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Helmhaus Zürich

13 February to 12 April 2015

hiStories – Geschichte in Geschichten

History is everywhere: whether in the jubilees being celebrated – and talked about – this year in Switzerland, or in the dramatic events unfolding across the world that are already being described as epochal. All of which goes to show that this is not yet, as was claimed twenty years ago, the end of history. Helmhaus Zürich brings together fourteen young Swiss artists, who are all making history – and telling stories – in their work. By exploring, narrating and documenting.

With Annette Amberg, Françoise Caraco, Goran Galić/Gian-Reto Gredig, Julia Geröcs, Daniela Gugg, Hemauer/Keller, Nicole Hoesli, Gabriela Löffel, Nele Stecher, Stefan Sulzer, Riikka Tauriainen, Tim Zulauf

This year, Switzerland is commemorating the Battle of Morgarten, 700 years ago, and the Battle of Marignano 500 years ago. Yet little more than 20 years ago, in 1992, political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed “the end of history”. Following the dramatic upheavals of the twentieth century, he surmised that the twenty-first century world would embrace the democratic Western capitalist system – and that it would do so without resistance. Yet movements such as Occupy have made it patently obvious that this neoliberal reality is not necessarily the wish of the majority, that post-history is in itself pre-history, and that the much-vaunted “end of history” primarily benefits the (in)famous 1%. Instead, what we are experiencing today is actually the end of post-history (whereas at the University of Zurich, the proclamation of the “end of Swiss history” refers first and foremost to the course content).

History is being made once again – only this time it is being made on Wall Street, in Hong Kong and on the squares and places of the Arab Spring, as well as in art. Many an exhibition, both at home and abroad, addresses this theme, which is also echoed in the praxis of individual artists. In Switzerland, especially, which stands out not so much for its historical awareness as for its lack of historical consciousness, many artists are “making history” by all manner of artistic means. Some are dredging up forgotten and repressed events, others analysing our historical awareness, still others revealing the identities of narrators – whilst all at the same time telling their own stories.

The Helmhaus exhibition *hiStories* brings together 14 artists, some of whom have created works specifically for this event. In doing so, they are writing themselves into history – and at times even rewriting it. Their approach is a highly reflective one. After all, they belong to a younger generation drawing not only on personal recollection, but also on various collective memories, without so much as a glance at the dates 1315, 1515 and 1815, which have made 2015 such a super-jubilee year. Historian Howard Zinn notes in his book *A People's History of the United States* that “We must not accept the memory of states as our own”. A

statement like this can lead, in the worst-case scenario, to revisionism – but in the best case it leads to good art.

The field of operation for the artists participating in the *hiStories* exhibition is not so much a geographically specific one, still less some historical battlefield of competing jubilees. Instead, it is a spectrum that embraces the very notion of history itself. Whereas, in the English language, a distinction is made between “history” as the overarching description of past events, and “story” in the sense of any narrative – be it fact or fiction, past or present – the German language has only one word for both; for history and narrative, fact and fiction, written and oral. Artistic licence, beholden to no scholarly authority, allows the artists in this exhibition to move freely within this contextual field.

Historiography as Narrative

Nele Stecher explores the biographies of people whose parents were Nazi perpetrators, actively charting their biographies in an area rarely addressed by historians, thereby shedding a light on little-known episodes and, with that, on some of the quirks of historiography. **Goran Galić/Gian-Reto Gredig** have followed and documented a number of city tours, creating a multi-channel video work that gives examples of oral history – some of them condensed to the point of the rhetorical. **Tim Zulauf** uses various media to construct a *Bau der Wörter* – a building of words – as evidenced by the title of his 2010 piece, first performed in 2010 in the Seebach district of Zurich, and shown here for the first time as a video work.

Françoise Caraco returns time and again to her own family history. For this exhibition, she undertook research in Paris about her grandfather and, in the process, was even able to add to a public archive with the material she had gathered. History, after all, is always our own history. **Daniela Gugg** has also spent several years looking at the life of her grandfather, who is now 100 years old – himself a living jubilee. **Stefan Sulzer**, on the other hand, does not go quite so far on the family tree, turning instead to his father in addressing more recent topics such as the economic crises of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Fictitious sceneries and historical buildings

Fiction can be created not only through language. **Gabriela Löffel** deploys images of backdrops from the Babelsberg film studio to illustrate the oral report of a Swiss citizen on holiday in Afghanistan at the time when Bin Laden was killed.

Nicole Hoesli, by contrast, has infiltrated recent pop and film history in several of her works by, for example, taking on the persona of pop starlet Sandra in reconstructed photo-shoots. Here, she takes a quantum leap back in history and re-invents not only the Villa Borghese but also the Homeric myth of Circe.

Talking of which, the Helmhaus has its own mythology: in AD 302, i.e. years 1713 ago, it is said that Felix and Regula were executed where the so-called Wasserkirche (or “Water Church”) now stands. **Annette Amberg** prompts us to consider what has happened since and how the world might look in the next 1713 years. **Hemauer/Keller**, recently awarded a sabbatical year by the City of Zurich, let the building express itself through a very special medium: they had it spiritually cleansed and then asked the person who undertook that ritual to describe the various invisible layers of the building.

Anal History?

“Is kitsch the absolute negation of shit?” This is the question posed by performance artist **Julia Geröcs** in a work presented on 26 March in which she makes reference to Czech writer Milan Kundera. Whereas Geröcs works with live narrative, **Riikka Tauriainen** complements her large-scale installation as part of the exhibition on 5 March with a reading

performance. This Finnish-born artist explores the potential of artistic strategies in the field of historiography and archival work, and in doing so confronts the question of why so many artists today are taking over what has traditionally been the preserve of historians.

One possible answer: art can afford to tell the stories that nobody else will tell because they fall between the stools of history, which is a specialist scholarly field, and myth, which tends to be reserved to literature – in short, somewhere between history and story. In recent years, artists have continuously built up an instrumentarium based to no small extent on the Internet, in order to tell these stories and histories in a variety of language-oriented and visually-oriented media. As, for example, in this Helmhaus exhibition, which quite literally makes history. The end of history has yet to be narrated.

Events

History is the sum of collected stories. In order to pay full tribute to this diversity without simply reiterating new definitions, the exhibition has opened up a space for collective, temporary and oral presentations. Every Thursday from 19 February to 9 April at 6.30 p.m. there will be a series of **Performances and Conversations** with artists and experts. For instance, internationally renowned architect Roger Diener will talk to artist Françoise Caraco about the (non)sense of memorials (2 April). Theatre group Teatro Matto will give a performance based on a project by the artist Marina Belobrovaja addressing the notion of a supposed Jewish DNA (12 March, 8 p.m.; see enclosed invitation card for details).

In the **5 o'clock theses** series, curator Daniel Morgenthaler joins Roger M. Buerger, director of the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich, to discuss the fictional aspects of history (25 February). A conversation with historian Erich Keller addresses the thesis that the end of history has yet to be narrated (25 March).

There will also be two **concerts**. The Doomenfels group presents enigmatic lyrics in local dialect combined with unique sounds (11 March). Author Melinda Nadj Abonji takes the stage with musicians Balts Nill and Mich Gerber to underscore the impact of poetic narrative through contemplative music (1 April).

As usual, Helmhaus is offering **guided tours** for adults outlining the exhibition's core topics, while at the same time providing **workshops** for children under the supervision of a trained kindergarten teacher who will introduce some of the artworks in an age-appropriately playful way.