

Gallery folder

ON STAGE – All the Art World's a Stage

March 15, 2023 to January 7, 2024

Exhibitions in general offer stages on which artists can present their works, and thus form a vital part of their public presence and livelihood. Taking up this theme, the exhibition *ON STAGE* focuses on works produced since circa 1960—most of them from the mumok collection—that feature explicitly stage-like settings and theatrical role-playing.

Actions. Stages. Hierarchies.

A sea change swept through the art world around 1960 as artists began to flout conservative social norms by developing new forms of performative and actionist art that deviated considerably from traditional fine arts and theater, or even deliberately turned them on their head. Viennese Actionism was part of this new current, for example Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* and the works and manifestos of his fellow artists Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, as were the performances of the Vienna Group featuring H.C. Artmann, Gerhard Rühm, Konrad Bayer, Friedrich Achleitner, and Oswald Wiener. The group's *literary cabaret* drew on the tradition of Dadaist theater to experiment with language and playacting in a novel manner.

In opposition to the male-dominated art movements, a feminist scene emerged, with women artists standing up against patriarchal norms and employing the female body as a symbol of oppression and resistance. VALIE EXPORT, Marina Abramović, Gina Pane, and KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek) subjected themselves to sometimes painful procedures or used metaphorical images and actions to convey the fraught relationship between power and powerlessness.

Such stances laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of artists. Carola Dertnig, for example, addresses the exclusion of female protagonists in the orbit of Viennese Actionism, lending them an ear on an empty stage. The truth about Otto Muehl's authoritarian and in some cases criminal behavior in the commune that bore his name is brought to light by daughters and sons of the communards, who present themselves as the activist group MATHILDA. They expose the ostensibly open society of the commune as being in fact a closed system with the potential for violence. Paul McCarthy illustrates a similarly close kinship between blithe conviviality and brute force, between folklore and intolerance, in *Bavarian Kick*. On a stage-like platform, a mechanized couple wearing folk costumes approach each other, first clinking glasses and then kicking one another.

Body – Transformations

As a game of deception played with the environment and its objects, the search for identity sometimes leads to the metamorphosis or fusion of bodies and objects—for example when an action with an object culminates in the manifestation of the subject, or when objects take on human traits. Maria Lassnig's transformations of her own person on film are one example, as are her body-feeling paintings, in which she translates physical impacts on her body into colored forms shaped by emotions. In several drawings, she depicts herself transformed into armchair-like shapes. In Stefan Wewerka's work, armchair and self-portrait virtually fuse, made possible by a cut that bisects and foreshortens the photograph. Anna & Bernhard Blume show in their photographs furniture literally flying around their heads, which has the effect of changing the space between them and the objects into an indissoluble continuum that collapses in on itself. While Birgit Jürgensen's *Kitchen Apron* fuses woman and stove to express a feminist critique of traditional female roles, Markus Schinwald's photographs show intertwined and contorted bodyobject motifs that take on surreal theatrical traits. Jakob Lena Knebl's work interweaves art, design, and fashion to reflect on the fetishization of the body through fashionable accessories. The erotic component is made plain here by the work's title: *Emanuelle*.

Viewers as Actors

Works of art that only unfold their meaning through audience participation can become a stage for the viewers themselves—one on which the experience of the work and of the self are inextricably entwined. Here, participation is an artistically guided form of experiencing and utilizing the work. Upon entering the *Nikon Autofocus Trap* devised by Michael Schuster, the viewer is photographed and thus becomes part of the installation. The automatic camera turns the viewer into a motif that is able to simultaneously view and interpret the resulting work. Hartmut Skerbisch's *Untitled*, from the series: *Invocation of the Axis* is designed as a walk-through sculpture in whose velvety red center the perception of the object coincides with and intensifies the viewer's experience of self. Thomas Struth presents art-goers and their gazes as the actual motifs of his work. Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror works, by contrast, enable viewers to observe themselves as they look. In mirrors set up across the corner of the room, you can see yourself from different perspectives. In early photographic works by the artist group Gelatin (since 2005 Gelitin), we see piled-up furniture penetrated by connecting passageways. The pictures document an exhibition at the Galerie Kunstbüro in 1997 in which visitors could squeeze through this furniture arrangement—with immediate effects on their experience of space and of their body. The three large-format portrait photographs exhibited in the vestibule on the lowest level show random passers-by photographed by Braco Dimitrijevic. He prominently presented these images on a building façade in the center of Zagreb, giving anonymous people a public visibility that was otherwise reserved for politicians in communist Yugoslavia.

