



Mermaid Doing Gymnastics, 2015. Cortesía de la artista y Zeno X Gallery, Amberes

GRACE SCHWINDT

Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts

19 February – 15 May, 2016

First-floor galleries

Tuesdays to Saturdays (including bank holidays): 11am to 2.30pm and 5pm to 9pm / Sundays:
11am to 2.30pm

Curated by: Agar Ledo and Gillian Park

With the collaboration of:



Supported by: Pavilion, Leeds / Fundación Centro Galego da Artesanía e do Deseño / Pavestone Projects / Facultad de Bellas Artes, Universidad de Vigo

Summary of the Exhibition Project

Grace Schwindt (Germany, 1979) uses a number of techniques like film, performance, sculpture in order to address issues linked to memory and the construction of social relations and power systems. Her work is a critique of the established systems, and invites audiences to consider how our socio-political structures are produced. How do we behave within these systems? Who is telling the story, for what ends and in whose interests?

Schwindt draws on the diverse fields of theatre, dance and music. Her creative process often originates within domestic settings and through these she then entrusts the choice of narratives to others. In this exhibition she prompts reflection on magic, beliefs and capitalism as forms of social interaction. The starting point is an interview with a man who monitors birds for signs of oil spills. Through this, the artist prompts reflection on the danger of labour within capitalist societies: becoming aware of how the human body behaves within certain systems warns us about the fragility of it.

The relationship between capitalism and morality, the fantasy of the immortal body, the representation of the body stripped of gender roles, the sea as an idealized, political space and the allusion to worlds existing after death create different narratives which converge throughout this show. The title of the exhibition stems from a conversation with an anthropologist on one of the central figures in Galician tradition, the *Moura*. As women and supernatural beings, the *Moura* is never permitted to lead a revolution. This would entail altering the order that myths and legends are responsible for preserving.

Schwindt's work deconstructs the power systems in order to show that nothing is neutral, since they respond to certain existing schemes within power structures. As an institutionalised system, an exhibition is not neutral either. It is conceived as a choreography in which the relationship between the visitor and the objects activate multiple subjectivities.

The exhibition also includes the world's premiere of the live performance *Madness and Other Tales*, 2016, which will take place on the museum's first floor on the opening day. Here, soprano Lisa Cassidy and Vertixe Sonora Ensemble will perform a new score written by Grace Schwindt. After the premiere, a recording of the performance will be presented at the gallery space.

The exhibition includes a **retrospective cycle dedicated to the artist's films** at the Museum **Library-Documentation Centre**, together with a bibliographic-documentary display of catalogues and publications, a digital dossier including links to the artist's work and to other artists of reference in Schwindt's work.

Premiere of *Madness and Other Tales*

Madness and Other Tales, 2016

A live performance by Grace Schwindt

Produced by: MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo

First floor galleries

Friday 19th of February, 8.30pm

Conductor: Ramón Souto

Soloist: Lisa Cassidy

Musicians: Iago Lariño, flute/ Anne Tooming, piano/ Mario Peris and Marina Ortiz, violín/

Sergio Montero, viola/ Juan Carrillo, cello

Costume maker: J. Méndez and Fernando Román Rodríguez

The fragility of the human body is addressed in this performance, in which a soprano and an orchestra perform a new score written by Grace Schwindt. This piece is based on the Aria of Madness from Gaetano Donizetti's 19th-century opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

9 films by Grace Schwindt

Venue: Library-Documentation Centre, MARCO

Hours: Tuesday to Friday from 11:15am to 2:00pm and from 5:15pm to 8:30pm, excluding bank holiday

*Films are shown in original version (English/German with English subtitles)

Meeting Florchen Gordon, 2008

The Chair, 2008

Counterpoint 1, Part 1: Individual Accounts, 2010

The Signal, 2011

Glass and Honey, 2012

Tenant, 2012

Clean Air, 2013

Only a Free Individual can Create a Free Society, 2014

"I use theatrical sets with minimal architectural elements to mark a location. I place bodies in these spaces, including my own, and use a tightly scripted choreography in which every move relates to institutionalized systems that rely on exclusion and destruction. Interviews that I conduct with individuals often serve as starting points for fictionalized dialogues that are then delivered by different performers.

