

## Still Moving

In her collages, photographs, artist books and paintings, Özlem Altin explores the body at rest and the inanimate in action

by Sara Stern (frieze d/e, issue 11, September/October 2013)



Özlem Altin, *Hand auf Körper*, 2009 (photograph: Hans-Georg Gaul)

Recently I took a walk around Kreuzberg with German, Berlin-based artist Özlem Altin's latest publication, *Invisible mountains* (2013). I wanted to see what it would be like to flip through the pages in a different context from the one in which I originally picked it up – at Circus gallery in Berlin this spring, where this booklet was displayed on a semi-circular plinth in Altin's most recent exhibition, *Cathartic ballet* (2013). There, the plinth also functioned as seating from which to view the main room of the exhibition, as though *Invisible mountains* were the programme to a theatrical production.

Pictures from the show are reproduced hand-sized across its pages, with fragments of text that subtly alter the meaning of each image. In the gallery, this created a footnote effect to the exhibition, but outside, the pamphlet began to read as an experimental film. One of the strongest works in the show, the striking photographic diptych *Untitled (Mädchen im Baum)* (girl in tree, 2013) is split across the first page turn. Overlaid with the text 'slow silence', and 'slow lost figures', the pages are like snippets from a Chris Marker film. Other phrases are at once so melodramatic and descriptive that I almost hear them in Werner Herzog's voice: 'emptiness enveloped in endless silence', 'the present never ends', 'close by, the sound of water disappears'.



Özlem Altin, *Untitled (Mädchen im Baum)*, 2013, photo prints (photograph: Nick Ash)

The pamphlet manufactures a sense of recollection or *déjà vu*. The 'having been there' of photography transforms into the more elusive 'having seen this before' – in Altin's show, perhaps, or even out in the world years earlier. This is how it feels to follow the non-linear progression of Altin's practice, in which similar images reappear, cycling across collage, assemblage, photographic

diptychs, artist books and paintings, the meaning shifting in each new context, but often focusing on the human body at rest and the inanimate in action.

Over the last ten years, Altin has been working with a large collection of images and texts selected intuitively from a wide variety of sources ranging from books and the Internet to her own drawings and photographs. For her exhibitions she chooses elements from this collection, arranging them specifically to how her body relates to the gallery space, choreographing a path viewers might follow around the positioned work. In *Each movement appears like hesitation*, Altin's first solo exhibition at Circus in 2009, self-contained constellations of images stretched across walls and plinths, sometimes framed by MDF boards or covered by a sheet of glass, blending the aesthetics of minimalist sculpture with that of Warburgian research display. The conflation of aesthetics is familiar, perhaps from artistic research projects, or the art academy, where plinths are often used as a quick fix. But here each element is carefully considered towards Altin's own ends, and the work evades easy categorization.

The largest wall in the main room contained four collages. Even from a distance, the motion studies of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge were recognizable. You had to move closer to study the lesser-known pictures and to begin to understand Altin's appropriative gestures. In the rightmost collage, *Hand auf Körper* (Hand on body, 2009) five disparate images formed a dialogue on touch. A hand reaches in with a pair of scissors to cut a piece of clothing from Yoko Ono in her seminal 1964 *Cut Piece* performance; another rests on a woman's shoulder as she stares blankly into the lens; in what appears to be a physical therapy session, a woman cradles a man's arm as she works on his body; in another medical image, a hand presses a man's neck, as though checking his pulse; a miniature watercolour of a face reveals a small handprint on its cheek. The simple gesture of a hand moving towards another figure reframes the body as a thing that can be touched. Other images focus on the absolute stillness of a hand that has found a place to rest. It takes a high level of engagement to follow Altin's contextual choreography and move past the surface of references (Marey? Ono? On the same wall?). But if you do, you experience a perceptual shift in which identification with a specific reference (in my case, Ono's *Cut Piece*) fades away into Altin's somatic narrative (here, the disembodied hand, the 'object-like' body). Recently, Altin told me that she would never discriminate against an image 'for being specific'. In a time when art audiences are often expected to read 'specificity' into every aspect of a work, Altin's approach is a subtle, yet poignant deflection. Re-contextualizing images so that they can be read in new ways becomes a form of animation in Altin's work. The same pictures from *Hand auf Körper* are also featured in two artist books – *Survival of an Idea* (2008) and *Confusion between the animate and inanimate* (2012) – and in a more recent collage triptych, *Hand, Hand auf Körper* (2011), in Altin's *Several Bodies* show at Circus in 2011. Each time they appear in a slightly different format and correlation, whether sequentially or freshly framed, producing that 'having seen this before' effect.

