

SUSANNE HOFER: *as it happens*

Solo exhibition

Art in the Trudelhaus, Baden

26 April until 23 June 2024

Exhibition tour in dialogue: Susanne Hofer in conversation with Bruno Z'Graggen, curator VIDEO WINDOW, Zurich

Bruno Z'Graggen (BZ)

The Trudelhaus is architecturally recognised as a unique and challenging exhibition venue for contemporary art. It is characterised by its tower-like structure, in which the floors and rooms are arranged one above the other and connected by stairs. There are no horizontal spatial cross-references and vistas, as it is normally the case with exhibition venues for contemporary art.

You got involved in this special place. And you have succeeded in presenting us with a wonderful and highly poetic exhibition with surprises on every floor.

What attracted and interested you artistically to realise a solo exhibition here?

Susanne Hofer (SH)

Basically, it is simply a gift for an artist to perform in an entire building. Furthermore, there are no uninteresting places for me, as it is an important part of my long-standing artistic practice to engage with a wide variety of situations and to work site-specifically. The more special the location, the more exciting the challenge for me.

On the one hand, I was interested in the location of the Trudelhaus, this steep slope with the view over the deep incision of the Limmat. On the other hand, I find the architecture you mentioned with the unusual stacked rooms inspiring. It pushed me to think conceptually and find solutions.

BZ

Can you please briefly describe the special vertical structure of the house?

SH

The Trudelhaus is located on the edge of Baden's old town. The exhibition space as it exists today was inserted into the historical building in 1969, as a kind of scaffolding construction in the shell. It is visually and acoustically permeable. You can see through a gap from top to bottom and hear the sounds from all floors. The public visits the exhibitions via a stairway.

BZ

How many storeys does the Trudelhaus have and where is the entrance?

SH

The initial question is a good one that is asked from time to time because of the hillside location and the lower access. For the current management of the Trudelhaus and my exhibition, it is at the top. The entrance and reception can be reached from the church in front via a narrow bridge and down three steps. This level forms the 'ground floor'; above it is a screed-like attic. Below the 'ground floor' is a '1st basement', followed by the '2nd basement'.

BZ

I would now like to ask you about your conceptual considerations for staging the exhibition and its sequences. Like theatre plays, literature and film, good exhibition concepts are based on a dramaturgy and narration, but with significant differences in the relationship between time, place and space. What are your thoughts on this?

SH

My video works and installations often have a local spatial and contextual reference. When you mention theatre, that fits very well. You've hit on something essential about my way of presentation, despite the differences between the two areas.

The idea behind my exhibition concept in the Trudelhaus is based on the idea of immersing oneself in a work of art. I would like to offer the public the opportunity to experience the tower-like house as an installation with stages on the floors. The 'acts' of the 'play' are staged simultaneously, not one after the other on the same stage as in a real conventional theatre. Here, the audience circulates vertically from act to act, as if on a parcours. At the same time, it knows that it can return to all the stages at any time, and must do so at the end.

In contrast to most exhibition venues, the movement of the audience and their immersion in the installation works is all the more consciously realised here, as people physically access them with a little effort via the staircase course.

The viewing directions are also important to me: first from the inside to the outside, out into the landscape; at the end, the view is directed in the opposite direction, from the outside to the inside, into the interior setting of the *Wohnmaschine* (living machine).

BZ

Was something particularly important for your dramaturgy?

SH

The aforementioned acoustic permeability in the building plays a central role in the dramaturgy, which I utilise in a targeted manner. Even on the ground floor, you can hear the sound of the *Wohnmaschine* on the 2nd floor as a rumble, to put it bluntly. These seemingly strange noises from underground inevitably create a certain restlessness and mysterious irritation throughout the building, even to the point of considerable disturbance, depending on the sensitivity of the audience. They generate an exciting curiosity in the visitors with a pull effect. The further you descend, the louder the noises become. The mystery is solved when you enter the last room. It is the only work in the exhibition that has sound.

BZ

Let's start the course here on the ground floor.

SH

The overture is *as it happens*. The work gives the exhibition its title and also contains its leitmotif. It is a projection, a two-part, spatially graduated video installation that extends from the floor to the ceiling.

The initial setting stems from considerations regarding the slope and storey structure of the building. After walking over the entrance bridge, I welcome the public head-on with a horizon motif and illusionistically direct the gaze of those entering back outwards towards the Limmat. We see a calm, wide sea horizon with a blue sky. On the one hand, the picture triggers longing. On the other hand, the tranquillity is unexpectedly interrupted from time to time by a towering wave full of white spray that seems to flood the room. The looped cycle inevitably involves the audience through the immersive character of the presentation.