While trying to represent a system, I deconstruct it by using the same mechanisms that I apply to build it: bodies, movements, speech, furniture, architecture, and costumes. For example, the film *Tenant* describes the routines that take place in a family home, such as eating together, doing homework, or bathing. These routines are embedded into a wider historical and social context and get repeatedly interrupted—such as a performer falling down stairs at the very moment she reaches the top. The body in my work is turned into a fragile prop in constant danger".

Grace Schwindt

Exhibition Guide

It is not possible to place the work of Grace Schwindt (Germany, 1979) into a single category but rather her work should be understood, more broadly, as questioning the systems and standards of contemporary society. Through her films, performances, drawings, sculptures and texts, Schwindt analyses the role of bodies, language and objects in the construction of history and memory. Her work is a critique of the established systems, questioning the supposed individual freedom advocated by capitalism, as well as the co-option of morality by the market. By deconstructing a set of power systems (the family unit, the community, the State, belief systems), Schwindt eschews an uncritical acceptance of reality and invites audiences to consider how socio-political structures are produced. How can these different forms of representation coexist in one single system, and what is the relationship between them? How are social structures produced? Who is telling the story, for what ends and in whose interests?

In her work Schwindt draws on the fields of theatre, dance and music. Her methodology is close to micro-history, taking singular events, individuals, objects or stories as her point of departure. Her creative process often originates from specific research and conversations with activists, politicians or family members, and through this she entrusts the choice of narratives to others. She says: 'I refuse the position of a witness or to take any position of authority in deciding who should have a voice.' Since her early work which reviewed recent German history through anecdotes that occurred during the Second World War, Schwindt has been consumed by the way in which unique personal stories affect the narratives of the collective, and in how social relations conform through acts of exclusion and destruction.

Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts brings together a set of works in which Schwindt explores magic, belief systems and capitalism as forms of social interaction. The starting point for this exhibition is an interview with a man who monitors birds for signs of oil spills. Through this, the artist explores the environmental impact of the oil industry, prompting reflection on the fragility of the body and on the danger of labour within capitalist societies, where physical strength and good health are essential for generating profit. The relationship between capitalism and morality, the construction of gender roles in folklore and opera, the sea as an idealised, political space, create different narratives which converge throughout the show. The exhibition is conceived as a choreography in which the relationship between the visitor and the objects activate multiple subjectivities.

Swindt aims to show that no system is neutral; rather, it is through the systems and structures within society that power is both produced and concealed. As an institutionalised system, an exhibition is not neutral either. It is, as Georges Didi-Huberman would say, a state apparatus, but, at the same time, a device capable of contradicting it: a war machine. Thus, in order to dissect the exhibition system, Schwindt looks at the histories of presenting and perceiving works in galleries, theatre and cinema. In the exhibition, bodies exist equally alongside other component parts: texts, words, songs, sounds, light, movements, visitors, mirrors, granite, thoughts, ceramics, silk, colours, gestures, space, time. By breaking down her set designs or exhibitions into their basic components, Schwindt makes visible the social relations of production, which operate in the shaping of this system. This relates to Walter Benjamin's demands when he calls for the author not only to transmit the apparatus of production, but also to transform it. Through this revolutionary stance, Benjamin proposes 'turning consumers into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators'

The exhibition reflects Schwindt's interest in Bertolt Brecht's notion of 'dialectical theatre' which, through techniques of alienation and distancing, reveals the artifice and mechanics of theatre, and

awakens rather than absorbs the viewer. One of Brecht's techniques was to turn the lights onto the audience to make them aware of theatre's construction. Like Brecht, Schwindt is interested in the mechanics of theatre, but in contrast she maintains a belief in the possibilities of magic and faith and a dream of a life based on different logics and orders even while aware of the world's horrors and the seeming impossibility for change. In her own work, she is interested, in contrast to Brecht, in keeping the lights off. Her aim is to address each audience member individually rather than enabling a community vulnerable to exclusion and evasive of responsibility, as Brecht does, by enabling audiences to see one another.

In her artistic practice, Schwindt avoids divisions between content and form, or between spectator and collaborator; she blends various techniques and disciplines and unveils the instruments and materials involved in the artistic process. She views the exhibition as the organisation of material, similar to a 'choreography' or 'musical score'.

