

Norm as Norms

On Erika Matsunami's *B.O.D.Y. – Space is Structuration of Bodies in Time #02* (2009)

B.O.D.Y. is a series of works – questioning the notion of “norm” – by Erika Matsunami, a Japanese artist based in Berlin. Since 2000, if one includes her previous project titled *Sensation in Motion in Time* (2000–2003), Matsunami has been dealing with socio-political issues and has, over the years, developed a distinct style collaborating with a performer with a disability Martina Nitz in the context of Theater Thikwa e.V. This is a theater company in which a variety of people, with or without handicaps, work together for stage sets, films, videos and performances; it has been actively engaged in Germany since 1990. In *Sensation in Motion in Time*, Matsunami has choreographed as well as projected a part of the performer's body on the stage in order to visualize the message: “every body is its own norm”. Exploring the same theme further, Matsunami has newly conceived the installation *B.O.D.Y. – Space is Structuration* using a mixed media installation mode. It mainly consists of three parts: the projection of a performance video on a table, synthesized sound of the inner body and noises, and two large, human-scale photographs on the wall. In this version, the viewers do not just sit back to watch the performance, but are expected to walk around in the installation, ultimately to become a part of, and to get a sense of what “body” and “space” can be experienced as within the work with their own bodies. Matsunami appropriates the time-space of performance to form a participatory installation in order to provoke questions on principles of structuration – physically as well as visually and acoustically.

Two images – one is a moving image projected on the table, the other a set of photography on the wall – are both results of the collaboration between Nitz and Matsunami. A video projection is situated next to used pencil and daily stationery, fixed on the standardized IKEA table, a globally mass-produced piece of furniture, and the expression of a new standard of living considered “normal” by many. Matsunami infiltrates such a set of binary notions through the details of her installation, in order to provoke people to question the notion of “norm”: how are the mechanisms of normalization produced and set to function? What is agency? For whom, for what are norms being produced and perpetuated? How shall we face such a dispositive? As once Foucault described, in order “to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions” (*Discipline and Punishment*, 1975), Matsunami ponders these questions within the reflexive setting of her performance, combining the globally standardized object of IKEA with the subjective image of Martina Nitz, or displacing her enlarged body by projecting it onto a typical residential architecture built in 1970s Berlin. Combining opposing representations of modernistic thinking, Matsunami spotlights the artificiality of norm. Playing with scale and dimension, form (format) and movement, she attempts to unfold the notion and to re-translate in a postmodernist manner: norm consists of at least as many aspects as the number of viewers, without any reduction. Accordingly, the total of all norms is “a-norm”, which implies something totally different from “a” norm or “no” norm.

The video shows their performance in a loop – drawing lines on a notebook, posturing against a wall, corresponding slowly in their movements. The performance took place and was recorded in a private space with a fixed camera position. It merges with the filmed action as if really nobody were standing behind the camera, nor in the room around the performance. The viewers are suddenly immersed into an intimate moment where private space and public space are shared. A

peculiar condition such as the one the viewers are confronted with certainly has the effect of blurring boundaries of the gaze between the subject and the object. As the performers are not watching but being watched, the viewers also gradually transcend themselves into performers, as it were, while tracing the performative act, and eventually duplicating their positions, to be a part of the installation while still remaining viewers. Matsunami has set this quasi-theatrical space as a device to share something private, but in return it is shared with the public as an object.

Reflecting these differences she implants into the work, *B.O.D.Y.* seemingly works similar to the re-enactment of a reversed process of structuration. Both still and moving images are subtle and look natural, and there is no distinction or differentiation. However, this is a carefully calculated presentation, which intricately repeats the way in which structuration is embedded in a society. Matsunami's implants offer an insight into the machineries of normalization as well as the conviction that "norm as norms" (a-norm, a multiplicity of norms) does not regulate individuals, but set up new standards for each individual. In other words, Nitz's body in the context of this work comes to represent all kinds of bodies in the world.

As she literally subtitles the work "under construction", *B.O.D.Y. – Space is Structuration for Bodies in Time #02* remains within a dual condition, incomplete and complete at the same time. Despite of summarizing her translation of "norm", Matsunami decisively continues the playful attitude in the presentation of the work until the end. It is a mode of production in the middle of a moment of transition, making bodies constantly transform in time and space. As a scene witnessed from the window of a car appears overlapping on the white page of a notebook at the end, the train *B.O.D.Y.* is already on the move to the next stage.

Dr. Miya Yoshida
art historian, critic and curator