

Holly Zausner's Film *unseen*

In her film *unseen* Holly Zausner offers the viewers glances of the urban ambiance of Berlin. Landmarks such as the Brandenburg Gate and the Television Tower appear, as well as significant roads and hubs like Friedrichstrasse, the Kottbusser Tor subway station, and Tempelhof Airport. Shots that enable the viewers to localize geographically what they see immediately alternate with others that refuse that possibility: interior shots of an airport and various factory halls, of an abandoned amusement park, or of moving trains. What we see in the latter images appears urban, but in fact it is strangely placeless. It could be any other large city. This contrast is superimposed with a second one: many of the shots – both those that show Berlin landmarks and those that show an anonymous urban ambiance – depict deserted settings. Such shots are, however, contrasted with others showing hectic pedestrians in the streets or

cars and trains in motion, and many of these images are shown with time compressed. This does not give viewers the impression that what they see is and should be accessible only as film. Rather, it is obvious that the deserted scenes were shot in the early morning and not because their locations were closed off for the shoot. It is equally obvious, however, that the contrast between the deserted scenes and the hectic crowds of people is about something remaining unseen, either because there are no people there who could see it or because no one pays attention to it in the hectic bustle of the metropolis. Hence it is this contrast itself that, by making things perceptible cinematically, also demonstrates the visibility of the unseen; and in that sense what the film shows is accessible only as film.

The protagonist of the film is Holly Zausner herself. Her actions do not, however, stand for themselves; instead they are related to two figurative sculptures of latex: a life-size yellow figure with feminine features and a corresponding blue one with male features. The figures have a rubberlike consistency but no inner resistance that could make them seem statuelike. The form of their outsized and seemingly unarticulated limbs emphasizes this. Thus the figures can hang or recline, but they cannot stand. When they are set in motion by outside forces, this movement inevitably transforms into the corresponding vibrating and tottering movements of the material. Just as Zausner's actions do not stand for themselves – that is, they reveal an autonomous performance quality – the sculptures to which her actions relate do not stand for themselves either. The viewers are thus obliged to understand both as integral defining aspects of a cinematic *mise-en-scène* in which the significance of the actions and figures is revealed only in recourse to the sites and scenes shown.

The sculptures to which Zausner's actions relate do, however, provide a theme that determines the structure of the film as a whole: the question of the position and meaning of sculpture in public spaces and public life today. In order to filter out this question as a theme from the diverse scenarios and situations shown, these things cannot be viewed in isolation but as a cinematic structure of opposed shots that mutually support and illuminate one another. It is not difficult to recognize a series of overarching thematic complexes that reveal a range of internal variations and yet dovetail. Let's start with the shots that are concretely related to places where the sculptures can be seen. All of them are situations of marking out and fencing in.

For example, one sequence in the film leads us through the sculpture garden of the Neue Nationalgalerie, where, fenced in by high walls and surrounded by bushes and trees, both figurative and abstract twentieth-century sculptures are seen. This place, which is intended to provide a home or at least reserve for modern sculpture, comes across like the wild game enclosure of a zoo in Zausner's *mise-en-scène*: two tigers are found there, though they never appear together in a single film image. They wander around with no evident motivation and occasionally climb onto a stone block belonging to one of the sculptures. It is as if the danger represented by the tigers is necessary to explain why modern sculptures have to be placed in such a marked-out and fenced-in situation. Sunk together and leaning on the garden's high enclosing wall, Zausner's blue figure looks like a foreign body, and yet it is in the very place that society has designated for contemporary sculpture. The figure's instability seems like a

commentary on that situation; and the fact that Zausner, seemingly risking her life, hurriedly enters the scene in order to remove the figure from this place reinforces this function as commentary.