BZ

At this point, the question arises as to the title setting with *as it happens*?

SH

The title contains a metaphorically deeper meaning. As I said, I also understand it as a leitmotif. Beyond the landscape motif, the scenery can also be read as a symbol of our lives: A cycle of calm, harmonious phases in which unpredictable events break in, developing an existential force similar to a force of nature and carrying countless adversities. On the one hand, we feel joy and contentment, on the other hand powerlessness and being at the mercy of events, *as it happens...*

BZ

In addition to the large video installation, two other videos can be seen. Can you please describe them briefly and explain the context?

SH

The three works are centred around the sea and the sea horizon and were created during my studio residency in Genoa in 2023.

The work to the left of the reception is called *Tramonto* (sunset). Here I was interested in the coincide of three levels of image and time. It shows a building in the harbour of Genoa in the evening light: the empty, dilapidated grain silo Hennebique as such, the poster filling the façade with the visualisation of the renovated building and the film-like projection of the natural play of light and shadow of the hustle and bustle of the harbour on it.

The video opposite is called *gaukeln*. The footage was shot in the Forte Monteratti above Genoa. It offers a magnificent view of the city and the sea, originally used for military defence. I walked the entire length of the building along the window openings. The foreshortening of the shots creates a swaying movement. The solid, centuries-old walled openings begin to dance and give the impression of theatre backdrops.

BZ

As it happens is a beamer projection, the other two videos are shown on flatscreens. What are the formal presentation considerations behind this?

SH

Spatial circumstances in particular led me to this setting. The focus is on *as it happens*. I could also imagine *Tramonto* as a beamer projection in a different context. The presentation forms of the works can vary. *Tramonto* and *gaukeln* function here like panel paintings and create an additional layer of meaning on the formal level, not least because of the flatscreen frames.

BZ

Besides painting, photography also comes to mind, doesn't it?

SH

Yes, people ask me about this in many of my works. They say they look like moving photography. I can understand that. I rarely move the camera when I take pictures. I usually observe a scene in a public space or in nature with a fixed camera setting. I am interested in the phenomena and small changes in reality that seem inconspicuous at first glance.

BZ

Let's move on to the other rooms. Why do you include the attic, which is not intended as an exhibition space, and what do we see there?

SH

A surprising effect here on the ground floor is that the installation can be walked through *as it happens*. It has an unexpected gap in the centre of the sea due to the layered spatial gradation. Curious visitors discover this, can disappear into it with an ironic effect and find the attic staircase.

The screeded attic is mainly used for storage. When I visited the house, it triggered my imagination of hidden treasures and secrets. Inspired by this, I really wanted to include this room in the exhibition. *On solid ground* works like a sublime little gem. The installation shows a circular section of Central Park in New York with people chilling on the grass from above. The scenery has a relief-like effect because it is projected onto scattered sparkling mounds of salt on the screed floor, which I have also done with sugar. It has the effect of an illusion and shows a paradiselike island of happiness full of harmony. The built-in loop stops time. At the same time, it has a melancholy fragility and dreamlike traits.

BZ

Now we move down towards the 1st floor. We walk through the ground floor towards the staircase that leads to the middle floor. On the side wall of *as it happens* we see the small-scale work *sea level*.

SH

Sea level consists of a total of 80 video stills with sea horizons that I filmed in and around Genoa at different times of day and in different weather conditions. The images show shots of the calm sea. I arranged them in such a way that the respective horizons continue into a long horizon line beyond the individual stills. The horizon lines are at different heights in the frames of the stills. This is why the merging of the images creates an undulating collage. We see a selection of the video stills here, the other one floor below. In both places, they lead like a red thread towards the staircase. The horizon here also corresponds to that of *as it happens*.

BZ

As we enter the centre room, we see the room-filling video installation *all tomorrow's parties*. How is this work constructed?

SH

All tomorrow's parties consists of a projection onto narrow strips of paper that are evenly distributed throughout the room, leading from the ceiling to the floor and creating a forest-like illusion. The staggered hanging means that the projection hits all the strips of paper and creates a shadow on the walls.

BZ

At first glance, it is difficult to recognise what is being projected. Only when you take your time does the picture reveal itself. What do we see?