Altin often blocks identification altogether, obscuring heads by painting over appropriated images. Sometimes her paintings look like they have been splashed with photo chemicals or have a decomposing, Jean Fautrier-like quality. Paint becomes the only trace of movement in an image that is otherwise static. In her 2012 solo exhibition, *Rhythm of Resemblance*, at the Leopold Hoesch Museum in Düren, she took identical copies of the same portrait by August Sander and painted over it two different ways, undoing its documentation of a fixed identity; erasing its seriality while doubling it (*Untitled (Sander)*, 2012). She repeated the process with a portrait of Piet Mondrian in the same room (*Untitled (Mondriaan)*, 2012). As its title suggests, *Rhythm of Resemblance* was a show in which doubling took on a movement of its own around a recurring theme: the head, or its absence. This was the first time that Altin explicitly played with diptychs and with mirroring objects (such as a broken stone head of Bismarck and a cannonball, both from the institution's archaeological collection) across rooms of the museum to create associative meanings.



Özlem Altin, *Standing or left standing*, 2009, MDF boards, photocopies, prints, glass and publication (photograph: Hans-Georg Gaul)

Circling back, it is the nearly filmic sequencing in the work of Altin's most recent exhibition and the corresponding publication which draws me in the most. *Untitled (Mädchen im Baum)* greeted visitors at the entrance of *Cathartic ballet* and framed and prefaced the show. Hung frameless directly on the wall, the black and white photographs portray the same limp female body balanced on a tree branch from two slightly different vantage points. The images initially appear grainy and investigative, as though taken from a newspaper article in which they might have served as evidence from a crime scene, or two stills from a film only

seconds apart. Upon closer inspection, grain gives way to blurred pixilation. The piece could be a contemporary version of a stereograph without the stereoscope viewer. But the angles are too far apart to be a stereo image, and so the doubling is only a suggestion of that subtle, pre-cinematic movement involved in experiencing two photographs – two moments in time brought together – super-imposed in semblance of a three-dimensional whole.

Altin spontaneously took the *Untitled (Mädchen im Baum)* photographs herself on her phone when she came across the scene in front of her studio building. Despite the disconcerting connotations of a still body in a tree, according to Altin, it was actually a joyful moment of children playing in a courtyard. Stripped of that lighthearted context, the diptych remains a suspenseful, open and ambivalent meditation on the sequencing of stillness. I found myself identifying more with the movement of the camera than with the motionlessness of the girl, turning slightly to mimic its subtle rotation around the tree.



Özlem Altin, *Whispering Hands*, 2013, photo prints on litho paper (photograph: Nick Ash)

In the main room was another photographic diptych, *Whispering Hands* (2013), in which Altin superimposed images of the famous chess player, Bobby Fischer, from different games at different ages, resulting in a cross-fade effect in which Fischer seems to almost fold into himself. It looks as if the player is caught midway between frames, but these shots were never sequential. Instead, this is a flattening of time and a removal of his context – the chessboard, an epitome of conceptualism – stripping Fischer down to a ghostly series of poses. Unlike in *Mädchen im Baum*, in which the still body is balancing, the static body here is thinking, plotting all of its past and future moves.

In conversation with the artist, Altin spoke about her desire to create ‘openings for viewers’, inviting us into her works so that we can form our own narratives. In my case, walking around Kreuzberg with *Invisible mountains*, my head bent over the image of Fischer head in hands, his body frozen, I could not help but think about the divide that many of us question in the careful balance between making and thinking: the pressure to be conceptual and the desire to be intuitive.