

In Between Not-Yet And No-Longer  
notes on ... at the edge of water by Simone Mangos

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The Marienbad has had an eventful history prior to its premises being used by the Kunstverein Freiburg since autumn 1997. Built during 1937/38 as an extension to the smaller adjoining Art Noveaux-style public pool, the Marienbad served as a municipal swimming pool until the beginning of the 1980s. After its temporary use as an exposition venue had come to an end in 1995, the City of Freiburg failed to sell the property due to conservation injunctions on the building issued by the Denkmalamt, the State Department for the Conservation of Historic Buildings and Monuments. In 1996 the Kunstverein finally succeeded in acquiring the right of future use of the premises. Today, following the Kunstverein's self-financed

alteration of the main exhibition areas, the building appears as a fascinating architectural double-entendre: once a swimming pool, it has now been transformed into an art venue; as an art venue, however, it is still recognizable as a former swimming pool. Hence, ghost-like, from behind the old structure a new and different structure is now beginning to shine through; just as the building's former identity will always remain curiously present in its newly-acquired one.

Haunted by its former phantom-like identity, the peculiar significance of this veritable art pool arises from two further aspects. Its unobtrusive, mouse-grey exterior (which is that of a common period apartment block in alignment with the street facade) belies the generous spatial dimensions of the radiant and brightly lit hall inside. And, the year in which the building was constructed is indicative of its connection to the Third Reich. Though built by Freiburg's Municipal Building Department, the axial symmetry of the building, together with the classicist character of its architecture, betrays certain links to the formal language of National Socialism. This connection is reinforced by a blue wooden sign, also from the 1930s and mounted on the tiled walls of the staircase leading to the upstairs gallery, which reminds and orders any visitor to the pool to "thoroughly clean all bodily parts in the bathroom under the shower by using soap". The admonition, equally banal as it is detailed, thus becomes (unintentionally) charged with the life-destroying holocaust background of the gas chambers.

The historical background of the building (which the Kunstverein now occupies) holds great importance in this case since Simone Mangos' work for Freiburg directly refers to it. Her conceptual reflections and visual translations include: the transformed as well as transforming architectural structure, its atmosphere, its smells, its historical significance and its present-day reality as a venue for art exhibitions. In fact, the whole oeuvre of the Australian-born artist is essentially informed by an attempt to consistently interrelate location and artistic intervention to such a degree that both become virtually inseparable. It does not follow, however, that as a result thereof both become indistinguishable. Rather, Simone Mangos' reflective artistic approach aims at establishing a finely tuned balance between what has already been there and what is a later addition to it. Her work takes up the physical, psychic and historical dimensions of the location without getting lost in them. And, the given room or space may then be read and understood in new ways without having been forced into a particular direction of meaning that would not suit it in the first place. This principle of balance is also an indication that her work at no point aims at static plainness and unequivocal meaning. Instead the artist prefers to put to use the osmotic principle of reciprocal and permanent exchange. In this context, liminality, the transgressive transition of one sphere or state into another, has to be understood as a process which, at least potentially, never reaches an end; a mental as well as a physical movement which reaches its final goal in itself.

This aspect was already evident in 1986 at Mangos' first large-scale solo exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney. She confronted viewers with a pine tree placed diagonally across the gallery room, its carefully cleaned roots dripping with honey. During a subsequent exhibition tour the tree was set alight at each stop anew and eventually turned into a trunk of charcoal which left traces of soot behind, but which nevertheless presented itself as a vigorous sculptural gesture while simultaneously illustrating the eternal dialectics of becoming and decaying. In *Sounding*, at the 1990 Biennale of Sydney, the artist re-opened a wide doorway which used to connect two separate factory buildings, both of which had originally been built in different decades. Within this threshold, she built a geometric lattice-work out of thousands of chalk pieces through which the other side could be seen, but not entered into. In both cases the viewer could witness an artist's highly developed sensitivity for the material in use, a stupendous feeling for space and light as well as for poetic metaphors, which make things appear in a new light without relegating them to one single level of meaning only. Her whole work resembles a passage oscillating between some indefinite beginning and an end which will and has to always remain open. In the process, however, the artist does not get lost in vague, woolly statements. The complex, free-flowing wealth of meaning in her work always results from a process of deliberate and precise reduction.