Another sequence transports the viewers to the restored Bode-Museum, where figurative sculptures from the early Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century are presented as cultural assets. Clearly, these figures have been torn from their original context in order to obtain a forced aesthetic presence when presented as quasi-autonomous sculptures against white walls that seem both aseptic and sacred. The camera's gaze wanders past the Christian sculptures and seems to want to adopt their typical gesture – eyes turned toward heaven and a gestural language – but ultimately it falls only on the white walls in the background, which again and again fill the entire pictorial field for a moment. What we see demands aesthetic and historical reflection, but it finds no immediate connection to a relationship with the contemporary world. That becomes all the more clear when Zausner films her blue figure reclining in prominent places within the framework of the architectural space. The figure is seen as a foreign body, not as a representative of cultural assets, and yet as a figurative sculpture it appears to lay claim to being seen in the tradition of the sculptures for which the museum was built. As a rubber doll, however, it also evokes connotations to an all-too-contemporary worldly reality from mannequins to sex toys that comment on this strange situation.

Finally, another sequence leads us out of the museum ambiance of the Neue Nationalgalerie and the Bode-Museum and into an abandoned amusement park (in Treptow). It is a marked-out area, which did not so much serve aesthetic education as amusement. Because it has lost its original purpose, however, the functionless equipment, constructions, and dummies take on a strangely sculptural quality. There are, for example, life-size imitation dinosaurs tipped on their sides, so that they look like plastic forms that have largely lost their mimetic function. Other shots reveal the struts of a roller coaster and a ghost train, which in their ruinous state latently remind us of the utopian hopes once associated with Constructivist sculptures. In fact, the amusement park itself was once capable of evoking utopian aspirations, as is clear from a UFO-like, elliptical pavilion on stilts that make it seem as if it were floating. Inside this pavilion Zausner does a kind of dance with one of the figures, a carousel-like circular motion whose centrifugal force is manifest from the behavior of the figure and whose choreography seems to be determined by the architecture. This dance sequence, which is shot relatively close up, conveys a kind of emotional intensity that is based not on empathy – neither between Zausner and her figure nor between the viewers and Zausner as performer – but on the fact that an already abandoned utopia obtains unsuspected new life through the dance.

Another complex of scenes and motifs in Zausner's film is not immediately related either to the question of the position and meaning of modern sculpture or to urban life or any utopia. It has to do with cinematic shots of factory interiors. These images seem strangely photographic, since the camera remains still and thus the shots have a certain duration and form sequences but do not refer to the idea of fluid continuity. In these shots we see neither Zausner

nor her figures. If anything moves in these images, it is the conveyor belts and the things transported mechanically by them. Therein lies a certain affinity to the conditions that the apparatuses of camera and projector impose on filming.

One of the factories is a bread factory where we see still unbaked loaves of bread moving across automatic conveyors, and the doughy masses become slightly misshapen as they transition from one conveyor belt to the next. In the context of Zausner's film, this can be seen as an implicit reference to her figures, which also react with their mass and amorphous flexibility to every change in their position. At the same time, however, we are aware that the contexts are completely different and cannot be reduced to a common denominator. Only by looking at a more general level can we grasp the suggested relationship between modern sculpture and the factory production of goods. This more general level can be seen in the fact that in the modern era sculpture repeatedly sought orientation in industrial production, its materials, processes, and forms. Such orientation seemed to be the only opportunity to achieve a cultural status and perhaps an urban presence beyond the sculpture garden as refuge and reserve. Zausner's film, however, does not seem suited to renew and perpetuate these hopes but rather to show the sites of industrial production with all possible sobriety and clarity. Her film may create a context in which these production facilities can be placed in the context of questions about the existential conditions of sculpture, but it cannot answer these questions. In one shot of a factory there is a giant sculptural form of various metal parts whose function is not evident to a layperson. It seems to be floating in the middle of the room on a hanger. Yet it is obvious that what seems quasi-sculptural here was produced without any thought of sculpture. That would rather necessitate that the company's materials and manufacturing processes were not employed in the way that is usual in our society.

In the context of Zausner's film what is particularly striking about the shots in factories is the fact that nothing in them suggests that these facilities are in Berlin; in fact, they could be in any other large city, on its periphery, anywhere in the world. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the film only shows the facilities from inside. That precludes any possibility of localization for which external views of an ensemble of buildings would offer clues.

