

RESISTIVE MANIFESTATIONS

Approaching the artistic works of Iris Dittler

By Sabina Holzer

(Translated from German by David Nemeč)

On the way home from a meeting with Iris Dittler, where she showed me her drawings, I suddenly (a bit unexpectedly) remembered my encounter with Alberto Giacometti's sketch sheets¹. Several years ago I spent an entire sunny afternoon at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 35 km outside of Copenhagen, in a room in front of those drawings. I was captivated by the faces which were almost vanished, hardly recognisable, yet appeared to come to the surface again through a few lines, present and absent at the same time. A few months before this, I had lost a person I loved, and never before had graphic art touched me so soothingly with its dedication to time and its transgression as in these tender, nearly invisible drawings. Physical vibration of, and with these lines and their interruptions, these traces that touched me intuitively and made me pause somewhere between thinking and being.

A similar physical vibration can be felt throughout Iris Dittler's entire artistic opus. Everything in her work is trace and translation of something touching the senses, a kind of whole-body vision. Her drawings, objects, and performances tell of transitions and protuberances in which the body reflects itself in contact with the other. A body that acknowledges itself radically, attempts to recognise itself – and simultaneously misconceives and becomes alien to itself.

A body on break-up – at times broken up –, in any case always becoming, touched by space, by the other, by interspace. Exposed, she follows the extent of her sensual perception and goes on to translate it. As if she were following movements that do not continue linearly, but which oscillate continuously between the self and the other as broken, bent, reflective lines. (Im)Pulses, contacts in an interzone between conscious and unconscious that demand to be called on as sensations: the indeterminate pull – yet so determined in the fact of its pull; the surreptitious tremor – so clear in its shaking.

If the drawing is generally the “true form of the object” connected with the idea, it here is the gesture from which the desire to show a form originates: here, sketching means finding, and searching in order to find a future form – or to have oneself sought and found.² Here, the drawing describes the in-describable, becomes a score (an operating instruction) or shows itself as direct touch in dots, lines, streaks, and marks. Again and again, the body here becomes an empathic instrument that, touched by its surroundings, by a situation, passes these touches on (to the paper).

BODY, SPREAD OUT, UPENDED

By means of *bodyscans*³ which present a kind of inventory of the physical situation, of sensations and impressions, Dittler investigatively tracks down her perceptions, samples and inspects them. Her artistic practice forms out of this constant prospecting of immediate, nonverbal, and prefigurative perceptions. In contemporary dance this approach is a

¹ <https://www.louisiana.dk/en/giacometti-gallery>

² cf. Jean Luc Nancy, *Die Lust an der Zeichnung*, 2011 Passagen Verlag Wien, p. 15

³ Bodyscan is an exercise for deep relaxation whose effect is based on the observation that consciously sensed body parts are able to relax and regenerate optimally.

Iris Dittler: *bodyscans 2012–2019*

technique employed to train physical awareness, and thus the perception of space and movement. Dittler, too, observes her various materials and media through the prism of choreography, and radically integrates into her graphical work the factors of body, space, time, memory, and score.⁴

“The psyche is extensive, does not know about it”, Sigmund Freud noted and thus pointed out that the “psyche” is body, and that this is exactly what escapes it.⁵ It is this, that which has escaped, by which Iris Dittler’s work – as a sensorial contemplation – touches memories, updating them and bringing them out into the open.

In Dittler’s performances, the human body is in a continuous dynamic relationship with the objects. These filigree, mysterious apparatuses made of metal, aluminium, copper and plexiglass always seem to wait for something to be done and created with them. As if they were calling the human bodies, and even in their absence were always obsessed by them. In her objects, Dittler combines constructed and organic matter, calling them “greiflinge” (griplings) or “organ”⁶, focussing on accretions and incisions. Their medical-technical look and feel is reminiscent of questionable attempts to gain access to the body and to control it. At the same time, their delicate displacement and alienation makes them actually become *objects* – objecting, resistive manifestations of poetic realities.

The performative activation of these realities again and again challenges relations and relationships. It is uncertain whether the subjects set the objects in motion, or whether the objects set the subjects in motion and determine them; whether these categories are at all still applicable. With these questions Dittler turns to her body knowledge – where psyche and physis connect with each other – and stages unspectacular everyday movements. Meticulously she unfolds rhythmical micro-repetitions which dissolve while going through variations. Objects and subjects, as bodies, are put in commotion by movement and touch. They form an extended human anatomy and yet remain foreign bodies, that “kind of object, part, piece or substance, which more or less by chance has entered the inside of an entity or a milieu which [...] one conceives at least as being homogeneous, endued with an order of its own to which the foreign body is not subordinated.”⁷

As a performer, Iris Dittler approaches this foreignness with distinctive slowness, stepping towards it out of time. Intent listening – e.g., to the pulsation of the organs (of which the heart is merely one), to the oscillation of the breath – creates an active participation enabling her to get into contact with objects, and to weave them into her experience. As if Dittler wanted to call upon our synaesthetic, participatory, quasi-animist perception, she reveals the things and elements surrounding us not as unmoving objects, but as subjects, entities, powers and forces capable of expression.⁸ In this environment she exposes her investigation of the anatomical und structural conditions of movements in commerce with objects. In this manner her performances create temporary imaginative places, while the materials in their dialogic agentiality⁹ occupy the space and await the viewers.

