

MELISSA STECKBAUER

The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly

23.03.-13.05.2018

Opening 22.03. from 19h
curated by Sylvia Sadzinski

“What do we desire when we desire other people? Not them. Something else.
Phaidra touched it. You hated her for that.” (Euripedes, *Phädra*)

“Noli me tangere [Touch me not]” (*John 20:17*)

Skin is the largest sensory organ of the human body. It contains millions of highly delicate sensors, which detect and report back anything that happens to them – a breath of air on the arm, a drop of sweat on the forehead, a pebble under the sole of the foot. When mutually agreed between humans, touch is a means of non-verbal communication. It expresses sympathy, can console and soothe, or put us in a state of rapture and ecstasy. Medicine and psychology attest to the comforting effect of touch, which takes the physical form of a slowed heart rate and decreased blood pressure. Nonetheless, feeling and touching is afforded low ranking in the Western hierarchy of the senses. The foundations for experiential knowledge are text and language-based, with sight and speech privileged. This is due, among other factors, to the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Christian religion conceiving of body and spirit to be an opposed duality, and judging the somatic joy of the senses to be vulgar.¹

Melissa Steckbauer's *The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly* is a multi-sensory installation. Sounds, smells, textures, texts and images interweave and overlap with one another. The work can be investigated on auditory, olfactory and tactile

¹ Paul Duncum, 'Visual culture and an aesthetics of embodiment', *International Journal of Education through Art*, 1: 1, 2005, 10.

levels. The artist overthrows the privileging and hegemony of the visual, bringing the sensory to the fore, in all its plurality. She transforms Galerie im Turm into an experiential workshop, a sensorial playground, a celestial site and a privy witches' hut; a place to localize and expand notions of sensuality.

The point of departure for the work is Steckbauer's *Sensorium* – a participatory performance focusing on the sensations of the audience. Everyday objects, but also smells or sounds, are enacted on the body, which reacts immediately: with goosebumps, twitching, excitement and relaxation. The materiality of the object is central, while its original meaning becomes blurred or almost dissolves. The performance aims to implement a form of collective creativity that expands sensory contact to the material world, and creates non-erogenous, interpersonal moments. The foundation for this is the giving and receiving of positive attention, the communication of our wishes and borders, and their realisation. The resulting ecstasy of the senses poses questions for rationality. At the same time, the differentiation between performance, ritual, ceremony and workshop begins to blur.

What do our sensory perceptions reveal about us as individuals – and that which we perceive? How are social structures and norms experienced via senses and physically affective impulses?² Connections arise between *The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly* and the concept of *radical softness*, which influenced the US-American activist and artist Lora Mathis (2015). In a society which preferences emotional control, the unapologetic sharing of emotions becomes a political act. Emotions and emotional experiences – particularly those read to be signs of weakness – thereby pit themselves against a masculine understanding of strength, instead opening the possibility of social change through empathy and a more considerate mode of human interaction. Vulnerability and softness are reframed as positive attributes. The communal celebration of sensibility acquires an empowering character. The title of the work also refers to repetitive moments of vulnerability and failure, from which we might draw strength. In this strength, the past, the present and the future are united.

These aspects are also central in the different works of the exhibition. Melissa Steckbauer's auditory work, for example, is inspired by the so-called *Pillow Book* of the Japanese court lady Sei Shōnagon. Written in around the year 1000, it contains witty observations and direct opinions, as well as personal impressions and feelings. Melissa Steckbauer's *Pillow Book*, too,

² In the sense of *sensory (re-)turns*, which in the social and cultural sciences refer to a reorientation of language and written text as a foundation of scientific knowledge regarding sensory perception and experience.

arrests not through mere descriptions, but through its feelings and sensory impulses, which allow human and environment to blur together almost ecstatically. This results in an obscuring of distinctions between human and non-human beings reminiscent of aspects of *ecosexuality* or *sexecology*³ – inspired by Donna Haraway and theories of posthumanism – in which nature becomes a possible lover. At the same time, the *Pillow Book* references a possibly future in which desire expands, and is no longer associated with any one distinct mode of sexuality.

Through this, *The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly* becomes carrier for a powerful queer-feminist strategy. Within the work, the role of physical experience and materiality is not disowned, but rather afforded a central position – something which is also made clear in the text-based contributions by Patrick Califia, Onyx B. Carmine, J&K/Janne Schäfer and Kristine Agergaard, Nicola Swietkowiak und Alok Vaid-Menon. Here, further self-empowering strength can be drawn from the sensory and sensual. These two aspects not only lead to ecstasies which extend consciousness, but are also a source of consolation, hope and a form of resistance – in particular for individuals experiencing social exclusion due to their gendered, physical, or sexual desires, or due to ethnic attributes.

The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly becomes a site where a community might arise and take the form of a quiet protest. In an era in which the United Kingdom, for instance, has appointed a minister for loneliness to counteract social alienation, Melissa Steckbauer creates moments of intimacy and closeness through sensory plurality. As we discover the individual works of *The Sonancy of Falling and Standing Repeatedly* visually, kinesthetically, auditorially or olfactorily, we are prodded by the question: in what kind of society do we want to live?

³ Performance artist and activist Elizabeth Stephens and sex-educator and performance coined this term in relation to art and activism.

EVENTS

Sat 24.03. 16h
Sensorium. A participatory performance

Sun 25.03. 15h
Sensorium. A participatory performance

Thu 05.04. 18h
Read To Me. A reading circle

Thu 19.04. 19h
Shame In The Round. A circle on utilizing shame as a powerful tool

Sat 28.04. 16h
Sensorium. A participatory performance

Sun 06.05. 14h
Sensorium. A participatory performance

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