

Atmospheric Transfer

The atmosphere permeating a location is of utmost importance for Thea Timm's artistic work. This not only includes landscape and architecture but also particular places or spaces. The artist takes in what these locations offer and transfers these moods in intuitive ways to her mostly sculptural, installative, and at times filmic and photographic works.

This atmospheric transfer manifests itself, for instance, in her installation *cabin in the woods* (2004). Timm's childhood memories of her grandmother's wooden cabin located in a forest in southern Germany were the point of departure for the work.¹ The installation functions like a transfer of the original to the exhibition context. In reality it is only a replica in which the artist has made use of several elements from the actual cabin.² Both realities are visually linked to one another in imperceptible ways. The artist enshrouds the cabin in fog and diffused light, lending the scene a mysterious aura. One approaches the work almost cautiously, and, once standing at the door, it becomes clear that it is locked. Only the view through the window provides a glimpse into the private interior realm. Intermingled with the *genius loci* of this location are associations to the aesthetic and the "air" of the 1960s in which the dwelling was constructed.³ The spatial experience is enhanced by the aspects that remain concealed. On the one hand, Timm offers the visual perspective from outside to inside. On the other, she keeps the viewer at a distance while simultaneously incorporating him or her into the experience by creating an emotionally charged, quasi-filmic narrative atmosphere that offers room for one's own memories, thoughts, and interpretations. The artist creates, so to speak, a surface onto which our own collective memory can be projected. Hence, the exterior and interior spaces that are also the focus of her videos and photographs are always devoid of human presence. *Cabin in the woods* also visualizes the process of memory. "Memory not only needs a single location it seems to mainly require a form that it can attach itself to."⁴ Thoughts of bygone times increasingly slip away from us; over the years they become more diffuse and fade away. Parallel to this, suggestion and imagination are capable of manifesting events in memory that never actually took place.

Thea Timm's approach is characterized by a personal way of seeing things—one would almost like to say by an unbiased manner of looking coupled with an expanded sense of curiosity. Actual childhood memories lead in other works to notions such as home(land), with echoes of the lower-middle class life the artist came to know while growing up in her hometown in northern Germany⁵—even if she herself never felt a part of it. It is possible to read her inlay works from this perspective. Using a variety of wood veneers Timm has created works that alternate between two- and three-dimensionality. *Driving Nuts* (2008) consists of a triptych of nautical themes including a helm, a sailboat, and a knot display that could have been lifted from a dockside bar or a Seemannsheim [sailor's home]. In another installation the artist presents hunting-themed inlays in combination with a rustic fence that absurdly meanders in a loop through the exhibition space. In Germany one mostly recognizes this type of boundary from backyards or gardens, which are not used to protect from the wild, but are a means for the owner to demarcate property borders. Timm turns this lower-middleclass convention on its head, breaks apart this staked-out zone, and casts in an absurd and amusing light the fence that is emblematic of convention and uptightness. In contrast to *cabin in the woods*, the domestic infrastructure is presented here in a preposterous manner, thereby detaching it from its original purpose.

With her inlay works Timm not only takes up an old handicraft but also plays with a certain hobby aesthetic. The use of veneers, gluing, careful detail work, and compositions all recall model building and decorative home crafts. Such domestic tinkering traces back to the do-it-yourself movement that began in England in the 1950s and quickly spread to the European continent. By 1957 the first illustrated German do-it-yourself magazine *Selbst ist der Mann* was published in Germany. Through today this amateur culture continues to enjoy enormous popularity.⁶ Timm has also always been interested in handicraft. However, she upsets this folk art impression mainly through her choice of titles. *Driving Nuts* (which is grammatically incorrect but intended to mean 'going crazy') refers on the one hand to the lunacy within the hermetic system of the do-it-yourselfer world in our basements. On the other hand, the title is to be taken literally: "driving" is reflected in the image of the helm and the model boat, and "nuts" is a reference to the veneer itself. It conjures up associations to floating wooden boats navigating like nutshells on top of an endless expanse of sea. Despite their highly aesthetic appeal, the panels evoke associations to

traditional clubhouses. This atmospheric link can be traced back to Timm's fascination for a feeling of social belonging of the kind found in self-purposed clubs that foster and support the recreational time activities of their members in a variety of realms. Belonging to such institutions are, for example, hunting clubs, maritime camaraderie clubs, or marksmen clubs, etc.