Gender Roles and Identity Games

In Wolfgang Tillmans's photographs, youth and pop culture with its club and gay scenes takes center stage. The artist—who is also a musician and political activist advocating for the social rights of marginalized groups and subcultures and battling against racism and homophobia—depicts his own surroundings in these party scenes and portraits.

Nan Goldin, too, draws on personal experience in her photos of the queer subculture, showing drag queens, trans people, and homosexuality and sometimes literally focusing on her protagonists' life on stage. The images oscillate between intimacy and violence, sensuality and existential threat—including the AIDS crisis, which Goldin documented very early on.

Gilbert & George denounce homophobia and philistine values in their gaudily provocative self-portraits, showing themselves as "Piss Heads" amidst ornamentally arranged excrement. The artist duo is committed to changing people rather than bolstering their pre-conceived notions.

"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died of AIDS in 1997, is a minimalist sculpture that becomes a stage when a go-go dancer performs. The dancer decides when to perform, listens to his own choice of music through headphones, and dances for himself—not for the audience. The preservation of autonomy and privacy as demonstrated here were central themes for Gonzalez-Torres in a contemporary environment pervaded by homophobia.

Ladies and Gentlemen (1975) is one of a series of pictures for which Andy Warhol for the first time used photographs he had taken himself. The drag queen Wilhelmina Ross plays the role of a laughing Josephine Baker, her true feminine essence revealed by how she transforms her appearance through make-up. The title of the work highlights the blurring of a heteronormative understanding of gender identity.

In her photographic oeuvre, Cindy Sherman steps into different roles in order to convey identity as something fragile and changeable. One of the springboards for her work was her experience of how the role models propagated by the film and media industries affect the real-life appearance and behavior of their consumers. At the same time, presenting ourselves as someone else demonstrates how our identities are formed and transformed through our exchanges with others.

Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian explores in her *Qajar Series* women's role in Iranian society. In old-fashioned-looking black-and-white photographs, she shows herself wearing traditional dress but accompanied by modern everyday objects that render palpable the tension and contradictions between tradition and the present day.

In *Personal Cuts*, Sanja Iveković successively cuts holes in a stocking she has pulled over her head, which makes her look like a terrorist. After each cut, a short film clip opens in which Yugoslav television extols after Tito's death the achievements of his communist regime. Iveković thus alludes here to her own socialization through the state-run media but at the same time to the propagandistic totalitarian rhetoric and imagery spread by such media as she carries out a gesture reminiscent of violence and terrorism.

Puppet Theater between World History and the Art Scene

Important figures and emblems in world history, arranged as if on a stage but with critical or ironic undertones, occupy their own thematic field. While Anna Boghigian uses the game of chess as a metaphorical stage for linking play and struggle, conducive to depicting the ambiguous nature of both historical and living figures in world and intellectual history, Emilia Rigová takes up the Statue of Liberty as a historical icon contributing to the American sense of identity, reinterpreting it in her work as a symbol of the Romani people. Aside from the Statue of Liberty, which in the wake of the Vietnam War was bound to seem implausible as an emblem of American cosmopolitanism, Öyvind Fahlström's green seesaw from 1968 touches on further issues on a turbulent world political stage, including the student revolts and the Cold War. Anna Artaker for her part uses photocopies of pictures of well-known figures as an "alphabet of persons" from which to compose her own self-portrait. She thus presents herself in the guise of others who—whether as positive or negative role models—were formative for her personality.

