

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

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by Walter Seidl

In the nick of time, the now Vienna-based curatorial threesome What, How & for Whom (WHW)—Ivet Ćurlin, Nataša Ilić, and Sabina Sabolović—managed to open their first exhibition as new directors of kunstHalle wien in early March. After temporary closure, the show's title resonated in the minds of many, longing for a world of commons with a gestalt that might not easily resurface the way it used to be. WHW borrowed the title from the Lebanese author Bilal Khbeiz, who



Adji Dieye, from the project: Maggie Cube, 2016–19. Lamda print, 100 x 70 cm. Courtesy: the artist.

formulated this list of words as items constituting the elements of a “good life,” yet only for those living in the former West, which had begun to increase the divide toward the Global South. As an antithesis to global parameters for spatial positioning, the curators reacted to the given architectural conditions by presenting a polyphonic artistic narrative stretching from the outside of the building to the entrance level, up and down several floors, as well as to hallways, arcane areas, and to the second venue at Karlsplatz.

When revisiting the exhibition, the choice of works elucidates how many artists have anticipated multiple forms of crisis or hinted at the fact that our understanding of globalized endeavors shaping our lives was meant to be shattered a long time ago. The latter has been formulated by many activist groups in the wake of the global climate crisis over the past decades. Oliver Ressler's films, six of which are shown on the ground floor, mark a cornerstone with respect to the deeds of several of these groups. In the entrance area, next to the counter, one of his life-size figures from the series “New Model Army” (2016) shows a man wearing a white protective suit with a protective mask, who welcomes visitors as if to warn of the current pandemic. On the opposite corner wall, Adji Dieye confronts viewers with a photo installation referring to advertising tropes with regard to the international brand Maggi, which is still popular throughout Africa,

though its Swiss origins have long since been forgotten (“Maggie Cube,” 2016–19). The artist takes up the brand's overarching yellow and red aesthetic to exaggerate pictorial traditions and propose a photographic imagery associated with stereotypical depictions of women in her continent of origin.

The way to the main exhibition levels is patched by Mladen Stilinović's work “For Marie Antoinette '68” (2008), consisting of loaves of bread on the floor with small pieces of cake or cobblestone inserted on top, questioning how a ruling class is able to govern without having an understanding of the different social strata. This path also leads to Stilinović's well-known “Money Environment” from 1980, highlighting the significance of his work for WHW, which selected artists they have collaborated with over the years in order to reflect on their joint curatorial agenda. While several of Stilinović's significant works can be seen throughout the building, Milica Tomić wanted to reenact her 2009 performance “One Day, Instead of One Night, a Burst of Machine-Gun Fire Will Flash, If Light Cannot Come Otherwise,” walking through the streets of Belgrade with a machine gun while visiting sites of anti-Fascist struggle during the Second World War. As the Viennese magistrate prohibited the carrying of a fake Kalashnikov rifle in public, the artist decided to use a large-size, cropped photograph depicting the heads of state at the first Non-Aligned Movement conference held in Belgrade in 1961, which she held up in the air while walking through the city (“On Love Afterwards,” 2020). The whole process and this original attempt are documented with textual material and photographs, some of which are also spread across the building. At the same time, Dan Perjovschi occupies niches, corners, and interstices with his political, cynical, and humorous drawings commenting on globalized and social issues, among them the word “quarantine.” Tim Etchells's textual neon and LED messages equally lead viewers through the exhibition and already greet them outside with the phrase “Songs about Being Free,” which is positioned on top of the venue's entrance and new logo as a post-institutional form of assertion.

The political demesne is particularly probed by a variety of installations on the top floor, their bric-a-brac mentality literally expanded with a long table for children's workshops. Andreas Siekmann surprises with an array of forty-seven miniature Plasticine busts (“Heads,” 2019–20)



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With works by Marwa Arsanios, Zach Blas, Banu Cennetoglu, Alejandro Cesarco, Phil Collins, Melanie Ebenhoch, Forensic Architecture a.o.  
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Milica Tomić, from the project: On Love Afterwards, action, January 2020, Vienna. Photo: Srđan Veljović.

of historically important figures who have contributed to the economic and capitalist realm, displaying the already deceased in grayish-bluish hues and the still living protagonists in color. WHW's act of finding the right balance, also between artists from several continents and of different gender, is manifested in the center piece by Vlatka Horvat (“Balance Beam #0616,” 2016). A multiplicity of roundish objects is placed on a several-meter-long wooden beam with three parts, which is floating on the backs of chairs. The installation looks as if it might collapse any second, yet it holds in place while referring to the precarious working and living conditions of many, and this not only in the cultural field. Alice Creischer's take on neoliberal politics can be seen high up with four animal figures on stilts: wolf, hyena, bear, and jackal (“In the Stomach of the Predators,” 2012–14). It symbolizes, alongside a video installation, a fable of how global networks and corporations infiltrate the economy in their attempt at privatization. This installation parallels the one by Ines Doujak one floor below, featuring three figures relating to the 2019 Bolivian coup d'état eliminating president Evo Morales (“The Devil Travels,” 2020). One character represents Sigmund Freud, who, in this work, wants to experiment with cocaine as therapeutic method; the second, the lord of the underworld haunting the miners; and the third, an American colonel who is interested in privatizing mines. Grotesque suits ornamented with genitals or fringed with golden piranhas exaggerate the ambivalence of physical drives mingled with greed and exploitation. The results of such desires often lead to forms of destruction, as displayed next to it in Monika Grabuschnigg's “Crash (Simulation)” (2019–20). Departing from the material clay, she spread a variety of differently deformed wheel rims all over the floor, some leaning against walls and signifying an apocalypse moment reminiscent of a Terminator attack. The extraterrestrial component is also manifested in the film “IFO” (2017) by Kevin Jerome Everson, whose handheld camera shots remind of the black-and-white era of the 1950s to 1970s. They report on UFO sightings in Ohio, which are narrated from two contrasting perspectives: one reported in great detail by a female army officer and the other casually recounted with poetic gestures by fellow African Americans. The furthest look into the fu-

ture is taken by Zach Blas in his video installation “Contra-Internet” (2018), which focuses on Ayn Rand's writings and sees the execution of tech CEOs in a sexually fluid utopian universe. Thus, WHW have succeeded in spanning a time frame that asks questions beyond the here and now, while presenting a canon of critically committed artistic practices. At the same time, they offer a prospective outlook on issues that will be tackled in future exhibitions.

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