Janaina Tschäpe

The daughter of a Brazilian mother and German father, Janaina Tschäpe's namesake is an Afro-Brazilian water goddess, a birthright that seems to have compelled the artist to develop a personal lexicon of aquatic forms and references that interconnect her video installations, photographs, and drawings. During her formative years in Brazil, Tschäpe was deeply affected by the gothic imagery found in artistic and literary traditions of nineteenth-century German romanticism. Her fascination with painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and with macabre fairy tales informs her approach to landscapes, which she transforms into enchanted environments populated with inert bodies, amphibious characters, and embryonic shapes.

If one is to live forever, Caspar David Friedrich wrote, *one must succumb to death often*.[1]

Prior to her current work in video and photography, Tschäpe produced a series of inflatable latex sculptures whose smooth surfaces, malleability, and breathlike movements evoked a corporeal presence. Her attraction to the human body as sculpture and an increasing interest in performance led naturally to *100 Little Deaths* (1997–2002), a four-and-a-half-year photographic project in which the artist succumbs face down in as many different locations.

Tschäpe's "deaths" occur in two kinds of settings: natural ones that include gardens, lawns, beaches, and parks; and others, more architectural in character, featuring cathedrals, bridges, staircases, windows, and doorways. The latter underscores the staged death as a symbol of the passage from what is visible and recognizable into the unknown. The 100 Little Deaths series owes something to the fascination Friedrich and his contemporaries had with Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, which valorized terror "as the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling." Nature, in turn, was seen as a direct correlate to the irrational mind and was the most apt metaphor for the infinite, the inscrutable, and the otherworldly.[2]

Many of Tschäpe's photographs allude to works by Friedrich, especially the paintings that hint at his preoccupation with death through his depiction of cemetery gates, churchyards, open windows, and mysterious night scenes. The figure in Tschäpe's *Bocaina de Minas* (2000;illus.6), for instance, blocks the entrance to a winding roadway leading into a lush hillside. The tone of the photograph is haunting and faintly erotic. The two arcs of the bridge's side railings can be seen as suggestively rising up toward the viewer like bent knees, tapping into mythical fears that relate female sexuality with nature and death. This innuendo is playfully reinforced by the title of the series, a teasing euphemism for the male orgasm.

While *100 Little Deaths* began as a sculptural gesture exploring the spatial dynamic between a horizontal body and its surroundings, the visual impact of these minimal interventions charges each photograph with an undeniable psychological intensity that contravenes hackneyed tourist snapshots and travel photography. The camera angle infuses benign scenes with ambiguity and latent danger by tightly controlling the distance

between the viewer and body. The vantage is most often situated level to the figure, either disturbingly close or at a safer distance. Suspense mounts as viewers envision their approach. *100 Little Deaths* also presents itself as a travelogue that relates a communion between the artist and a place visited. The activities of site selection, camera setup, and lying down became a private ritual that grounded Tschäpe in a particular place and moment despite her constant travels throughout Europe and the Americas, where she realized performances that required more preparation time and commitment from outside participants.

From 1992-98,Tschäpe studied at the Hochschule fur Bildende Kunst in Hamburg, Germany, under the fluxus artist Henning Christiansen. Tschäpe remembers the school being "intoxicated with the ideas of [Joseph] Beuys and Franz Erhardt Walter and performance art was something impossible to avoid."[3] For her generation emerging in the early 1990s, performance art from the 1960s and 1970s was experienced solely through documentation and relics. While performance is defined, in part, by an experiential immediacy for participants and audience members, the retelling of the event through eyewitness accounts and documentation perpetually reinvests the work with new meanings.

In an early performance titled He drowned in her eyes as she called him to follow (2000;illus.7), Tschäpe introduces water as a fully developed theme that links the substance with metamorphosis and death. Filmed in Brazil, Spain, England, and New York on Super-8 and digitally, it is a seminarrative tale of a sea creature that appears to have been ensnared by a fishing net and brought ashore. Our heroine wanders disoriented through a sequence of activities tethered loosely together by dream logic: a ride on an old-fashioned carousel, a climb on seaside cliffs, and a serenade in a karaoke bar. A Russian love song that the sailors spontaneously sang while Tschäpe was filming provides the soundtrack.

The story is interspersed with enigmatic clues that insinuate the mermaid's death and that of a sailor. One particularly ethereal moment shows Tschäpe's head submerged in an opaque pool of marshy water swaying like a metronome. The image was extracted from the film and looped as an independent piece titled *Moss* (2000). Reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* (1851–52), the video once again evokes nineteenth-century romanticism to make youthful melancholic longing palpable for audiences well versed in new media technologies. In the performance videos and photography conceived after *He drowned in her eyes*, Tschäpe abandoned the narrative form, removed any trace of herself from the performances, and ceased casting men in favor of working solely with an intimate group of female friends.

The three-screen projection *After the Rain* (2003;illus.1-3) was filmed in the coastlands and mountainous regions of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, Brazil. The leading image hones in on a verdant mountain that, rising up like a pregnant belly, is shrouded in a fog that dislocates the viewer by concealing the surrounding region. The connection to Friedrich's representations of men and women standing on terra firma at the frontiers of mountain ranges and vast seascapes is striking. These people personified sublime

emotions. Similarly, photographs such as *Capri Exterieur* (1999–2000;front cover) and *Juju 2* (2004;back cover) show the awesome spectacle of nature vicariously through a turned figure, yet Tschäpe obliterates this romantic distance by taking the viewer into the mountainside, where preternatural vignettes unfold.

In these episodes performers, identified in the title of the photographs by their first names, are attired in elastic costumes fabricated from inflated and water-filled condoms, balloons, and latex that subsume the body from the neck down, as well as rubber tubes that permit underwater breathing. Tschäpe delights in the realism intrinsic to make-believe by employing recognizable materials to produce her outfits and exposing their respiratory mechanics. Analogous to flesh and internal organs turned inside out, the bulging amoeba-like forms identify the body with evolutionary change and watery beginnings.

This evocation of a primordial past recalls the earth-body works of Ana Mendieta, whose subtle interventions outdoors during the 1970s evoked natural life cycles and sacred feminine energies. Moreover, the manner in which Tschäpe's synthetic costumes constrict movement also aligns her performances with the early works of Rebecca Horn, whose physically encumbering prostheses have, at times, invoked unicorns and mythical birds. Likewise, Tschäpe's custom-designed outfits dramatically alter equilibrium and sensory experience. While she allows some free movement, she is primarily interested in physical limitations that "seduce" performers to adapt and experience the body and landscape in unexpected ways.[4]

Tschäpe's performances manifest themselves on different levels beginning with the rapport that develops over time between the artist and her subjects. This exchange is influenced by many factors, including weather conditions and other chance events. Benefiting from recent advances in digital technology and color printing processes, the final presentation of the performances in video and photographs conveys a sense of immediacy and viewer participation. The leitmotif of the amphibious creature and the selection of similar natural settings connect the interrelated series. While the videos for *He drowned in her eyes* and *After the Rain* present self-contained worlds, the photographs infinitely extend these environments in the imagination, presenting moments of arrested possibility.

Sandra Firmin, Curator

Footnotes:

1. Caspar David Friedrich, quoted in Wieland Schmied, Caspar David Friedrich, trans. Russell Stockman (New York: Harry N.Abrams, 1995), 32.
2. For an in-depth discussion on German romanticism see Joseph Leo Koener, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990),180.
3. E-mail to the author, January 2005.
4. Ibid