

fffriedrich gallery in Frankfurt: An exhibition in three acts

VON LUISA DEL PRETE · VERÖFFENTLICHT 08/09/2020 · AKTUALISIERT 15/04/2021

How do curatorial practice and artworks influence how we perceive what we see? Can they work together to form new ways of exhibiting? The group exhibition side by side, which took place in the fffriedrich gallery in Frankfurt explores this notion of collaboration.

The Protagonists:

The Artists: Lydia Ericsson Wärn, Maryna Makarenko, Nicholas Grafia and Mikołaj Sobczak

The Curators: Louisa Behr, Anna Holms and Sofia Steffens

The Space:

A gallery in the center of Frankfurt, small scale, with white walls and a grey linoleum floor. A huge rectangular window dominates the wall that faces the sidewalk.

Act One: Lydia Ericsson Wärn

Friday evening. Summer has clogged the city. The cement emitting heat that numbs my body and makes it heavy. I approach the gallery space. Louisa, Anna and Sofia are sitting outside on little plastic stools. They seem a bit dazed too. We make small talk about the exhibition, about what's going on, a little bit about ourselves. Then it's time.

I enter the room, welcoming the sudden dip in temperature. The cool white walls blunt the heat from outside. I notice three paintings hanging from various locations. One horizontal, one vertical, and one that does not fit into a standard geometric form. A grey Y-shaped carpet cuts across the floor. I take in the overall feeling: the different colors, forms, images, the bright neon light shining from above. I see bodies, but none are in full scale. The painting titled *All the days in a working day* leaves me guessing which body parts are shown: the inside of thighs clothed in purple shorts? Two bodies almost touching? Space makes no sense, as it is also altered by the round clock drawn on the surface. The frame not aiming to be symmetrical, or even harmonious, lifting from the wall in sharp edges. It confuses me while at the same time making me smile, just because I've got nothing to compare it to. No anchor point, no information, only time between two thighs.



All the days in a working day – Lydia Ericsson Wärn
(2020), Öl, Acryl, Leinwand, Foamboard,
Installationsansicht, Foto: Ivan Murzin

I wander to the huge window that looks out on the sidewalk. The left corner is partly concealed by another painting that hangs vertically from the wall. A woman – naked – holding a pose that could be described as upright crawling. Her hands push an imaginary wall, one knee tucked in the air, she stands on one foot. It's as if the body is morphing through space, some parts of it clearly contoured, some nebulously wafting in the air. I put the puzzle pieces together that make up her whole form, but she still refuses to make logical, form-related sense. The same sense of unbalance arises when I try to form an overall impression.

But not only through the depiction and framing, but also through a curatorial intervention in the room. The display of the painting – called *Commuter* – is not placed in the center of the gallery space. Hanging from the left corner of the window, facing the inside of the room it refuses the exhibitionist practice of seeing art works



Lydia Ericsson Wärn, Commuter, 2020, Öl auf Leinwand,

Installationsansicht, Foto: Ivan Murzin

put on a pedestal for everyone to consume. Passersby would only have a glimpse of its backside. By obscuring not just parts of her body, but also withholding from pillorying it, the voyeurism – deeply connected to the female body – is thwarted.

In this sense, the artworks and curatorial practice resemble each other. The room(s) are taken into perspective, every inch scrutinized, to leave me with the notion that concepts of space, either bound to the typical white cube or the simple picture plane, can be reimagined and transformed.

Act Two: Maryna Makarenko

I make my way to the gallery again, for part two of the group exhibition. It's Sunday and people are strolling through the city, maybe as tourists, maybe just as legs in need of walking. The heat hasn't abated. It still penetrates every pore of my body. The same crowd has gathered in front of the space with the addition of Maryna, whose artwork is on display today. She sits on one of the stools sporting bright purple Camper shoes that – though heeled – look very comfortable. After a quick chat I enter the room. Its walls shadowed, and with the window covered so as to let the video work gain more clearance. I look down on the flyer to read the work title: *Jellyfish*, a performance movie Maryna produced in 2017.

The first thing I notice is the water, the grey-bluish color palette which resonates through the film. People wading, floating, dancing through an inside pool, all clothed. Shots of neon pink light cut through the scene, bursting through the dark color scheme. The water offers no resistance to the movements of bodies. They slide through it, sometimes in pairs, tenderly touching or helping each other to float, sometimes aimlessly drifting by themselves. Wafting waves of sound play in the



Maryna Makarenko, Jellyfish, 2017, video, Installationsansicht, Foto: Ivan Murzin

background, fluid music that evokes the vibration of singing bowls. I sit down to take it in. A calming effect sets in, supported by the voices talking. The cut changes and a single person stands upright in the water basin with their wet clothing clinging to their body. Eyes fixed on a point outside of the frame. Snatches of words conveying personal experiences and insights to gender and concepts of identity.