The gesture as presentation of communicability, the making visible of a means as itself, is mostly ascribed to dance. Also, it is always the carrying out and presentation of the body movements’ own medial character, and thus of all actions. It brings the humans’

⁴ cf. ACT! Entfesselte Performance – Kunstforum 264, Mathieu Copeland, p. 121

⁵ cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *corpus*, 2003 diaphanes Verlag Berlin, p. 23

⁶ Iris Dittler, *greiflinge*, aluminium, 2016; *organ*, aluminium, steel, routed wood board, 2017

⁷ Jean Luc Nancy, *Ausbreitung der Seele*, 2010 diaphanes Verlag Berlin, p. 43

⁸ cf. David Abram, *Im Bann der sinnlichen Natur*, 2015 thinkOya Drachenverlag GmbH Klein Jasedow, p. 145

⁹ Possibility of action, effectiveness. Also see: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Barad

being-in-a-medium to the fore and in this way opens up an ethical dimension.¹⁰ In this folding together of outside space and body space as a dispositive against which objects can stand out, Dittler consequently follows the tradition of trespassing as practised by abstract expressionism, postmodern dance, minimal art and concept art, and fathoms the boundaries of the respective disciplines and their entanglements.

With regard to her drawings, objects, films and performances, Dittler strictly insists on form, her quest and query, and consistently confronts them with the ephemeral and dissolving effect of movement. All involved elements – including herself – thus become phenomena not to be classified so easily. Entangled, singular, and open, they refer to procedural relations, fluctuating identities and relational actions. Everything in this world appears as sentient beings. Animate beings are subjects and objects together, everything appears to them, and they appear to others and disappear again. Animate beings are not mere phenomena, but they react to their being phenomena with self-expression.¹¹ Dittler shows the subjects' and objects' "self" in unstable, vibrating becoming as a radically empathic position, thus pointing to the future as possibility and hope.¹²

Sabina Holzer, performer, author, and movement pedagogue, works mainly in trans-medial collaborations. In 2007 she began to publish texts on and for contemporary dance and performance in various media. As a performer, she works internationally in numerous projects, since 2005 in close connection with the artist Jack Hauser. Joint performances and interventions in theatres, museums, galleries, and in public space. Currently she is exploring materiality – writing – body in motion. www.cattravelsnotalone.at

Iris Dittler is a visual artist and performer. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris. Her transdisciplinary work connects elements of visual art and contemporary dance. Body, object, and space are brought into a resonating relation with each other, the grammar of the respective media explored with regard to the possible transfer to the other media.

In 2016 Iris Dittler received the BKA state stipend for fine arts as well as the City of Vienna's grant for fine arts. In 2018 her work was awarded the Theodor Körner Award. She presented performative installations in *Werkstück* (2012) at Tanzquartier Wien, *scaPes – Festivals 2015*, the *Burgenländische Tanztage* (2016), at *Tanz*Hotel* (2018), *Imflieger* (2018) and the festival *Still Moving* at Théâtre de l'Étoile du Nord Paris (2018). Her performances and object installations were shown in galleries and art institutions in Austria and abroad (Galerie Marcelle Alix, Centquatre Paris, le 3bisf, Aix-en-Provence (FR), Palazzo Bottigella Gandini (IT), MUSA and Freud Museum Vienna (AT) etc.)

¹⁰ cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Mittel zum Zweck – Noten zur Politik*, 2001 diaphanes Verlag Berlin, p. 60

¹¹ cf.: Hannah Arendt, *Vom Leben des Geistes*, 1989 Piper Verlag GmbH Munich, p. 29–31

¹² Due to COVID19 measures, the exhibition "Iris Dittler – From Which/What/Who Did This/You Derive?" at Kunstraum 5020 in Salzburg could not take place at the appointed date from April 24 to June 28, 2020, and was postponed to March 2021. Please find more information at www.5020.info. The title of the exhibition quotes Richard Kostelanetz's poem of the same name (eds. Sandeep Bhuller and Amy Ontiveros, Richter Florida, New York 2011, p. 10–17).