

Tanja Schwarz
Es kommt, was in mir ist, nicht heraus

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There: a track in the dirt, a rock, the light on the forest floor. Here am I, in the midst of it all and yet elsewhere. The walk is a paradoxical form of movement. It may tempt us to seek a form of redemption in the experience of nature, an alternative to preoccupation with our own subjectivity. But, as so often when we search for alternatives, it is the glimpse of the other, the open encounter with the many possibilities of the world, that simultaneously shows up the limits of the self. We are left with the crushing suspicion that we remain, after all, alone with our feelings and thoughts, with this inner movement for which we seek resonance in the world outside.

In the slide essay *Es kommt, was in mir ist, nicht heraus* (*What's inside me can't get out*, 2021) Tanja Schwarz explores the commonplace notion of the walk as a metaphor for the (literary, artistic) quest for meaning through a combination of photographs and text fragments that appear like found footage from a historical archive. The handwritten notes and snapshots of a nondescript landscape imply an unnamed protagonist, who is attempting to write with meaning and find meaning in writing. It is a narrative that plays with cultural expectations and clichés about the relationship of creativity and the experience of nature, while also creating a believable protagonist with a complex inner life, feeling and wit. On both these levels – the cultural and the subjective – the work sparks recognition and makes us smile as much as we feel the drama. It suggests that the viewer take an empathic, self-reflexive rather than analytic or ironic stance. As a line on a slide puts it: “and I caress everything that I'm unable to say like an old cat”.

Maybe there is no salvation, not in nature, not in writing, not in love. *What's inside me can't get out* – but in the irrational, searching motion of the notebook there is a tentative push towards expression, towards sharing the doubt, the lack, the gap. This process of giving form – albeit it fragmentary, perhaps it can *only* ever be fragmentary – is central to Tanja Schwarz' artistic work. Her drawings in the series *Panic for beginners* (2020/21) began as a reaction to a crisis of meaning experienced by the artist; she began to use slapdash drawings to explore existential questions about what it means to live as a human being in the world, how to weigh the abysses and absurdities of life. Simple, linear drawings and pointed short lines of text give a poignant shape to anxieties and vivid ideas that are fed by a deeply personal imagination, and yet seem familiar to us all. The drawings produce a kind of calm, a singular moment carefully recorded among the chaos of being. The artist describes this stance as a form of “cheerful defiance” – she confronts the entanglements and anxieties of our existence with humour instead of resignation.

The monotypes from the series *I'll be in touch* (2022) are a continuation of this approach, although the drawings are more complex and spatial. The smudges resulting from the printing process play with coincidence and add depth, reinforcing the sense that the work is denser, weightier – less feather-light impression and more flowing, dirty prose. In many of the images, creatures enter into relationships, or are sometimes forced into them. Hands fumble, touch, grasp for the boundaries between beings and within. Wallowing in each other, swallowed by another. Here, there is humour in being haunted. Ghosts are everywhere, delimiting bodies from objects, animals from human beings. There are moments when the drawings suggest an animistic world, and some of the motifs appear as if borrowed from fairy tales and myth.

These images can stand on their own, as individual scenes or snapshots. But they are conceived and made in relation to one another. In their interrelationships they unfold stories and thought processes, without a fixed sequence or order. These shifts from one world to another, associative thinking and the juxtaposition of points of view, is fundamental to Tanja Schwarz's practice. In the words of the artist, one should not "cover up this complexity and mysteriousness of the world with precipitous explanations and simplifications. To me, this also has an ethical dimension (...) I believe that art and philosophy help us to continuously see reality in a different light and to open ourselves to the unknown – or suddenly discover meaning where before there was none."

About the artist

Tanja Schwarz (*1987) draws and writes at the interface of art and philosophy. In 2019 she completed her MA in Contemporary Arts Practice at the University of the Arts Bern. From her early film essays to her current work, her art is characterised by a conviction that art is a way of making meaning and that it has transformative social potential, while also examining her own ambivalence about these claims. She explores various conjunctions of image and text, probing how they impact our perception, the ways in which they inform our understanding of art and language. In 2014 she received the Kulturförderpreis Thun and the Frauenkunstpreis of the Canton of Bern. Since 2020 she is part of the artist PhD research group "Der zuteilende Teil" at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) / University of Linz. She is a guest lecturer at the University of the Arts Bern and in the research institute Transdisciplinary Studies at ZHdK. She currently lives in Biel/Bienne.