The scene changes and again shows the drifting of bodies through calm waters. I hear voices coming from the speakers, smoothly arguing that loosening the constrictive roles and attributions would contribute to a space in which there is less violence. I hear discussions about the possibilities of fluid personas, ever changing between and outside the binary notions of gender. I hear voices pronouncing the radicality of love, of being held and acknowledged as multifaceted human beings. Images of utopia spark in my mind, my own limitations are delineated more clearly. Which restrictions does insistence on dualism uphold? How would relationships – to yourself and to others – look if we were not held hostage by our personalities and duties? Can we exist between both shores, floating through the deep like jellyfish, diaphanous and electrified?

Act Three: Nicholas Grafia and Mikołaj Sobczak

Today is the finale of the three-part exhibition, finishing off with the works of Nicholas Grafia and Mikołaj Sobczak. From afar I see a group of people gathered in front of the

gallery. Coming nearer I notice it's not only the visitors and participants who have set up outside, but also the display of the work. A screen is put up in front of the window, showing a performance piece of the two artists which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2018.



*Nicholas Grafia & Mikołaj Sobczak, The Accursed Ones, 2018, Performance
Dokumentation, Installationsansicht, Foto: Ivan Murzin*

The Accursed Ones is conceptualized as a split screen video, showing different angles of the same room lit by a cold blue light. It's a lot to take in, at times it's dizzying to keep track of

what is happening. Three performers rush through the room in a kind of frenzy. Their interactions are livid, loaded with strong gestures thrust at the spectators. It seems as if they are performing a kind of religious cleansing, pushing a stone as if working with a Ouija board, using an egg to pace the body of one of the actors in a kind of palm healing motion. Their speech emphasizes this notion. I hear them talk of priests and psychiatrists declaring homosexuality a mental sickness, or spells uttered in repetition. Throughout the video the movements become more hectic, the speech louder and sharper. In a sense, it reminds me of horror movies, in which the protagonists are possessed by demons that have to be exorcised by clerics or healers. Except in this case, there is no final expulsion of evil. On the contrary, it is acknowledged and integrated into the concept of self. "We are not humans," one of the performers says. "We are zombies." A phrase that gains even more significance in current times, when the president of Poland Andrzej Duda declares homosexuality as an ideology and homosexuals as not human¹ In a way, this mode of appropriation takes this debasement to show the strength that comes from adapting to a society built on the elimination of one's identity, the agency that arises from being silenced.

I get a glimpse of blue drawings hanging from the wall inside the room, partly concealed by the monitor. They work as a visual study – together with text-based research – forming a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Painting, drawing, reading, theatre and performance play into the mode of their collaborative art production, opening the barriers of conventional professionalization in art practice. But not only is the question of media scrutinized, also modes of knowledge production are held for account. In his drawing *The Library of Hate*, Grafia portrays the accumulation of knowledge through a library containing allegedly established theories and literature. The people standing in the foreground of the picture function as gatekeepers, overlooking the organization and structure of a room filled with books that make up society.

They get to say what is to be included, what excluded, therefore reflecting the




Nicholas Grafia, fünf Zeichnungen, Tinte auf Papier, Installationsansicht, Foto: Ivan Murzin

development of an educational canon and its fixation on a singular viewpoint. I have always believed that there are few things that can be rendered as objective, and that in most cases knowledge comes from personal and cultural background. However, western thought has often professed to hold an objective standpoint, thereby blocking access to other forms of knowledge. From this vantage point the assertion of objectivity reveals itself an instrument of power, that works in favor of a Eurocentric monopoly. Nicholas and Mikołaj counter this notion through an inclusion and amalgamation of their heritage. Owing to the possibilities of performance, Polish and Philippine teachings or sayings are communicated through dialogue, often varying in

language to show the myriad of conscious or unconscious viewpoints structuring knowledge. There is no hierarchy of knowledge, no diminishment of it on the base of it being a “superstition.” Moreover, in a way Nicholas’ and Mikołaj’s art practice shakes the fundamentals of the conventional, westernized way model of thought to produce an authentic expression of our world.

Although the curatorial decision to put the monitor outside obscures parts of the other artworks on display, it does not deny the access to it. On the contrary, by moving the exhibition outside it pries open the White Cube, enabling a fortuitous look inside. The issue of opening seems to be a general theme, pervading the exhibition. It is not only interventions in the artworks themselves, which break open the walls of the conventional and assumed, but also the way of showing it that questions the conventional and triggers a “thinking outside the box.” I’ve always believed that art and its rendition can shed light on what is concealed, that in a way it works as a text that spells out its context, but I have also come to think that it paves the way for creating new contexts in the sense of educating, of making you think in new mindsets that cannot be taught in books and teachings. The artists shown, as well as the curators, seem to me to participate in this process by simply offering new approaches and exposing what tends to be obscured.

The group exhibition *side by side* took place in the fffriedrich in Frankfurt from 24 July to 27 July. It showed artworks by Lydia Ericsson Wärn, Maryna Makarenko, Nicholas Grafia and Mikołaj Sobczak and was curated by Louisa Behr, Anna Holms and Sofia Steffens.

1. https://www.queer.de/detail.php?article_id=36330, 28.08.2020 []



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