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A number of temporal registers co-exist in the exhibition with references to both death and immortality. A series of drawings and sculptures throughout the exhibition present mermaids – usually possessors of eternal life – who are wounded through their coexistence with mercury, a toxic element that is released into the sea by power plants and other industrial facilities. The exhibition also draws on the temporality of art forms: of cinema, theatre and also music, in its focus on rhythm and repetition. There are references to the past through folklore and maritime traditions and to the future – the revolution still to come. The audience also becomes aware of the present moment and the role of their own bodies through the exhibition, as they pass through *Curtains*, 2016, which touches the visitors' skin and marks the entrance to the exhibition.

Homecoming in the Otherworld, 2016 introduces the traditions and beliefs of fishermen from the Aran Islands (Ireland), the legacy of Celtic jersey designs and of an Atlantic culture in which traditions circulate through the earliest maritime routes. Handed down from generation to generation, the jersey designs are linked to the identity of each clan. References to this tradition can be found in several works in the exhibition (*Little Birds and a Demon*, 2015) as well as in some of her drawings. 'I like wearing knitted jumpers, second-hand, those that were used to identify drowned fishermen, one unique pattern for each family', is one of the sentences uttered by the birder in *Little Birds and a Demon*, 2015, which references the way in which jersey designs were used to identify the clan of shipwrecked bodies.

The fragility of the human body is also addressed in *Madness and Other Tales*, 2016, a live performance in which soprano Lisa Cassidy and Vertixe Sonora Ensemble perform a new score written by Grace Schwindt. A recording of the performance is presented in the gallery space. This piece is based on the Aria of Madness from Gaetano Donizetti's 19th-century opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The murder of the bridegroom by Lucia – who is forced to marry him for political reasons – is the focal point of this tragedy in which the bride's act is perceived to be an act of madness. This work implicitly addresses the patriarchal construction of the feminine signified by the mad woman, whose hysteria (widely used in literature and opera) precludes the possibility of the woman acting to free herself from an oppressive situation. This is addressed by the artist through the mirror suit – a sharp, rigid material, in contact with the human skin – alluding to what Lacanian Psychoanalysis refers to as the 'Mirror Stage' of infant development, in which the subject overcomes their experience of fragmentation and powerlessness. In addition to the narrative signified by Donizetti's opera and accentuated by the setting, is the emancipatory narrative provided by the artist in her modified score. The high notes attempt to transcend the usual range of the human voice, and the whistling references the superstitions of sailors who associated it with protection. For British and Asturian fishermen the whistle was 'the Devil's music', the call to the wind and to the storm.

Schwindt is interested in the way in which folklore, superstitions and traditions are integral for maintaining social structures. Legends and myths are not merely descriptions of past events, but both express and produce power relations. These stories help maintain the status quo, and can be read as a code through which to understand society. *Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution*, 2016, the sculpture which provides the title for the exhibition, stems from a conversation with an anthropologist and from research into the representation of women in oral traditions and, more specifically, the legends of the 'enchanted *Moura*' (Moorish maiden). In Galician and Portuguese tradition (but paralleled in other Atlantic cultures, Basque and Irish legends, and in Lorelei from German mythology) *Mouras* are endowed with supernatural powers. The exhibition title refers to the representation of the *Moura* within the domestic setting (similar to the role of the Celtic Mater) as well as to the building of large-scale structures, such as dolmens, menhirs and other megalithic monuments, which legends attribute to the *Moura*. But the title also refers to the symbolic representation within folklore that subjugates women: despite the power with which the beliefs endow them, *Mouras* do not subvert the systems to which they belong. As women and supernatural beings, the *Moura* is never permitted to lead a revolution, which would alter the order that myths and legends are responsible for preserving. As Schwint explains, 'In my understanding, the power of the *Moura* is to question, upset or subvert order and systems but only, in the end, to reiterate them. This is in line with the classic tradition of fairytales and folklore that question a system only, in the end, to reiterate it.'

The *Moura* thus functions as the representation of an unrealised potential, presenting the possibility of an alternative order that will never be resolved, as 'the gap in the system which, by its very existence, ensures the system's durability'. In her sculpture, Schwindt reveals the protective and threatening, seductive and dangerous, powerful and dependent figure (those irreconcilable opposites that Lévi-Strauss considers inherent to the construction of myths) of the *Moura*. The historian, Mar Llinares, writes 'The *Moura* ceases to be dangerous when the man dominates her savage sexual aspect (servant) and, through a kiss, blood spilt from a wound or a flower taken from her mouth, all clear symbols of deflowering (sexual possession), she is transformed into a desirable wife (dominated woman)'. In her work, Schwindt asks, What would happen if we could strip the *Moura* of all the cultural, social and political connotations that surround the figure? Would the figure disappear, or could she represent a true threat for the system? Could she lead a revolution?

