

Lena Grossmann
MIMETIC BODIES
16 Feb–21 Apr 2024

In her performance and exhibition *MIMETIC BODIES*, visual artist and choreographer Lena Grossmann explores the capacity of our collective body language. Her focus lies on everyday body movements and gestures, their readings and their relationships to one another. *MIMETIC BODIES* can be experienced in two ways: through performances that take place during opening weekend, and afterwards, as an exhibition that encourages interaction, movement and imagination. A graphic on the floor, designed as a form of movement notation, extends across the Kunstverein's entire exhibition space and serves as a connecting thread. Symbols, conceptual fields, paths and suggestions of actions invite visitors to explore different approaches to physical imitation and question behavioural patterns within the exhibition space.

Tie your shoes, go downstairs, exit the building, slow down, overtake, stand in the queue at the bakery, shift your body weight, move up in the queue, order, pay, wait at the crossing, cross the road within the markings, walk side by side, speed up, think about that urgent email, swerve, turn, open the door, shake out your umbrella. The route to work outlined here consists largely of internalised movement patterns and a series of interactions with other bodies. This interplay of bodies and movements can be understood as a choreography, in the sense that it is a way of organising bodies, space and time. This choreography forms part of what dance scholar Gabriele Klein describes as “choreographies of everyday life”: “In our movements through the hours of the day and through spaces, we repeatedly, and unquestioningly, generate that which we call the everyday world.”¹ Such choreographies of everyday life can follow explicit signals, rules and instructions, e.g. traffic lights, traffic laws or road markings, or they can be guided by architectural features, e.g. pavements, buildings, passages. On the other hand, they unfold in inter-bodily communication processes, in body movements, postures, gestures, but also in the distances between bodies, and in body constellations. Even when we are simply waiting in a queue or walking next to someone, even then our body is signalling something and is relating communicatively to other bodies. Even without verbal expression, an ongoing dialogue between bodies unfolds, giving rise to interpersonal relationships, placing bodies within a spatio-temporal order and producing social spaces.

Such communicative interactions, inter-bodily relationships and processes of perception and sensing are at the centre of Lena Grossmann’s performance and exhibition *MIMETIC BODIES*. The ancient Greek concept of mimesis serves Grossmann as a working concept under which she analyses bodily communication processes within interpersonal relationship networks. “Mimesis” or “mimetic” refers to forms or processes of imitation, assimilation, empathy, appropriation and repetition. Such mimetic processes create a network of relationships

between movements, actions and bodies, also encompassing representations and perceptions. These are resonance relationships that mediate between the familiar and the foreign – or, as the anthropologist Christoph Wulf puts it: “In mimetic processes, a *relationship to another world* is established.”²

MIMETIC BODIES is based on Grossmann’s extensive artistic-choreographic research into bodily communication and translation processes. The research and performance project *MIMETIC BODIES IN PUBLIC SPACE* (2022), which Grossmann realised as part of the *What is the City?* research residency programme at the Münchner Kammerspiele, was an important preliminary work.³

Adopting the approach of participatory observation from social science field research, Grossmann compiled and analysed mimetic movement strategies in various sites of transit and lingering in Munich’s urban space, particularly in underground U-Bahn stations and public squares. For example, she studied how bodies swarming out of a U-Bahn carriage thread their way onto an escalator or observed the chain reaction triggered when more people join those waiting on a platform. The focus was on questions surrounding the way in which bodies organise these public places and the role processes of imitation play here – questions that Grossmann pursues further in her performance and exhibition *MIMETIC BODIES*:

How do we structure our intercorporeal, social, public and even private spaces by means of collective body language? Which behaviours and codes do we use as a matter of course? In what ways do we adopt and imitate the movements in our environment? What bodily reactions does being imitated produce?⁴

Based on her research findings, Grossmann has developed a series of categories and subcategories which she uses to analyse and organise mimetic movement strategies. These mimetic categories are marked in different colours in the graphic on the floor. They mark spatial zones that

can be assigned to individual scenes within the performance or to the movement suggestions listed on the floor. These include, for example, the categories VARY, EMPATHY, REPETITION, FOLLOW, GAZE and CAMOUFLAGE on the ground floor and IMAGINATION and SOUND on the upper floor. As is already clear from this selection, this is not a strict system; rather, the different categories designate conceptual fields that allow the performance scenes and suggestions of actions to be located spatially and intellectually, to be reflected on from a certain point of view. Within this, several mimetic categories can usually be traced in individual scenes or action suggestions, some more prominent than others. The GAZE category, for example, emphasises both a prerequisite for a variety of mimetic processes and the contextual conditions of the performance and the exhibition. For example, there are movement suggestions in which the performers stand opposite, next to or behind one another and thus in different visual relationships to each other, or even in which the view from the surrounding balcony gallery is incorporated: "Imagine you are being watched from above. Don't look up but move on." In the course of the performance, different relationships of watching and being watched are played through and integrated within the configuration of the individual scenes.