(Self-) portrayals of art scenes and their rituals she light on the role playing and hierarchies within the art world and art history. Jörg Immendorff, for example, portrays artists, collectors, and art professionals from the German art and painting scene, claiming that they represent a museum of modern art. The fact that the large-format painting is dominated by male figures becomes all the plainer when it is placed next to a painting by Katrin Plavčák that shows a variety of female personalities from the history of art and culture. DIE DAMEN (Ona B., Evelyne Egerer, Birgit Jürgenssen, Ingeborg Strobl) decry the male-dominated scene by pointing out the extent to which the withholding of the names of female artists stems from entrenched male habits. The art world is illuminated on film by Jeroen de Rijke / Willem de Rooij in a scenario showing the upper class engaging in small talk in which sexual, colonialist, and capitalist desires burst forth. The audience at an art opening is likewise the subject of a photograph by Oktavian Trautmannsdorff. Josef Dabernig deals in his film *Hypercrises* with the creative crisis of a writer who has retreated to an abandoned theater/cinema in which Dabernig's artist colleagues appear as performers. Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl appear in Scheirl's painting as self-promoters from the history of painting. Knebl's dress quotes the picture "Nocturne" by František Kupka, one of the first modernist abstract paintings. Schwarzkogler's art of (self-) staging is conveyed in a series of self-portraits exuding a dandyish attitude. For Hockney, the painting itself becomes a stage on which the artist peeks out from behind an open curtain.

In Concert

As artists turned away from traditional genres, they began experimenting around 1960 with new forms of musical performance. Some early examples can be found in the work of the Vienna Group: Friedrich Achleitner, H. C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener. These artists not only freed literature and music from linguistic and compositional conventions but also challenged the traditional separation between stage and auditorium, between producer and consumer of art.

Nam June Paik gave several experimental concerts with fellow artist Charlotte Moorman that blurred the boundaries between art forms. Often, all that remained behind assilent witnesses to these performances were the (destroyed) instruments, along with photographs and videos. In the late 1960s, Katalin Ladik created a new experimental, body-based form of poetry in what was then Yugoslavia by singing and performing the phonetic and visual facets of language. Mounting a pedestal and singing, the British artist duo Gilbert & George in turn presented themselves as *Living Sculptures*, a concept they still pursue today. This was tantamount to a literal swan song for an outdated sculptural ideal, replacing age-old canons with music, performance, and the use of the artist's own body.

The late 1960s—a period when Andy Warhol was making his silkscreen portrait series of Mick Jagger—provide the historical frame of reference for Mathias Poledna's 2003 film installation *Western Recording*. Poledna recreates here the recording of the song *City Live* by singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson in a legendary United Western Recorders studio. *Western Recording* demonstrates how the past can only ever be represented from the point of view of the present and will therefore always appear different to us. Heimo Zoernig likewise deals with the conditions for studio recordings in his project *Avoidance*, in collaboration with Marcus Geiger, Martin Guttmann, and Hans Weigand. A joint studio session resulted not only in the record *Avoidance* but also a video documenting only the preparations for the first recording, a process that is otherwise omitted from the final studio version.

In a nod to the hippie era, Cosima von Bonin created a disjointed stage landscape with spotlights, microphones, and stuffed animals for her installation *THE BONIN / OSWALD EMPIRE'S NOTHING #03 (CVB'S FATIGUE RAFT & MVO'S WHITE RABBIT SONG)*. The artist, known for her collaborations with musicians, has arranged a setting here that conveys fluctuating moods: fatigue, melancholy, but also a craving for high-spirited fun.

Casting. Shooting. Screening.

Many contemporary artists have incorporated in their work scenes reminiscent of the casting calls and auditions attended by actors of stage and screen. In Constanze Ruhm's film *La strada è (ancora) più lunga*, young women read aloud texts by Italian feminists from the 1970s to illustrate the topicality of their concerns. Rashid Masharawi instructs the protagonists in his video *Waiting*, who were cast in

Palestinian refugee camps, to act as though they were waiting. The hopeless situation of Palestinians in the Middle East conflict gives this work an explosive political charge. Postures adopted while waiting also provided the inspiration and content for Kurt Kren's film *TV*, which translates a chance observation from the window of a Venice café into a cinematic ordering system. Along with Kren, Ernst Schmidt Jr. is one of the experimental filmmakers who began in the 1960s to explore the principles behind the production and reception of films. His film *Schnippschnapp* deals with the physical cutting and mounting of film stock, an activity that is also reflected in a technoid painting by Carola Dertnig, who has appropriated painted remnants from Schmidt Jr.'s film.