One of her work's chief characteristics is the union of geometric and inorganic components with natural, frequently metaphorically charged materials — as may be seen in her above-mentioned contribution to the Sydney Biennale. On the one hand, there are the pieces of chalk which invoke a broad horizon of associations; pregnant with dusty classroom smells, the screeching of chalk on a blackboard, and the memory of lessons laboriously running by like thick, sticky honey. On top of that, the material nature of chalk points far back into the geological history of the Earth. Formed from the remains of shells, corals and fish bones which had eventually been deposited at the bottom of the sea, chalk itself may be considered a liminal threshold between the organic and inorganic worlds. As limestone's soft relative, it may be pressed into different shapes, but nevertheless remains brittle and fragile at all times, irrespective of the fact that its form has now been rendered compact. On the other hand, the formal rigour — almost reminiscent of Sol LeWitt — of the chalk lattice, which is several centimetres in depth, prevents us from reading the work on a purely sensual or material-poetic level only. Indeed, as a white structure which has been carefully inserted into the white walls surrounding it, it may even be understood as a constituent part of the existing architecture. This is something which arguably would not only contribute to its sheer invisibility as art, but also to its invisibility as an autonomous piece of work; a work whose sculptural character is always to be understood in terms of an image, whose character as an image, however, always finds its origin in sculpture also. And the latter is found to be true not least because daylight, which plays a decisive part in all of Simone Mangos' works, again and again exerts its transformative powers in ever new facets and surprising turns within the sculptural volume of the layers of chalk lattice.

The installation ...at the edge of water, (pages 83-92) conceived especially for the Marienbad in Freiburg, is also marked by a structural ambivalence between autonomy, its links with reality, and a network of interconnected metaphoric, spatial, historical and psychological affinities. Old street lights from the German Democratic Republic, a photograph, and, (located on the upper gallery where the changing rooms used to be), a sculpture made of soap powder that grows, it seems, out of a pedestal and presents two differently-sized footprints, come to stand for an associative and elliptical inquiry into both body and soul of a building; a building that is completely saturated by its own history and various functions. Rarely since exhibitions have been held at the Marienbad have the rooms been so intensely thrown back onto themselves while simultaneously being enlarged by a completely new dimension as in the case of Simone Mangos' work. Although, on the surface of things, there is not that much to see after all. Hanging at the end of fourteen grey electrical cables (leading downward from the lighting rigs of the upper gallery and slung over the railings) are an equal number of grey street lights. They are equidistant and in a perfect row, the rounded end of the lamp heads just touching the floor. The room is empty apart from that. A second look, however, already shows how relative such a notion of emptiness can be: the serial and orderly structure which extends itself over a length of about 25 metres creates an accelerated spatial impression in a horizontal direction for the viewer, who simultaneously is drawn into its depths. The street lights are so suggestive as "ready-mades" that their sheer presence easily fills out the whole building. It is almost impossible, especially as we see the lights in their vertical, hanging arrangement, not to interpret them on an associative-objective level as well. In order to merely hint at a few likely associations — boats, various forms of fish, drops, tadpoles, seals or anthropomorphic creatures with their eyes made of the lightbulbs, all may be seen in the lamp heads. It is exactly the ease with which a translation into a known object may be achieved by the viewer, that also presents a certain threat to the artistic work involved, since in this way the object itself comes so heavily to the fore that it here runs the risk of crushing everything else by its sheer physical presence.

For Simone Mangos, however, the lamps are to be used exactly because they incorporate such a potential. It is their capacity of being charged symbolically and metaphorically that presents the decisive artistic challenge for dealing with them. It is precisely for this reason that, Simone Mangos chooses to work with water, chalk, honey, or fishing net, (all of which are equally "notorious" materials), that she also takes an interest in these particular lights: they inherently possess a vibrant transformative energy, a certain potential for transformation which has its parallels in the transgressive character of the work as a whole. In their grey rounded portliness they indeed appear to be organic, without actually being so, and their anthropomorphic, seemingly natural character stands in stark contrast to their technical function. Thus, they finally become perfect examples of an ambivalent sign as they undergo the artist's treatment. Their original function, which was to shed light from above down onto as wide a radius as possible, is still reconstructable. However, it is a function which the lights — now as bodily forms in upright balance — are capable of performing only in a rather limited way. Their light shines first and foremost, for those who actually approach them closely. It is an intimate light, one of inner dialogue, that emanates from them. At the same time, it is an inversive light, one which is directed at itself. The artist clearly stresses this self-reflective aspect by leaving the reflectors with an authentic, unlit lightbulb and adding a new 40 Watt bulb, whose warm light illuminates the inside of the lamps, rather than the exhibition hall around it. We can add to this the natural tendency of the lamps — touching the ground at one point only — to turn in due time to the direction most suitable and natural for each of them so that now they partly cast some light on each other. Be that as it may, the structural dualism which manifests itself in this light installation remains open to any interpretative direction. It is not forced into reaching a definite and self-determining decision in terms of its meaning, yet is clearly a precise and thoughtful poetic act of placing.

