

Extremities

Hanne Loreck, translated by Jena Balton-Stier

“I love you so much!
that without giving it any thought
I'd give you a tile from my oven
For naught.
[...]
I laugh.
The holes make up more
than half of a sieve.

I love you so much!”

Joachim Ringelnatz (1928)

A view of body parts, insight into sensations – Sophie Aigner's artistic practice encompasses various media: unglazed, flat ceramic objects, aphoristic texts, and digital photomontages. Body contours are carved into reddish clay slabs with irregular outlines, sometimes rounded, sometimes more or less square. Letters or mathematical symbols are scratched into the still soft surface with a pointed object (a kind of chisel) surrounded by fingerprints. There are also silhouettes of individual limbs, a foot or a finger in various constellations, sometimes alongside a few characteristic inner lines to suggest toenails or fingernails. When regarding the body, Sophie Aigner visualizes its tips: the peripheral ends of the extremities, toes and fingers, but also the nose and ear (medically *acra*). The loose body appendages are not shown but are contextualized in a non-visual way. The comically reduced cut-outs and carvings of the individual limbs in the clay panels find their counterpart in the prosaic notes on the “peaks of life,” birth and death, and (as the artist says laconically) on everything in between. This in-between not only stands for a possibly long time (old age, illness, transience, longing, misfortunes, risks and losses) but also is as abstract as it is concrete when relatives, friends, lovers and family play a role. The in-between events are recorded by a female author who does not explicitly position herself as a woman yet is read as a female subject via her experiences, feelings and memories. The author's relationship to the protagonists remains as minimally outlined as the foot we look at from above, a nose in profile or fingers: the foot has a circular hole where the leg anatomically begins. A lower leg or an entire leg could be inserted into this open space. The shape of an ear is carved into a rounded flap. This is cut out of a flat clay tablet and folded upwards – a hole is also in its place. Could the tab represent a tongue, and its absence mean speechlessness? “Speaking in tongues” means following an intuition that is incomprehensible or at least does not follow the usual semantic production of meaning. If an ear lies on

this tongue or is scratched into it, the accent shifts from speaking to listening. All of the media Sophie Aigner uses have a certain laconicism and something lapidary in common (literally derived from the Latin *lapis*, *lapidis* meaning “stone”). In this way, the concise becomes something that seeks to capture the ephemeral, forever carved in stone or preserved in a proverb. One of Sophie Aigner's aphorisms reads “I want to carve the message in stone.” What is to be preserved in this way remains open; different things may be used here.

We also find placeholders in the ceramic medium through empty spaces or cut-outs, through which the surface underneath can be seen. These holes appear as if they were intended for a plug-in or screw connection – clean, rudimentary. They turn the body into two things: into a kind of floor plan of several of its functional units, which make it possible to conceive of the body as a building as well and which, just as in construction, only constitute a stable whole when interconnected. Screws, suspensions and mountings of all kinds can serve this purpose as well as pipes, hoses and ropes. All parts have counterparts in the body: joints, blood vessels and tendons. Versions of connecting elements can be found in Sophie Aigner's black-and-white photomontages. But memories and sensations expressed in words and sentences also serve to create cohesion, the psychosocial structure of which the subject is a part. What initially sounds like a mechanical understanding of the body fundamentally changes when we include Aigner's texts. The succinct personal sentences hold the pictograms together like nails, sometimes even like nuts (*Mutterschrauben* (nuts, i.e. “mother screws”) have outlived the once equally well-known *Vaterschrauben* (bolts, i.e. “father screws”)). While this is metaphorically speaking, the artist herself uses the associative potential of the metaphor to create iconic and verbal families.