This contrasts with the third thematic complex that Zausner's film addresses: the urban ambiance as such. For here we see not only shots that focus on Berlin landmarks but also numerous images featuring traffic hubs, transport routes, and the like that exist in the same or similar form in other large cities. In contrast to the interior views of factories, however, these traffic scenes form a continuum that allow for stops but no boundaries between inside and outside. That which is known as "public space" is fundamentally determined by such scenarios and infrastructure. The cinematic contrast between deserted transport routes and hubs and fluctuating crowds of people makes that clear. But if the concept of publicness in the urban ambiance refers primarily to the conditions and requirements of transport, and no overarching public interest is recognizable, then the question of the possible role and position of sculpture arises again. The sculptural, rubberlike figures in Zausner's film and the way in which they are handled both cinematically and performatively appear to respond to this

question. For the figures are placeless and without footing; because they do not belong to a specific context per se, they seem to be destined to be transported or, left to their own devices, to sink together beneath their own weight onto the ground or onto the performer who stands like a statue. Ultimately the impression is conveyed that, though these figures may have sculptural qualities and may place volume, mass, space, and material in an aesthetic relationship, as sculptures they must be seen at the same time as shifters, something that is extremely atypical of sculpture.² *Shifter* is the name for linguistic expressions whose meaning is completely dependent on the specific context and moment of their utterance – for example, personal pronouns (*I, you, he, she*) or indications of place and time such as *here* and *now*. Such expressions thus have an affinity to the specific semiotic character that Charles S. Peirce called an *index*. Signifiers and signified thus stand in a causal context – for example, smoke as a sign of fire or shadow as an index of a light source and its position.³ Zausner's figurative sculptures cannot, however, be directly characterized as shifters or indices; only their cinematic use makes it evident that they can take on these functions in order to raise thus the question of their role and position as sculpture. Placed somewhere – on the floor of the Bode-Museum, for example – they mark their place as one that specifies this question; transported to the context of a performative action, they indicate that their meaning grows out of action and its context but has no inherent significance of its own. At the same time, however, they indicate that they possess an ability to adopt and manifest meaning in this way.

Figurative sculptures presented in art galleries are, as a rule, intended to suggest a strong meaning of their own. Thanks to the proverbial white cube of the gallery's architecture, moreover, they obtain a forced aesthetic presence that isolates them from the urban context. Zausner's film begins with a shot in which the storefront windows of an art gallery are shattered by an explosion. The frame within which art is observed is thus literally burst open onto the urban ambiance. In a metaphorical sense it is the figures themselves who cause this explosion. Their "lack" of an inner core of meaning makes the explosion seem necessary in order to make visible cinematically the figure's ability to establish relationships to a complex cultural environment. Only with an awareness of this potential can the art gallery again become a place to which the figures can establish a relationship in order to seem strangely placeless here and at the same time comment on this placelessness.

The title of the film, *unseen*, which is skywritten by a plane in the opening sequence, seems to be an assertion that the film is determined to falsify by making the unseen seen. What is then seen, however, is something unseen. Just as those simply pursuing their daily business would scarcely have seen this ephemeral writing in the sky, since they are hardly likely to have thought of looking at the sky. The visibility of Zausner's figures is given over to a cinematic *mise-en-scène* since they are seen only in deserted situations or within a crowd of people. As viewers we are ultimately dependent on the specific regime of visibility that the film represents. These figures fulfill their destiny as sculpture within this regime, whereas conversely the effects of the film taken as a whole shed light on that destiny. If we observe the reflexive relationships of film and sculpture in their historical genealogy as we presented

2 Dan Graham, *Films* (Geneva: Éditions Centre d'Art Contemporain and Écart Publications, 1977), 15.

3 The terms *shifter* and *index* have been discussed frequently since the 1970s in debates on art theory; Rosalind Krauss's two-part essay "Notes on the Index" was fundamental to the discussion: it is reprinted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 196–220.

it in preliminary form in excerpts in the first section of this essay, we do not find specific influences that earlier films have had on Zausner's *unseen*, but we do find something ultimately far more important: the continued development of a general set of questions. This gives us reason to hope that her film will provide an occasion to devote more interest to this historical genealogy and its complexity than has been done thus far.

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