Schwindt's focus on the enchanted *Moura* links to *The Emperor and the Little Girl*, 2016, a recording of the artist reading a new script in which the divine, the human and the natural are intertwined through the adaptation and transformation of a legendary tale, reflecting Schwindt's interest in the critical capacity of language. The artist speaks the text emptying her speech of any gesture, intonation or movement, which may code the audience's interpretation. Thus the text becomes self-referential rather than its more common use as explanation or illustration. Texts are staged in different ways throughout the exhibition: transcribed on a wall, performed live or recorded, in relation to song or music. Not only does the exhibition address the dissection of social systems, but also the means of transmission or visualisation of bodies, voices, objects in the theatrical, cinematic or museographic scenography.

Schwindt uses objects to explore how they behave independently and in their relationships between themselves or with the world, questioning how time and experience add value to the objects, in which different stories take shape. *Three Gifts*, 2016 draws attention to the ways of organising social relationships on the basis of objects. Clothing is also charged with strong connotations – the Roman toga is a clear example of that. The toga was worn wrapped around the body and its folds and colours varied depending on status and social power: the extremely expensive Tyrian purple dye was a symbol of authority only worn by generals, senators and emperors in Ancient Rome, which is still linked to power relations today. The work also addresses the relationship between *Mouras* and humans, based on the exchange of goods: the sculpture includes a piece of gold, another of silver and a plague of bacteria.

Once again, the burden of morality, adapted across different times and geographical settings, functions to maintain social order.

The narrative is another of the elements that Schwindt deploys in order to analyse the power structures that society is based upon. Within the exhibition, narrative is a tool that is used, not with the aim of explaining or reinforcing the systems, in which the artist does not believe, but rather to understand and question how social relationships are shaped through symbolic and narrative mechanisms (mythology). These acts of domination have been reinvented in the modern world, albeit without a magical dimension. The methodological strategies employed by the artist, both in the discursive content of her work and in its formalisation and staging, originate from the resources of history, anthropology, documentary as well as the more illusory domains of theatre, dance, cinema and magic, which together are deployed in order to reveal the construction of the collective imaginary.

Inspired by the story of Martin Heubeck, a birder based in the Shetland Islands, in *Little Birds and a Demon*, 2015 Schwindt tells the story of a man who monitors birds for signs of oil spills. In this highly contaminated setting the protagonist is driven to madness. The fictional text written by the artist is given visual form through a wall-based work and also used as a script or a 'score' for the exhibition itself, since it is the piece on which the body of work shown here is based, and around which all the different elements have been created. The text deals with a figure who is in a position of care but who is also instrumentalised by the oil industry as a means to measure the efficiency of the capitalist system.

In *Little Birds and a Demon, 2015* – a script written for a film currently in process, also used for a sound piece which was broadcast from The Shetland Islands (UK) in 2015 as well as presented as part of an installation at the 14th Istanbul Biennial – the protagonist, a birder, describes how oil leaked into the sea penetrates the skin and permeates the body until it enters the bloodstream and reaches the heart and brain, transforming the birds into tiny oil drums, genuine hybrids, who are the product of nature, but also of society. For Schwindt, objects or materials or, as here, non-human species, are never independent of human will and desire. As Marina Vishmidt has said, in a recent text on Schwindt's work, 'objects have no reality apart from the historical experience of domination and exploitation that renders the subject-object relation natural and legible.'

The installation opposite the text, *Figures Marching*, 2016, could refer to the metamorphosed birds, the *tiny oil drums*. These marching figures also appear as drawings elsewhere in the exhibition, acting as nodes in a network that links different narratives. The figures in this piece are marching, on a mission, although it is not clear to where, reflective of the capitalist obsession with progress and accumulation above all. Within the piece the contaminated birds figure the absence of morality within capitalist society. As the artist explains: 'Corporations have increasing control over the market, with less and less interference by the state or laws. Economic laws, which are supposed to protect society, are disappearing. They mutate into regulations, which corporations can freely interpret and often define. The epistemological distinction between market and society is being dissolved. Businesses make moral decisions on the basis of market logic and to guarantee maximum profit. Morality has been co-opted into the market, has become a commodity that is produced, distributed, and consumed.'

