

Helmhaus Zürich

9 December 2016 to 5 February 2017

Beyond Every Mountain Is Another Mountain

A Meeting of Contemporary Art from China and Switzerland

With: 9mouth, Luciano Castelli, Louisa Gagliardi, Gregory Hari, Hu Jieming, Hu Weiyei, Chantal Kaufmann, Tan Ping, Tian Xiaolei, U5

Contemporary Chinese art can be seen almost everywhere these days. Yet the affinities and differences between the contemporary art of China and Switzerland have rarely been addressed concisely. Helmhaus is now hosting a meeting of five Chinese and five Swiss artists from different generations whose remarkable works, created specially for this exhibition, present a veritable fireworks of innovation inspired by East and West, complemented by a sparkling array of independent films from China showing at the Filmpodium in early 2017.

China and Switzerland have in common a landscape of many mountains, through which viewpoints and perspectives are constantly changing and being relativised. Every overview is blocked by the next peak. And so it goes in the Helmhaus exhibition, too: distinctive artistic positions from East and West provoke thoughts on connections, differences and overlaps. The field that eventually emerges is wider and more far-sighted than any expected polarisation: China is reflected in Switzerland – and Switzerland in China.

The starting point for this journey was an encounter between the two renowned artists Tan Ping and Luciano Castelli at exhibitions in the National Museum in Beijing (2015) and at the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Institute (2016). On the initiative of Chinese curator Huang Mei, the two shared a veritable cultural hotpot, delving into the abstract painting of the Chinese artist and figurative painting of the Swiss artist – quite the opposite of what one might expect. Tan Ping, who studied art in Berlin, works against the backdrop of Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy. Luciano Castelli was a leading figure in the Neue Wilde movement, creating strident gender-relativising performances, films and music, with an early nod to *chinoiserie*, and is now reinventing himself by looking back (among other things) on his early work and remixing it. Tan Ping's abstract painting is rooted in European and American tradition, and yet at the same time it is primordially Asian: in its distinctive handling of colour and in the impulsive yet controlled combination of painting and drawing. Both work in large formats – and on the first floor of Helmhaus Zürich, as in Shanghai, both also work directly on the wall. Each one individually, and sometimes together.

Animated History, Painful Present

These two very different masters of their respective craft – the Chinese artist reflective and existential, the Swiss artist vibrant and provocative – meet here in Switzerland for the first time since their highly lauded exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai. The dynamic of their encounter inspired Helmhaus curators Simon Maurer and Daniel Morgenthaler to broaden this dialogue by including a number of other exemplary artists from China and Switzerland. For the most part, they represent a young and, indeed, by European standards very young generation – drawing upon the repertoire of curator Li Zhenhua, who has introduced a second young wave of Chinese contemporary art to the international art scene. The two Swiss curators visited them and others on the bustling fringes of the megacities of Shanghai and Beijing. Now they are here. With the exception of Tan Ping and Hu Jieming, China's pioneer of New Media, they are in Switzerland for the very first time, bringing new works created specifically for this exhibition.

In thrall to animation, Tian Xiaolei from Beijing has created nothing less than the future on the second floor of Helmhaus: the melding of human and machine, with reality as a space full of potential, evokes prosthetic paradises that are as seductive as they are repulsive. Zurich-based artists' collective U5 creates analogue counterparts: blended installations that mix archaic materials and cutting-edge medical technology – and performances that quite literally embrace the audience. Louisa Gagliardi, who grew up in Valais, uses digital aids to create seemingly classical painterly bodies pierced by pieces of contemporary jewellery, while Chantal Kaufmann from Zurich zooms in painfully close to her own reality in film and language – but deploys a tone so universal that her diagnoses could apply just as easily in China.

In another room the New Media pioneer Hu Jieming collaborates for the first time with his son Hu Weiyi. Both have developed their own strategies for the animation of history, based at times on the digital reanimation of vintage photographs and based at other times on richly detailed installations in which public figures from widely varying eras are brought together. Young photographer 9mouth takes a far more intimate approach, presenting an artist's book created specially for the exhibition. As the biographer of a new generation of women in China, 9mouth achieves unusually open-hearted images that revolve around self-staging – which, in turn, closes the circle to Luciano Castelli's theatrical early photographic work on the first floor of Helmhaus Zürich.

Events, Performances

The wide-ranging programme of events accompanying the exhibition gets off to a gentle start with a guided tour on the Sunday before the official opening aimed at enabling a direct encounter with all the Chinese artists involved – as well as providing a unique insight into work of mounting an exhibition (*Vor-Sicht*, Sun 4 December 2016, 4 p.m.). Also prior to the opening, the Chinese band ST.OL.EN give their European debut concert (EXIL, Tue 6 December 2016, 8.30 p.m.). Helmhaus reaches out with other events as well: shortly before Christmas, a Brain Stimulation Conference will be held in the studio of U5 in Zurich's up-and-coming creative hub Altstetten (Thu 22 December 2016, 8 p.m.). And from mid-December to mid-February, Zurich's Filmpodium will be screening independent films from China and holding talks with Chinese filmmakers.

3/3

As ever, Helmhaus will host all the usual discussions and tours, including a tour with Luciano Castelli (Sun 8 January 2017, 11 a.m.): in the series Welcome to the Problem Zone! co-curators Li Zhenhua and Michael Vonplon speak about their experiences of Sino-Swiss cooperation (Thu 12 January 2017, 6.30 p.m.). The two 5 o'clock Theses will explore the role of graphic design in exhibitions, with renowned graphic designer Jonas Vögeli (Wed 21 December 2016, 5 p.m.), and discuss the phenomenon of copying in Chinese and Swiss art with artist Jiajia Zhang (Wed 18 January 2017, 5 p.m.).

Towards the end of the exhibition, Zurich-based artist Gregory Hari presents a highlight of performance art. His Long-Term Performance in 4 Acts, in collaboration with jazz musician Tapiwa Svosve, will bring the entire Helmhaus alive with music, song and language.

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The exhibition Beyond Every Mountain Is Another Mountain – A Meeting of Contemporary Art from China and Switzerland is a collaboration with the National Museum in Beijing, the Shanghai Oil Painting and Sculpture Institute, the Filmpodium in Zurich, the Club EXIL and miro china, a Swiss platform for cultural exchanges between China and Switzerland. The project is sponsored by Hotel Baur au Lac and Carl F. Bucherer.