Timm's work *Wimpelkette* also deals with the insignias of club culture. In 2009 at Galerie Skulpturi DK in Copenhagen she presented in the exhibition space a nearly ten-meter long cord with pennants in alternating light beech and dark mahogany veneers. This kind of decorative flag hanging is familiar as ornamentation for towns or city districts for celebrating (shooting) festivals or other kinds of social festivities. For many generations the pennant has also been considered an object for indicating identity or allegiance. Thus in maritime navigation some kinds indicate whether particular crew members are on board, such as commanders or admirals, and serve as a means of communication with other ships. At the beginning of an official soccer or handball match opposing team captains exchange club pennants as a sign of the bond and friendship with one another. Frequently the pennants also serve as souvenirs for clubs, pilgrimage sites, travel destinations, or tourist attractions. All of these meanings resonate within *Wimpelkette*.

The unusual selection of rigid, seemingly high-end material in contrast to typical flexible plastic, fabric, or paper, means that the mini flags that are supposed to flutter in the wind remain fixed in a *single* position. Timm investigates here the transition between standstill and movement by almost halting time and freezing the pennants in their characteristic flutter. Thus, similar to how this represents specific information in a general way, the wooden mini flags symbolize pennant strings in themselves. The temporary ornamentation becomes an almost furniture-like spatial element, transferring its inherently festive mood to the exhibition space. In a sense *Wimpelkette* employs a strategy that runs counter to the looping rustic fence: whereas the fleeting city ornamentation is statically fixed as a universal image, the presence of the rigid fence per se is loosely arranged in the exhibition space.

With Timm, everyday objects, spaces or locations are the things that make their way into the exhibition context. Often one's awareness of them is only raised via this transference. An example of this is *Schnee von gestern* [*Water Under the Bridge*]. For an outdoor exhibition in 2007, the artist presented a discarded GDR streetlight, which

was displayed on the ground as if it had been randomly deposited there.⁷ The confusing aspect, however, was that it was still illuminated, i.e. it was still “intact.” The sculpture possesses a humorous nonchalance, not the least by means of its title, which reminds one that the streetlight is a relict from an earlier era. The casualness of the presentation also concealed the enormous logistical effort that actually went into the project. *Schnee von gestern* also considers, however, the question concerning who actually determines what is worth preserving, what isn't and why? In terms of the development of eastern Germany, which, for example, is also traceable in Berlin where architectonic relicts from the GDR disappear from daily life in succession, this question is more than pertinent. The streetlight not only allows one to reminisce over the bygone ambiance of East German cities, it stands for another kind of city fixture that ostensibly no longer has any value and has been replaced by newer models. The artist pays homage to these things with a great degree of dedication and care. The illuminated streetlight almost seems like a character that defiantly continues to illuminate despite the fact that surrounding societal circumstances have changed, rendering it useless.

Thea Timm constantly encounters in her immediate, everyday surroundings conditions whose universality she tests and addresses artistically. This approach is often expressed through original elements that are presented in combination with her own works. An unequivocal love for materials shows through. She searches for the transition from the two-dimensional to the object, from the actual place to the model, and from societal convention to the uncommon. Via these atmospheric transfers she plumbs not infrequently themes of home and homeland as well as atmospheric realms. Given that homeland is always something personal, Timm's works contain both the chance to identify with them as well as the possibility of raising unsettled feelings. With her precisely attuned artworks she not only sharpens our awareness of daily phenomenon, but she opens up the space for personal recollections, associations, and secret yearnings.

Susanne Köhler, 2010

Notes

1 Strictly speaking the cabin was located in Musberg, an incorporated area of Leinfelden-Echterdingen south of Stuttgart.

2 Following her grandmother's death the family tore down the cabin in 2007, returning the plot to its natural state.

3 See Carina Herring, "Ein echter Fan steht natürlich. Ereignisse zwischen Bild und Wirklichkeit," in: *Thea Timm*, published by Landeshauptstadt Kiel/Stadtgalerie Kiel and Thea Timm, 2007.

4 Thea Timm in conversation with the author on February 28, 2010 in Berlin.

5 The artist grew up in Sprengel. It is the smallest part of Steinberg im Kreis Stormarn, a community with 2,600 residents, northeast of Hamburg.

6 The term was first used in reference to home hobbyists, and later in the 1970s it was also used in the punk and hardcore subculture scene. Today it generally encompasses a range of activities in the hobby and culture realm.

7 Referenced here is the exhibition *01/01*, held inside a greenhouse in Berlin-Lichtenberg, 2007.