Performance

Within one-hour performances, five performers guide seven visitors through a series of scenes that outline, comment on and question mimetic processes. In one of the first scenes, the visitors and performers walk through the exhibition space together as a group. They cross the exhibition hall, climb the stairs, circle the space via the gallery on the upper floor and return to the exhibition hall. As a movement pattern characterised by repetition and variation, walking is fundamentally mimetic. Similarly, the interactions within the walking group are mimetically structured in a variety of ways. The steps and movements

of individuals exist in relation to those of others. They follow each other, align, synchronise or fall out of step. In complex processes of coordination, the individual bodies thread themselves together to enter passageways. What are the distances between the bodies and how do they vary? Does the group seem symbiotically connected, hierarchical or does it disintegrate? Where do impulses come from and how are they passed along? Is there an individual who sets the pace or direction? How do the sounds of walking affect the movements? Walking in a group is an example of how interpersonal interactions emerge from mimetic processes that constantly mediate between self and other, between the individual and the collective.

Many of the performance scenes work with simple elements of movement. These are often everyday movements, including deeply ingrained movement patterns, such as walking, a learnt repertoire of movements or cultural techniques such as tying shoelaces. Then there are, for example, various standing positions and displacement activities, which in one scene are reflected back to the visitors by a performer. Other scenes demonstrate abstracted sequences of movement that focus on and emphasise a particular strategy of mimetic movement as if set up for an experiment.

Throughout the performance, movement sequences and performing bodies are never presented in isolation but are always integrated into shifting constellations. The distances between bodies, their spatial arrangements and directions of movement, their relationship to the architecture as well as their perspectives and visual relationships are an integral part of the sequences. Just like the number of performers, the tempi, dynamics and movement spaces vary. Visitors are involved in what goes on in a variety of ways. They join in, as when walking in a group. They move in a wide semi-circle observing the group of performers standing in a tight circle. They stand closely together with the performers or watch a scene from a distance and then find themselves in the middle of it. In this way, the performance treats space as a malleable

structure that is interactively modelled by bodies relating to each other in mimetic and perceptual processes.

Exhibition

The graphic on the floor functions as a form of movement notation, signifying the constellations of bodies as well as the visual and spatial references within the performance. Coloured markings and symbols indicate locations, directions of movement, paths and lines of sight. The notation thus has a guiding function and contributes to the realisation of the performance. On the other hand, it leaves as a trace an expansive representation of the spatial and physical structure of the performance at the site of the event. The notation is thus both a prescription and a postscript to the performance. It transfers the temporal succession of the performance into a spatial simultaneity that can be viewed like a map from the surrounding gallery on the upper floor.⁵ However, the graphic not only represents a past event but also indicates potential, something that could happen in the exhibition space. It illustrates and establishes a space for action and movement.

Some of the graphic symbols in the floor notation do not refer to the performance but are instead aimed at exhibition visitors. These can be used to activate the exhibition through a variety of movement suggestions. Written in white, they are spread throughout the exhibition space and can be performed alone, as a pair or in a group. They invite visitors to explore bodily imitation processes within their own behaviour and to develop a sense of their own body, for its spatio-temporal relationships and its relationship to other bodies.

The EMPATHY category at the front right of the hall contains this suggestion for a duo: "Position yourself opposite of each other. Imitate each other simultaneously, moving your arms and your head." The potential standing positions and viewing directions of the performers are indicated on the floor by two blue ovals with orange triang-

les and white arrows. The difficult part of this activation is that both performers must move their arms and head, but only by imitating each other. Nevertheless, the movement does not come to a stop. Arms rise slowly. Does one of them dictate the movements or do they arise from minimal, mutual attempts at conformation? When carrying out this activation, it can seem as if the movements occur of their own accord, as if they originate from an impulse that arises between the two bodies. The movement suggestion enables an experience that can occur in mutually inter-related, mimetic interactions: the impression that bodies tune into each other, vibrate on the same wavelength and connect symbiotically.