Throughout the exhibition multiple narratives and temporalities take shape, resulting from the confluence of elements, visitors and performers, and from the confrontation between history, religion and politics. These relationships also give rise to a number of subjectivities: birds are transformed into oil containers, bodies into mirror sculptures or, as occurs in *An Order of Things*, 2014, a flat image. On first glance this body is totally static but, on closer looking, small gestures are discerned, the result of the dancer being pushed to the limit of stillness. The image depicts a performance in which a woman is suspended in mid-air and a female magician leaves tracks in salt, which covers the floor. In this work Schwindt uses magic with a critical intention, to challenge the dominant forces and to refer to two of the

themes addressed throughout the exhibition: the fantasies of the invulnerable body and the invisible forces that maintain the status quo.

Magic hides the causes, its laws. It speaks of the search for other realities, of the inexplicable transformation, of the manipulation or emergence of the unexpected. A belief in magic confirms the desire for greater powers that offer the potential for protection, for freedom and immortality. The histories of opera, theatre and carnival are closely related to magic in their potential to subvert normal social roles (in which the king may play a beggar or a man a woman) but only, as with fairytale and myth, in order to reinforce the existing social systems and hierarchies. In Schwindt's work there is tension between the visible and the invisible – on the one hand spectres are sustained invisibly on stage and on the other elements of theatrical construction are revealed in the mechanics that keep the body in a state of levitation. Magic becomes material, like all the other elements in the exhibition, so that its false bottoms are revealed. At the same time Schwindt does not stop at conceptual deconstruction but presents the possibility of a different reality, one not determined by exclusion and violence. In this work, and throughout the exhibition, the artist seeks to transform the relationships of production, placing herself within the social processes in order to subvert them.

Agar Ledo and Gillian Park

On the artist

Grace Schwindt (born 1979, Germany; lives and works in London) studied photography at the University of Westminster and has a MA in Fine Arts at the Slade School of Fine Art, London. She now teaches at Goldsmiths University of London. Recent solo presentations include South London Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Whitechapel Gallery, London; Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; Wiels – Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, and White Columns (New York). In 2015, she had solo exhibitions at Tramway, Glasgow, UK; Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; and Site Gallery, Sheffield, UK; and had work included in the 14th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey, and Art Unlimited / Art Basel, Switzerland. Upcoming solo exhibitions this year will be presented at MARCO – Museum of Contemporary Art, Vigo and Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, Bath.

On the curators

Agar Ledo is Chief Curator at MARCO Vigo since 2006, where she has recently co-curated 'Port Authority', by Gintaras Didžiapetris and 'All Traditions Are Inventions', by Patricia Esquivias, as well as solo shows by artists Pedro Barateiro, Carlos Bunga or Jose Dávila. Together with the Museum's Director, Iñaki Martínez, she has curated 'Summer Folk' or 'Entering the Work', a cycle of exhibitions which analyses the condition of the public as an integral part of the artwork. As Chief Curator, she has directed and coordinated the exhibition projects at MARCO for almost a decade now. With a MA in Museum Studies, Agar Ledo has enjoyed training residencies at Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Norman, OK (USA), Le Consortium, Dijon (France) and Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon (France). Her career features exhibition spaces such as Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea (CGAC), Fundación Luis Seoane or the BIACS, International Biennial of Contemporary Art Seville (2004), where she worked as the Assistant Curator of the late Harald Szeemann. She regularly writes texts for specialised magazines and publications and has been teaching at the University of Santiago de Compostela (MA in Contemporary Art, Museology and Criticism, 2008-2012) where she is now completing her PHD.

Gillian Park is director of Pavilion, a visual arts organisation based in Leeds, UK. She has curated projects with a number of contemporary artists including Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Gintaras Didžiapetris, Celine Condorelli and Melvin Moti. Alongside this work she is undertaking doctoral research at Leeds University under the supervision of Prof Griselda Pollock, through which she is reviewing the history of Pavilion, which began in 1983 as Europe's first women's photography centre. She is particularly interested in the convergence of photography and the women's movement during this period as well as in feminist strategies of curating and art practice in the current moment.

Information & guided tours

The exhibition staff is available for any questions or information, as well as regular guided tours:

Daily at 6pm

'A la carte' group tours, please call +34 986 113900/11 to book

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FUNDACIÓN MARCO: Ayuntamiento de Vigo, Xunta de Galicia,

Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte

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