SH

The takes show a construction fence. Scraps, torn-off adhesive tape and flyers referring to past parties and events are hanging on it. The fence is littered with them.

BZ

Where did you come across this construction fence?

SH

I discovered the fence at Alexanderplatz in Berlin. It presented an attractive picture for me as a whole. It was a sunny afternoon with a lot of wind. The pieces of ribbon and flyers fluttered strongly in the sunlight.

BZ

If you look at this paper forest, you can see that the strips are translucent and the projection can be read from both sides.

SH

The room we are in on the first floor is a passageway, accessible from two sides. It was important to me to create an installation that can be viewed from anywhere; you can carefully walk through the middle of the forest if you want to. Then the projection can also be seen on your own body. I involve the audience.

BZ

We also see a shadow cast on two sides of the wall.

SH

The picture is fanned out onto the hanging strips of paper, and at the same time onto the wall in strips. Stripes of image and shadow alternate on the wall. This creates a kaleidoscopic illusion of space. The

room also appears larger.

BZ

Finally, could you discuss the title *all tomorrow's parties*? What does it refer to?

SH

I am referring to the famous song title of the same name from 1966 by the cult band Velvet Underground with Lou Reed, John Cale and others, written by Reed and sung by the star singer Nico. The band was closely associated with Andy Warhol's Factory in New York. It is a melancholy song. It tells of the transience of beautiful moments. No sooner are these party flyers up than the parties are over again. Events are imminent and pass, *as it happens...*

BZ

Is there a version of the work in which the song can be heard?

SH

No, such a version does not exist. The installation has no sound. However, a great solo concert by jazz musician Marco Käppeli (dr/perc) took place here in the installation on 26 May.

BZ

As we pass the back wall, we see the second part of *sea level*, which, as above, again depicts the horizon line of the sea in a wave-like collage. Let's descend to the next level.

This consists of an arena-like atrium, semi-circularly stepped with three free-standing columns in the room. We see the installation *Wohnmaschine* (living machine) as a structure with cardboard boxes of different sizes onto which videos are projected. Can you please tell us about the idea behind the installation?

SH

The aim was to utilise this stepped atrium architecture and use used packaging boxes to create a stage-like setting that consists of this architecture and forms an interior situation. Each box surface simultaneously shows a short video of varying length, most of them with sound. The installation is intended to invite people to stay and observe.

As a whole, it refers to the concept of Le Corbusier's *Wohnmaschine*: an immense *unité d'habitation*, a modern type of house that brings many people together in one place and has a functional living space setting where hardly anything can break. Everything is different in my work. The installation caricatures Le Corbusier's concept with a great deal of irony.

BZ

What do we see on the projections?

SH

We see a precisely edited, assemblage-like sequence of different situations in terms of location and time, lasting a total of 15 minutes. These are looped shots of interiors, furnishings or views to the outside world. For example, there are fragments of places where I lived, of a condemned house and a former hotel. You can also see a lamp, various cleaning products and bottles that fall over and get up again, not forgetting the doors that have come off their hinges or a wash basin that falls down with a crash and quickly rises again. The built-in loops keep the actions going.

The overall picture appears to be a shrill interior panopticon with comical and surreal scenes. It seems as if a poltergeist were at work or the objects were actors. What happens in the living rooms during our absences? Does it really remain as quiet as we think?

BZ

The work lives strongly from the close connection between image and sound. Can you please tell us something about the significance of the sound?

SH

The sound is original sound everywhere. The sound coincides randomly because the individual videos are of different lengths. The result is a kind of cacophony. However, not all videos have sound.

BZ

In view of the many coincidences in the *Wohnmaschine*, would it be possible to return to the beginning at the end of the tour, to *as it happens*?

SH

Yes, absolutely. *As it happens* refers to events that we cannot influence. This idea is also present here. Most of the objects and places shown no longer exist and have had to make way for something new. It seems as if they have been washed away by a violent wave without leaving any traces or memories.

BZ

Thank you very much for the beautiful exhibition and the interesting tour.

Interview

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Editing: Bruno Z'Graggen

VIDEO WINDOW

VIDEO WINDOW is a nomadic platform aimed at discursively transmitting contemporary video art in Switzerland and abroad. This is done in different ways as single screenings, thematic series and programs or exhibitions accompanied by artist talks. The platform has been existing since 2012, led by Bruno Z'Graggen, Zurich (brunoZgraggen.ch).