Further back towards the left-hand side of the hall, the instruction "Tie your shoes" prompts a seemingly simple action. But when was the last time I consciously tied my shoes? How exactly do I do that? In interplay with the laces, fingers perform a kind of dance in miniature along a centre line. Are the movements the same on the other shoe? How do other people tie their shoes? And how do children learn to tie their shoes? Someone shows them how. They try to imitate the movements. The attempts are repeated. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Like other movement patterns and cultural techniques, the child has internalised the process at a certain point and this incorporation is renewed with every repetition. Tying shoelaces is structured by repetition on different levels: in the movement sequence itself, in learning, internalising and renewing the movement and in its execution by different people. Accordingly, the instruction "Tie your shoes" is in the conceptual field of REPETITION. Some movement suggestions draw on the architecture of the gallery or provide an impetus to undermine common patterns of behaviour in the exhibition space: "Lie on your back until someone enters the space." Or they can take us far beyond the exhibition space: "Wait until you see someone taking a flyer at the entrance. Follow this person." Close to this instruction, which is assigned to the mimetic category CAMOUFLAGE, there is a reference to *Following Piece*

(1969) by Vito Acconci. The artist set himself the task of following a randomly selected person in public space every day during an exhibition (New York, 3 to 25 October 1969), unobserved, until the person disappeared into a private or inaccessible space. In other places, there are references to other key works of performance art that serve as historical precursors or role models for individual scenes, movement suggestions or questions in *MIMETIC BODIES*.

On the upper floor, under the IMAGINATION category, there is a series of suggestions that are not primarily realised through movement, but through our imaginations. Significantly, relationships between imagination and embodiment, bodily feeling and body movement can also be interpreted as relationships of imitation. These imagination suggestions are therefore not just about mental processes, but in particular about what an imagination does to the body. How does my body – and equally my sense of space – change when, in the stark exhibition hall, I follow or even just read the suggestion: “Imagine bright sunlight shining on your face”?

Similarly, the relationship between the linguistically formulated movement suggestions and their execution is a mimetic one: the linguistic suggestion prescribes a movement that the body executes. However, the implementation can turn out very differently depending on those executing, their dispositions and decisions or, as Grossmann states: “Language is used to open up a movement space that language itself does not describe.”⁶ Accordingly, the activations within the exhibition are only realised through physical activity and bodily reenactment. If I stop at simply reading the suggestion “Tie your shoes,” I won’t be able to experience the complex sequences of movements needed to tie my laces.

Processes of imitation, assimilation, empathy, appropriation and repetition enable and structure the dialogue between bodies and thus relationships between people in different ways. As the example of tying shoelaces demonstrates, these are fundamental for learning, incorporating and

reproducing behavioural patterns and rule-following behaviour. As a result, they become the basis for social behaviours, routines and rituals, which in turn produce, stabilise and reproduce social orders, institutions and social spaces. Mimetic processes can also create and consolidate asymmetrical relationships, power relations, social hierarchies and exclusions. For example, a group that walks through the space together could very well be hierarchically structured or exclude people. However, mimetic processes are not characterised solely by imitation and repetition, they invariably generate differences to the original model. In this way, they harbour potential for change and remodelling.⁷ Grossmann’s performance and exhibition *MIMETIC BODIES* draws attention to bodily processes, interactions and relationships that underlie the social and determine our experiential worlds, whether in everyday life or in the exhibition space. *MIMETIC BODIES* invites us to sharpen our (bodily) awareness of such processes and in doing so, suggests a basis for not only reproducing social orders but for changing them.

¹ Gabriele Klein, "Choreografien des Alltags. Bewegung und Tanz im Kontext Kultureller Bildung," *Kulturelle Bildung Online*, 2012, accessed 14.02.2024,

<https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/choreografien-des-alltags-bewegung-tanz-kontext-kultureller-bildung>

² Christoph Wulf, *Zur Genese des Sozialen. Mimesis, Performativität, Ritual* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2005), 8.

³ For her research and performance project *MIMETIC BODIES IN PUBLIC SPACE* (2022) Grossmann collaborated with the dancers Yurika Sophie Yamamoto and Estefanía Álvarez Ramírez as well as the visual artist Annabell Lachner.

⁴ Lena Grossmann, *MIMETIC BODIES* announcement text, Lothringer 13 Halle, 2022, accessed 14.02.2024, <https://www.lothringer13.com/en/program/archive/mimetic-bodies/>.

⁵ Gabriele Brandstetter, Franck Hofmann, Kirsten Maar, "Einleitung. Notationen und choreographisches Denken" in: id., *Notationen und choreographisches Denken* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2010), 12 f.

⁶ Lena Grossmann in her portfolio about the work *MIMETIC PRACTICE* (2022).

⁷ Cf. Christoph Wulf, 9, 94ff.

Lena Grossmann's performance and exhibition *MIMETIC BODIES* was first shown in 2022 in Lothringer 13 Halle in Munich. Kunstverein Freiburg presents a further-developed version, adapted to the Kunstverein's exhibition hall.