The strangely wilful personality of the lamps which are allowed — while being balanced precariously on one fragile point of contact — to turn in any direction they want, is literally “reined in” sharply by the grey electrical cables. They are tightly suspended and lead vertically up towards the gallery railing. Thus the lamps are referred back to a strict, serial uprightness which inevitably creates a somewhat cold and austere atmosphere, one of anti-pathos. In a similar way, the tight geometrical arrangement of the cable wiring on the gallery level is undercut significantly. Directly fitted to the lighting rigs, which initially had to be freed of all neon tubes, the cable reaches the railings in a wide, curving bow. Slung around a railing bar, it is only from there that the gravitational force of the fibreglass lights forces the cable into making a straight vertical line. The wiring which, seen from a certain position on the gallery level, gives the impression of a gigantic, bulging curtain hemmed in at its sides or of the sides of a somewhat loosely pitched tent roof, has to be also understood as a self-referential tracing of the way which the electrical current has to travel in order to illuminate the grey light drops on the floor in the exhibition hall. The cable in its virtue of signifying its functional necessity, has thus become one with its purpose (as an electrical cable it carries electricity), while simultaneously it is always already a marker for a certain aesthetic surplus value. As such the cable not only metamorphoses the actual way the electricity encompasses a waterfall-like flowing process that eventually coagulates in great, grey drops on the floor. In the process, the cable also touches upon and affects: the vertical structure of the railings, the actual size of the railing bars, and the gallery supports; its particular shade of grey reacting directly with the grey floor and the various shades of grey of the lights. At all times, though, the whole cablework may yet be seen as a linear design in space tracing and measuring the verticality of the building. In addition, the light which is led down from the gallery level and which eventually turns into a sculpture on the lower floor provides a paradoxical inversion of meaning. Light, which actually makes most sense and in exhibition venues especially, when it comes down from above, suddenly not only finds itself on the ground below, but in the process it has, in a meaningful and seemingly magical way, become an integral part of the sculptures. No longer may the formal requirements for staging art, i.e. space, white walls, artificial and natural light, be separated from the work of art itself. Both have become interconnected as by an umbilical chord of grey cable, yet both seem to thrive on the energy of the other. Only because of their new fittings do the ceiling lights now possess the power to really shine, that is to shine inwardly: just as diamonds need to be bedecked by other stones in order to really stand out. Conversely, without the cable-fed energy the lamps would be lifeless, amputated fragments. The vertical, energy-based interdependence of both spheres clearly points in both spatial directions beyond its mere limits, above as well as below. It is neither the light fittings above the gallery, bared to their functional entrails, nor the rounded lamp heads on the grey cement floor which mark the outer limits of the work. Rather, its energy vectors aim as much at the zone underneath the floor (where the pool once was situated, the lateral extension of which is indicated by the row of lamps) as they aim at the zone above and beyond the skylight.

The literally endless, vertical osmosis and, connected with it, the inversion of semantic levels which we find in this part of the work may yet again be encountered in two further, interrelated sections of the work. Exactly in the middle of the wall which separates the exhibition hall from the entrance area, the artist has placed a narrow, vertical-format colour photograph. A pair of bare legs seen in profile from the thighs down stand aligned to a swimming pool beneath whose tiled edge a glimpse of water is seen. Right above, on the gallery level, she has placed a white pedestal, also situated exactly in the middle between two angular, brown-grey columns made of artificial stone. On these rest, as has been mentioned, the imprints of a pair of differently-sized feet in soap powder. If we look at it in a formal way, the evident interrelations between both works and between the objects and their surroundings already appear to be entirely appropriate as well as intense. For example, the actual width of the photograph corresponds exactly to the width of the pedestal in the gallery. In return, the dimensions of the pedestal correspond exactly to the dimensions of the stone columns. Finally, photograph and pedestal may be aligned by one imaginary vertical line that divides the whole building into two halves: on the one hand, the zone in which lamps and cable may be found, on the other the opposite zone, which appears devoid of anything material.

