

## ... of bread, wine, cars, security and peace



ADJI DIEYE's *Maggic Cube*, 2016–19, lambda print on aluminum and yellow wooden frame, 100 x 70 cm. Courtesy the artist.

What does it mean to live the good life? As ageless as it is protean, the question itself provided the starting point for Kunsthalle Wien's expansive exhibition "... of bread, wine, cars, security and peace," named after the metrics used by Lebanese writer Bilal Khbeiz in *Globalization and the Manufacture of Transient Events* (2003) to describe the unattainable dream of a "good life" for people in

the Global South in contrast to the West. The first show at the Kunsthalle under the artistic leadership of Ivet Ćurlin, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović from the curatorial collective What, How & for Whom/WHW, "of bread" conceptualized artistic practice as a means of reimagining moral, ecological, and scientific alternatives beyond the exploitative structures of contemporary capitalism.

Upon passing through the museum's entrance, above which glowed Tim Etchells's neon sign *songs about being free* (2020), one was immediately enveloped by the bold red and gold colors of Adji Dieye's photographic series *Maggic Cube* (2019), in which the bodies of African women are effectively colonized by the Swiss bouillon-cube manufacturer Maggi. Draped in garments emblazoned with the company's colors and logo, the women symbolize the cannibalizing of local culture by the corporate visual culture of this now-ubiquitous brand.

In one image, a white hand drawing the garment over a Black woman's face underscores the inescapable sense of self-estrangement stemming from the history of economic colonialism in West and Central Africa. It was no coincidence that the exhibition began in the museum's gift shop.

A sense of urgent contemporaneity persists in Tuan Andrew Nguyen's two-channel film installation *My Ailing Beliefs Can Cure Your Wretched Desires* (2017), where an unaverted focus on images of slaughtered animals accompanies a narrated dialogue between the spirits of the last Javan rhino and the Hoan Kiem turtle Cu Rua, drawing the viewer into the complex dialectic worlds of Vietnamese mythology and history. The artist's awareness of the ecological implications of human overconsumption and unfounded traditional beliefs in the medicinal powers of certain animals, which fuels the illegal trade of endangered species and hastens their extinction, feels especially prescient today. In the film, one spirit speaks of reincarnating as a virus so that it will bring sickness to humans.

Ascending the stairs to the second floor, among Dan Perjovschi's many site-specific wall drawings satirizing current affairs, one encountered a foam ladder by Vlatka Horvat. Entitled *Above Us Only the Sky* (2020), the ladder is suspended beyond reach, suggesting the impossibility of escape as we gaze upward. Elsewhere, Horvat's *Balance Beam* (2016), a constellation of found circular objects (for example, a roll of toilet paper, fruit, spools of thread, a camera lens, and marbles) delicately perched

along a wooden plank placed atop a series of chairs, speaks to the precarity of contemporary life, defined by everyday unpredictability, economic insecurity, and social alienation.

However, alternative visions of the world underlie much of the art on display. Marwa Arsanios's film *Who is Afraid of Ideology* (2017–19), for example, captures the interstitial lives of ecofeminist groups living in the mountainous borderlands of Kurdistan and the Bekaa valley near the Syrian border in Lebanon. Marked by a commitment to self-governance, ecological sustainability, and the reclamation of marginalized lands, groups of women narrate their own lives and landscapes. "This is called the 'Women Only' village," remarks one woman before continuing, "When women are autonomous they become equal to men."

There are, of course, pitfalls with large group exhibitions. Featuring over 35 participating artists and collectives as well as institutional collaborations, the bricolage of voices and visions overwhelmed at times and even seemed secondary to the larger social and political agenda of the curatorial collective, which evinced a certain didactic single-mindedness despite the obvious emphasis on collectivism. How well the Kunsthalle can navigate its commitment to artistic, curatorial, and institutional plurality with this quandary in mind remains an open question.

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