



Anne Imhof: *Angst*

Kunsthalle Basel, Basel
Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin

As one of the basic dispositions of modern human existence, *angst* (anxiety in German) is not always expressed through words, but often surfaces instead as bodily utterances. Such anxiety need not be directed toward specific objects but can relate to a more profound sense of one's being-in-the-world. In Anne Imhof's performance *Angst*, autonomous speech is replaced by repetitious coded gestures tackling human and nonhuman agency, and the power structures within which agency is embedded. Individual performers appear immersed in their actions, isolated from the spectator; their movements are inherently controlled, as the cast follows Imhof's instructions to shape the course of events through introspection and reaction to subjective criteria. Imhof's performances have been known to include nonhuman actors, and *Angst* includes living falcons and a remote-controlled aerial vehicle (or UAV). Animals function as unpredictable agents in Imhof's works, complementing the artist's instructions with a degree of chance; the machine, conversely, becomes a prosthesis of human will, in this case as, simultaneously, an instrument of surveillance and a potential threat to security.

Commissioned after Imhof received the Preis der Nationalgalerie 2015, *Angst* is composed as an "opera" in three acts. *Angst I* debuted at Kunsthalle Basel [June 10–August 21, 2016]; *Angst II* was performed this fall at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin [September 14–25, 2016]; and *Angst III*, a final act, is now part of La Biennale de Montréal [October 19, 2016–January 15, 2017]. In Berlin the artist transformed the spacious central hall into a fog-filled environment that incorporated segments of spiral staircases, punching bags, and two niches furnished with sleeping bags, guitars and amps, hookahs, and various consumer items such as razors, shaving foam, soft drinks, and boxes of cigarettes. Integrating a variety of media—audio, drawing, sculpture—Imhof's performances revolve around

objects and readymades, commodities that seem to delimit the scope of the performer's actions.

Along the central axis of the Hamburger Bahnhof's historic hall, acrobatic acts took place on a tightrope, accompanied by the buzzing sound of a UAV, while the installation's bright, sterile niches became zones of retreat where performers could "hang out," communicate with the artist via their smartphones, or smoke. As with Imhof's past performances, the cast was composed of students and friends, among them performers, dancers, and models who followed an unpredictable rhythm of contemplative gazing, almost absurdly lengthy posing, or mutual body shaving—meditations that were at times punctuated by sudden loud musical pieces, or by speedy, mechanical movements. During *Angst II*'s four-hour late-night sessions, the hall was inhabited by this fashionable entourage, which carved its way through the crowds of visitors to gather in groups, only to dissipate again after holding postures appropriated from the fashion world and various subcultures.

The piece gets along without the use of spoken word; instead, its interactions take place in melancholic, introverted gestures that may culminate in collective whistling, or in several minutes of head-banging. Without providing a clear storyline, the disparate acts of *Angst* present themselves as a series of disjointed gestures and utterances that seem to be profoundly inscribed into the performers' bodies. In this respect, Imhof's cast recalls director Robert Bresson's "models," who are not actors but amateurs who integrate spoken lines and bodily gestures through protracted and repetitious rehearsal sessions. Imhof shares Bresson's contempt for traditional theatricality and thus focuses the viewer's attention on movements that, together, ultimately yield sharply composed images as they unfold over time. In the *Angst* series, a steady play of difference and repetition can be grasped in Imhof's

players' mechanical execution of her script, nuanced to a certain extent by a kind of deliberate improvisation.

In keeping with *Angst I*, the nine evenings of *Angst II* were conceived as "variations," each intending to produce an ephemeral snapshot, shaped by the performers in action. In Basel, Imhof's first act built itself up gradually and slowly introduced its characters, among them the Diver, the Lover, or the Spitter—archetypal figures assigned certain traits that charge *Angst* with auratic references. The upstairs rooms of Kunsthalle Basel divide into three zones: a rectangular main gallery and two attached square rooms. One of these side areas was furnished with mattresses, a stand for a falcon resembling a gym machine, falconry gauntlets, and various commodities—elements of which would later appear in Berlin. At the center of the main gallery was an epoxy resin water basin flanked by eight punching bags; paintings, hung on the walls, depicted poses and movements similar to ones taken on by performers during their active sessions. In the other adjacent room, an aluminum opera loge offered a view of three monochrome lacquer paintings, whose surfaces showed scratches and marks. These elements provided a set that was altered throughout the course of the performance sessions, exhibiting traces of past events and pointing to those yet to come.

Angst staggers between abrupt acceleration and slackening toward stasis, perhaps mirroring the individual's need or desire for adaptability amid the flux of contemporary life, and its constantly changing economies of time. In Imhof's opera, anxiety is conjured and resides within a zone that sits between surrender and resistance.

—Christoph Chwatal

ABOVE: Anne Imhof, *Angst II*, 2016, performance by Eliza Douglas, Franziska Aigner, and Mickey Mahar [photos: Nadine Fraczkowski; courtesy of National Galerie, Hamburger Bahnhof, and Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin]