…of bread, wine, cars, security and peace

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by Walter Seidl

In the nick of time, the new Vienna-based curatorial threesome What,How & for Whom (WHW) — Jvet Curlin, Natalia Išić, 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 gaze that might not easily reassure face the way it used to be. WHW borrowed the title from the Lebanese author Bilal Kittelz, who 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 propagate photographic imagery associated with stereotypical depictions of women in her continent of origin.

The way to the main exhibition levels is patched by Milana Sustižnić’s work “For Marie Azenineke “58” (2008), consisting of loaves of bread on the floor with small pieces of cake or cobblestones 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 1989, 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 revisit her 2009 performance “One Day, Instead of One Night, a Bunch of Flowers Will Pull Out Your Life’s Thread 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, creped 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 by 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 “quantum.” Tim Etchells’s sexualised 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 dimension is particularly probed by a variety of installations on the top floor, their brick-a-brac mentality literally expanded with a long table for children’s workshops. Andreas Siekmann surprises with an array of forty-seven miniature Plastelene boats (“Heads,” 2019-20). With contributions by Kader Attia and Ana Teixeira Pinto, Alice Creischer, Inés Doujak and Barker, Bilal Kittelz, Marlene Steuerwitz, What, How & for Whom, Sylvias Fufucalis Whitman o.a. (eng./ger.) With works by Marwa Amrouni, Zach Blas, Bianu Cesamăţiu, Alejandro Cesarco, Phil Collins, Melanie Eberholtz, Font Ritter Architects a.o.

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of historically important figures who have contributed to the development of the economy and society. Displaying the already decreased in grayish-bleached lives and the still living protagonists in color, WHW is set of finding the right balance, also between artists from several continents and of different gender, is manifested in the center piece by Viola Horvat (“Balance Beam #0616,” 2016). A multiplicity of redundant 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, leaning three figures relating to the 2019 Bolivian coup d’état eliminating president Evo Morales (“The Devil Travels,” 2020). One character represents Sigmani Prenal, 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 pendants 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 Montika Grabasik’s “Crawl (Simulation)” (2019-20). Departing from the material clay, she spread a variety of differently deformed wheels rim all over the floor, some leaning against walls and signaling an apocalypse moment reminiscent of a Terminator attack. The extraterrestrial component is also manifested in the film “FF” (2017) by Kevin Jerome Everson, whose handheld camera shots remind of the black-and-white era of the 1950’s to 1970’s. They show the director’s encounters in Ohio, which are narrated from two contrasting perspectives: one reported in great detail by a female army officer and the other completely recounted with poetic gestures by fellow African Americans. The furthest look into the future is taken by Zach Blas in his video installation “Contra-Internet” (2018), which focuses on Ayn Rand’s writings and 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 canvas of critically commited artistic practices. At the same time, they offer a prospective outlook on issues that will be tackled in future exhibitions.

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