Can a nose profile be folded open and shut like shutters? It is such seemingly paradoxical gestures

that Sophie Aigner realizes materially. Constellations of these sorts of body parts – not prominent sensory organs such as the eyes and mouth, but the perhaps marginal, at least less frequently visualized nose and ear – seem to express a specific relationship to the body. The clay is roughly the color of raw flesh, but it is not used in a three-dimensional, voluminous way. Instead it appears almost two-dimensionally, as a panel that can be inscribed and can record entries. The colorful allusion to the body is intertwined with the level of its graphic designation. This happens non-verbally, pictographically and iconically; or with numbers and mathematic symbols. One exception is the realization “alright, it means something to me,” the motto of this artist's book. Just as a nose, an ear or a fingernail is carved into the board, the slogan is also carved in loose cursive script. Letters that have a closed inner surface (such as a, e or o) have this part cut out to form a hole. Following this “anatomy” of the characters, letters become like body parts – think of the foot with its hole instead of the leg. But the aphorisms also tell of holes and empty spaces. Not only concrete gaps or holes dug in the ground are meant, but also irretrievable and irreversible losses. In this context, “alright, it means something to me” reflects the admission of living in a sentimental, sensitive way (in the best sense of those words) with things and past moments that others find banal or at least inconspicuous, and knowing the subjectivity of their meaning.

Counting appears as self-assurance; counting becomes a test of existence. Anatomy knows the numbers, and through it we also know them: one and two, sometimes five; two buttocks, two breasts, five fingers on each hand, etc. Yes, but can you be sure that they are always there and belong to you forever, or (to put it another way) that you can always count on them? *Setz dich auf deine vier Buchstaben* (that is to sit on your *Popo*, your rear end) was sometimes said in the past. Counting and designating with letters are close. “Take away the number from everything and everything falls apart,” remarked Archbishop Isidore of Seville in the period around 600 A.D. The mathematics historian Karl Menninger prefaces his cultural history *Zahlwort und Ziffer* (1934/1958) with this wisdom. Counting is fundamentally important but also gives insight into why it can become a magical practice and insure against disaster, for example to avert the misfortune of a dissolution of “body and soul.” Sophie Aigner's short texts address such moments when it comes to family structures: mother, father, sons, grandparents, aunts and uncles. They can also be assumed in the arithmetic symbols, in the plus sign, or in minor equations such as 2+1-1-1, with additions and subtractions, one is added to two and two ones are then subtracted one after the other. Procreation, birth and death are articulated abstractly and seemingly impersonally.

What usually could be understood metaphorically as a connecting thread of thought is given the character of a line in Sophie Aigner's work. In this sense, this thread-like something comes to resemble a ribbon: lettering or text, numerical writing or numerals, incisions. Even the digitally collaged components look like punctuation marks. At first

glance, they appear as potential supports, connectors and fastening elements; in their placement between the ceramic objects and the aphoristic texts, they organize structure in a grammatical sense, provide rhythm and the meaningful cohesion of sentence and body parts, and conversely, the separation of units of meaning. However, these mechanical parts merely suggest functionality. On closer inspection, they are hardly useful technically; yet symbolically they are of use. This is also how the individual body parts made of clay appear and how the relationships can be read. Close relationships are characterized by (life) stages and are fragile like the ceramics; experiences show fractures of which the author and artist keep small material remnants to support an imaginary bond to the events: a piece of a baby's umbilical cord, a hair of an ex and rather a bone of a mother still living today than later her ashes. These are all aspects of an eccentric subjectivity that must repeatedly derive stability from its physical parts, the tips of its body and its memories shortened into vignettes of words and must therefore reassure itself through *Er-Zählen* (re-counting and telling).

The fact that not only the material of a brick (clay) plays a role here, but also the object itself, can be understood as a fundamental moment. House and body have always had a pictorial relationship in which the built (technically speaking the constructed) plays the central role, but also the relationship between an exterior, a surface, and an interior which remains invisible at first glance. Carved into the pink flesh of clay, Sophie Aigner's impressions – not only fleetingly perceived but also as a lasting psychological impression – appear both like an incision in the body and like a cuneiform script of connectedness.