silence*, 2009/10). The public, frequently rural, arena is used by Nina Staehli as a kind of testing ground for exposing her works to an "unregulated", non-artistic reception: as she herself reveals, this allows her to study how people interact with her work, which elicits often unexpected and precise questions as well as responses.¹ During its creation, Staehli always considers the setting in which a work will be presented and the form of the presentation.

Against this background, it comes as no surprise to learn that Nina Staehli is a keen observer of her surroundings. She collects "impressions and interactions such as 'objets trouvés' wherever she goes"², from which she derives shapes, characteristics and traits for her sculptures, objects and installations. Her one-month sojourn on Elba, for instance, exerted a major influence on the current group of works, *processione*. On her walks around the island, Staehli spotted the almost ornamental groupings of Processionary caterpillars that colonise the pine trees there. Inspired by the striking mimicry exhibited by this species of moth, she created a multi-part group of works encompassing a number of elements, including three video projections and several installations. One of these consists of five knobbly shapes reminiscent of stylised larvae arranged in a circle such that their 'heads' and 'tails' are in contact. The soft, vaguely anthropomorphic bodies possess their own unique colourings: shades of ochre; bright, fleshy tints; luminescent white; lustrous black; and a slightly abraded-looking black and white surface. A cage-like structure of thin slats slows the progress of these 'grubs', constraining their range and preventing any attempt at breaking out. The bodies form an endless circular motion like the links of a chain, which, if interrupted or broken, would have existential consequences. The three video

¹ In: *Nina Staehli. And Ruby Dean*, Zurich: Montagverlag (pub.), 2011, n.p.

² Op. cit. note 1, n.p.

projectors each show different edited images of a clearing in a wood; thin white strips of plastic have been stretched between its trees. The camera focuses in turn between the shadow play of the strips on the needle-strewn ground and the pale lines vibrating in the wind and standing out against the sky, the tops of the trees and the ground. The gleaming strips slice through the visual space, while the eye seeks points of reference that would allow it to create order both spatial and in terms of perspective. A second structure articulates itself within the 'naturally grown' order of the trees: it intersects the space, creating inclusions and exclusions and defining a new space. Each of the videos is accompanied by an audio track created by Thomas Binzegger, which varies between ethereal ambient sounds, wind noise and amplified crackling interspersed with bird calls, snaps and eruptions of what one takes to be metallic sounds. What appears in the enclosure, with its sturdy body shapes, to be a firm-set, immovable habitat becomes, in the videos, a shifting, permeable meshwork. Both image and sound suggest an identification, whose origin or purpose is as open-ended as the permanence of its presence. Nina Staehli uses the white strips - these reach out beyond the edges of the wall projections into the exhibition space and on into the courtyard and the urban realm - to intertwine the (medially determined) spatial and reality constructions of her works and couple them closely with the receptive experience of the visitor.

If one accepts the premise that spaces are created through social, political and cultural actions, then, in *processione*, we encounter an installative display in which the visitor plays an important role in the formation of various spatial structures that are perceived as such. By our presence, we confront the works of the artist with an 'outside', with a view of reality based on conventions and understandings that in turn find their expression in spatial organisation. We stand 'in' the exhibition, walk 'in front of' the works, our presence adding the last piece of the puzzle that closes the circle of imagination and creation, of perception and thoughts of spaces and spatial experiences.

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