In *The Casting*, Omer Fast links a US soldier's experiences in the Iraq War with a love affair he had while stationed in Germany. The film installation centers on the processes of rehearsing and producing the cinematic version of these personal memories.

The influence of television and the media industry on how we view our social reality is the subject of Keren Cytter's video *The Victim*. Shot in the artist's own apartment with her friends, the low-budget video deals with tension-fraught relationships and ends with the melodramatic suicide of one of the protagonists. Media fiction and reality merge as well in Jeff Wall's *Man with a Rifle*, inspired by the sight of a man imitating with his hands the gesture of shooting a gun. The artist recreated what he had observed in a photograph that is staged as elaborately as a theater piece, which he mounted in a light box.

Historical aspects of racism and colonialism and their persistence in our present day are illuminated in artworks that reference film and theater. Tracy Moffat's photo series *Something More* is about a young woman from the countryside who moves to the city to achieve "something more". Moffat points to the grim fate that lies behind these garishly colored, theatrically composed images in a real world still ruled by racism. In her black-and-white silhouettes, Kara Walker sheds light on the darker side of Black identity and history. *Freedom: A Fable* is the telling title of one of her books, which tells of abuse and exploitation. In her photographic works, Destiny Deacon plumbs the depths of entrenched racist stereotypes in images that are only whimsical at first glance. Another form of identity construct can be found in the ideals propagated by the Hollywood dream factory, embodied here by the colorful portrait sculptures *Liz Taylor* by Saskia De Boer and *Douglas Fairbanks Sr.* by Nicholas Monro. While Elizabeth Taylor appears here as a doll-like Madonna, the portrait of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. emphasizes the artificiality of the characters in Hollywood movies.

In their film *Black Bus Stop*, which is shown at the mumok kino, Kevin Jerome Everson and Claudrena N. Harold reference the storied spot on the University of Virginia campus that has been given that name. Black students have been meeting at the bus stop since the 1980s to lend expression to their collective history and cultural identity through music, song, and dance.

Stage – existential

The video by the artist Absalon, who died of AIDS the year he made it, shows him flailing around as if in a hopeless struggle against an invisible opponent. Whereas the artist's wild gestures are set in an empty white space, in Tom Burr's installation *Anxiety*, an abandoned stage with its props becomes the site of potential action, the overturned furniture a relic of an unknown drama of the past. According to Burr, the dynamics and temporality implied in the work qualify it as a performance. Zsuzsi Ujj turns her attention to fundamental questions of human existence, showing in her work her own naked body with a skeleton painted onto it in isolated or life-threatening spatial situations. In *Mirror and Pandora's Box*, Bruno Gironcoli creates a potential stage setting composed of objects made of materials that are obviously shabby and yet somehow opulent. With its references to Greek mythology, the space is charged with cult-like significance. The artist was inspired by the myth of Pandora, popular in literature and the theater, to portray the menacing side of seduction in a sculptural fashion, thereby addressing existential entanglements that are also evoked in some of his drawings. In Thomas Pils's painting *Night on Earth (the world is our stage!)*, the figures crowd onto a stage set under the stars, at the mercy of the nighttime cosmos. Here, earthly existence is like a theater play with assigned roles from which there is no escape. Ingeborg Strobl's *Hommage à Artaud* consists of a newspaper published on the occasion of a 2002 exhibition at mumok devoted to Antonin Artaud, along with some knickknacks placed atop it. In this way, she constructs a fragile "memorial" to the eccentric French playwright, actor, and theater revolutionary who advocated a "theater of cruelty" that also reflected his own sad fate.