As regards their contents, both sections of the work prove to be equally densely interrelated. The differently-sized footprints on the pedestal correspond to the differently-sized feet in the photograph. A fact which one seems to only fully realize after seeing the differing imprints upstairs in the gallery. And just as the emerging dualism between the interconnected larger and smaller footprints is echoed inside the street lights by the serial duality of the extinguished, yet large authentic lightbulb alongside a lit, yet smaller “foreign” bulb, so does the seemingly paradoxical inversion of semantic levels here find another repercussion. The human figure in the photograph — only visible up to its thighs — is not, as one would expect, completed on the gallery upstairs. Rather the opposite is the case: it becomes completely dematerialized. Above we are confronted with what we would actually expect to see below. It appears, however, in a form in which it is nothing but a memory. The pedestal has turned into a platform from which a dive into the depth of space has been risked, a dive which nevertheless can only refer to the pool reality of the

photograph as well as to the past of the Marienbad since nowadays and under the current exhibition situation such a daring leap would, I presume, end fatally. Imprinted in the white, soft powder that fills the entire room with a faint soapy smell and an idea of cleanliness (while simultaneously and due to its appearance reminding us of some white, sun-baked sand dunes at the sea), the footprints have thus become markers of a presence which consists conspicuously of its absence. Now they are manifestations of a structural absence which, from its very invisibility, does eventually develop a physically tangible presence.

The combination I have alluded to in connection with the lights, a combination of anthropomorphic metaphors and stress on narrative elements on the one hand, and of minimal geometric reduction on the other, also characterises the pedestal sculpture, which actually is not that at all, but rather an indissoluble amalgamation of pedestal and sculpture, a fusion of soft, plastic matter and angular, white geometric hardness: a sort of walking paradox not unlike the pieces of chalk from *Sounding*; fragile and easily pulverized, yet constructive and compact. Naturally, we may also see in this a commentary on the tremendous changes sculpture and the plastic arts had to go through in the course of the 20th century. Here, man as the central topic of the plastic arts for centuries may only be found in the guise of two inconsistent footprints, a fast-disappearing residue, an “impossible” phantom. The pedestal, too, is no longer a foundation to be taken seriously since sculpture nowadays prefers to place itself directly on the ground; not least in order to strongly emphasize its sense for all things real, but also to demonstrate its actual interrelatedness with this world. Neither the hypostatisation of the pedestal as a self-contained sculpture, as Yuji Takeoka has demonstrated so impressively, nor the puristic idea of an entirely autonomous work of art — which is supposed to be only what it is, while everything else has to forever remain something else — find an echo here. Instead, the work comes together and postulates itself to literally serve as a sculptural sketch, a sculptural gesture accumulating in an image which derives its presence by continually orbiting what is actually absent.

The purification process necessary for a work in order to become true *l’art pour l’art* is achieved here as an ironic reflex only: as a washing cycle or in the clean smell of white soap powder. The truly important things in art as well as in life, however, are found to be more complex as regards their interrelations. They consist of opposites which cannot and will not let go of each other: contradictory couplings which go a long way in underlining that — in both art as well as in life — the pure and the absolute may only be reached through the impure and through that which is relative. True purification consists of de-purification. It is only through complex contingencies that we may finally arrive at images that do not collapse in front of our own eyes because of their sheer impossibility (as do, for instance, pure minimalism or any attempts on a complete fusion of art and life), but rather, grow on the possibilities inherent in them.

What remains then, is the space in between: a strangely bright, yet equally dark area, filled by intimations of not-yet and no-longer, a twilight zone, the shadowy manifestations of which seem to escape and become intangible the more we try to pin them down or render them concrete. The invitation to the opening of ...at the edge of water pictures a panoramic view from an aeroplane showing sky, land and sea as an overpowering blue zone in which the transitions between the various elements have dwindled into so fine a line that they can hardly be distinguished. It is a picture which shows congruity in difference and difference in congruity. Just like the street lights that have long since ceased to be street highlights, but will forever remain lights, it is a backdrop which illuminates nothing but its own precise and clear-cut complexity: “at the edge of the water” we are neither inside nor outside, but exactly in between.