Artistic Direction, Choreography, Graphic Design:
Lena Grossmann

Performer, Artistic Collaboration Performance:
Estefanía Álvarez Ramírez

Performers:
Georgia Bettens
Marianne Linder
Tamora Dinklage
Lena Schillebeeckx

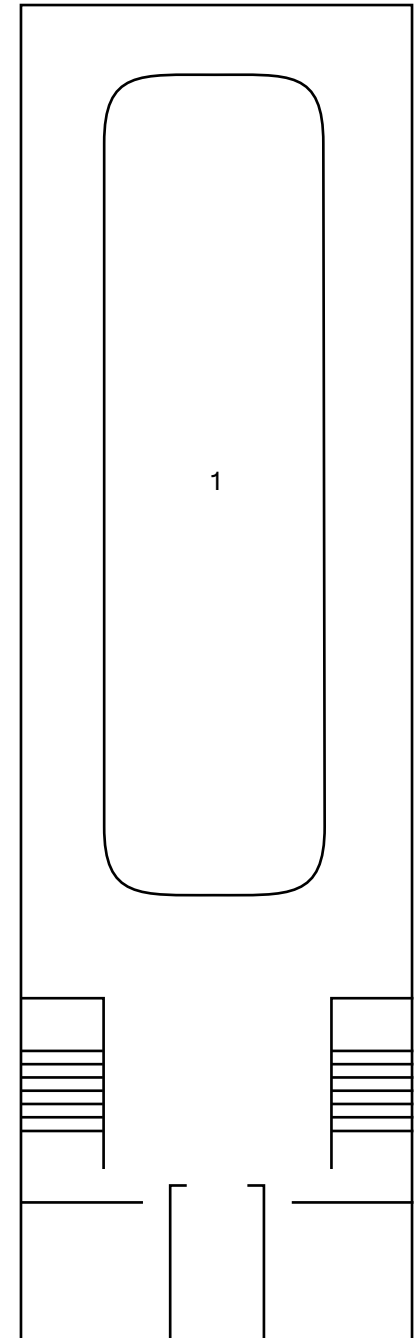
Graphic Realization:
Ludwig Haslberger

Lena Grossmann (b. 1991) lives and works in Munich.

Solo exhibitions (s), group exhibitions (g) and performances (p) (selection): *MIMETIC BODIES*, Lothringer 13 Halle, Munich, DE, 2022 (s/p); *MIMETIC BODIES IN PUBLIC SPACE*, in the context of: *What is the City?*, Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich, DE, 2022 (p); *code and shadow; reverse TRIO*; Kunstraum München, Munich DE, 2020 (s/p); *X ways through organised space*, Bundespreis für Kunststudierende, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, DE, 2019, (g/p); *code and shadow reverse*, in the context of: Olaf Nicolai, *there is no place before arrival*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT, 2018 (p); *Strecke (1-7) aus Armkreis (0) für vier Personen*, Berlinerstraße, Kassel, DE, 2018 (p).

1
Lena Grossmann
MIMETIC BODIES, 2022/24
Adhesive foil
Dimensions variable

Hall and Gallery



Programme

Fri, 16 Feb–Sun, 18 Feb 2024

Performances

(Registration required)

Fri, 16 Feb 2024, 7.30 pm

Opening Night with an
Introduction by Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 29 Feb 2024, 7 pm

Curator's Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Sat, 2 Mar 2024, 3 pm

Mimikry

Movement Workshop with
Quindell Orton

Thu, 14 Mar 2024, 7 pm

Discursive activation with
Elena Basteri

Thu, 11 Apr 2024, 7 pm

*Ästhetik in Bewegung – Ausstellung
x Performance*

Lecture by Hanne König

Sat, 14 Apr 2024, 2–4 pm

Movement Workshop for Children
6–12 Years
with Lena Schillebeeckx
(Registration required)

Thu, 18 Apr 2024, 7 pm

Guided Tour with
Marilena Raufeisen

Opening Hours

Wed–Fri, 3 pm–7 pm

Sat–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

Entrance: 2 €/1.50 €

Thursdays free

Members free

The project is supported and made possible by the Office of Culture of the City of Munich and the Bavarian State Association for Contemporary Dance (BLZT) with funds from the Bavarian Ministry of Science and Art, the Erwin and Gisela von Steiner-Stiftung Munich and the LBBW-Stiftung.

Dieses Projekt wird gefördert von der

 Landeshauptstadt
München
Kulturreferat

 **BLZT**
BAYERISCHER
LANDESVERBAND FÜR
ZEITGENÖSSISCHEN
TANZ

 STEINER-STIFTUNG
MÜNCHEN

LBBW
Stiftung
Landesbank Baden-Württemberg

Kunstverein Freiburg is sponsored by:

 Freiburg
IM BREISGAU

 Baden-Württemberg

 Sparkasse