

Helmhaus Zürich

11 May – 1 July 2012

### **San Keller** **Spoken Work**

**San Keller (born 1971 in Berne) is one of Switzerland's best known artists, and perhaps the most talkative. Dialogue is at the very heart of his approach. There is little in the way of conversation – from sales pitch to judicial interrogation – that this conceptual and performance artist has not channelled. *Spoken Work*, Keller's first solo exhibition in a Zurich institution, recognises the verbal character of his prodigious oeuvre. And yet, as the new works in this exhibition show, the artist doesn't always get the last word. Indeed, his many different partners in conversation are the ones whose voices are heard.**

San Keller is well known to the wider public as what might be termed a "service artist". He has quite literally slept on the job on behalf of employees – as he did, for instance, under the news anchors' desk of the *10 vor 10* current affairs television programme – and has even carried visitors up the stairs at Kunsthau Zürich. In the past ten years, Keller has moved significantly forward, climbing the social ladder, so to speak, from "service artist" to "delegating artist". Keller does not position himself as a performer at the centre of his work. Instead, his art increasingly consists in defining a clearly specified focal point to which his project partners can respond actively. Whereas his earlier works bore such titles as *San Keller Carries You Up To Art*, the artist's name has now disappeared from the titles of his work.

For the 2009 photo series *Cuckoo (At Work)*, Keller had photographs taken of himself intervening in the works of fellow artists in their own studios – thereby undermining the often overwrought fetishisation of individual authorship and the "hand of the artist". In November 2011, by contrast, he invited artists to staff a stand he had rented at Zurich's vocational trade fair and pitch the craft of the artist to the public.

### **The Craft of the Artist as a Model for the Future?**

As a result such artists as Christian Vetter from Zurich and Pedro Wirz from Basel found themselves on a par with such down-to-earth trades as gardeners or bakers, whilst fielding often loaded questions from almost every senior school pupil in the local canton. The image of the artist, in this context, was not merely a curiosity, but a possible model for the future. In a climate in which traditional trades are losing their status in our predominantly knowledge-based society, art offers a career in which craftsmanship is not only esteemed, but also fetches high prices. Moreover, it permits a free and critical approach to unusual materials: San Keller's own working material, for instance, is dialogue. His work is relational – quite literally a relational aesthetic of the kind that became popular in the socially oriented works of artists in the 1990s – and his medium is the individual.

The group of works known as *Der Beruf des bildenden Künstlers* may be seen as a model for Keller's approach: he seized the opportunity of using the invitations to his solo exhibition in November 2011 as an occasion to invite his fellow artists to the vocational trade fair – a prologue to the exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich curated by Daniel Morgenthaler. In preparation for this, he asked a number of artists to draw up binding guidelines for the trade, to be included in the manifesto presented at the fair. The diversity of opinion in the manifesto, in turn, led to the next

step: instead of the usual discussion panel, Keller invited more fellow artists to take part in a group meditation session at a business centre in Kloten.

Once again, the artists found themselves in a very unfamiliar situation. Once again, they could not simply play out their individual artistic abilities, but were forced to reflect, as a collective, on the vocation of the artist. One particular speciality of artists – finding a visual solution – was outsourced by San Keller: the Zurich graphic design studio NORM witnessed the meditation session via Skype and transposed the artistic input of the meditation into images.

The intimacy of the situation and the seclusion of the business atmosphere can be experienced in a large-scale video production on the second floor of Helmhaus Zürich. However, the work of the graphic designers is not just a kind of internal protocol of this unorthodox meeting. On the contrary: the visual solutions actually play the role of conveying the vocation of the artist to the outside world. The result is printed on banners hung on the facade of the Helmhaus for the duration of the exhibition.

### The Perforated Institution

During the trade fair – which is also documented in film footage shown in the exhibition – Keller quite literally placed the vocation of the artist within a broader social context. With the flags on the Helmhaus, he also perforates the facade of the institution. The discussion triggered by San Keller and developed in several stages finds its way out of the institution through the images that can be seen from afar, and is carried into the immediate social and urban surroundings of the Helmhaus. The public space around the building thus becomes a forum – the focus of life in classical antiquity – for both spoken and mute dialogues: on the image of the artist, the public space or the politics of the visual. These are dialogues that form an integral part of San Keller's *Spoken Work*, from which the exhibition takes its title.

Unlike a conventional work of art, there is no individual author in Keller's *Spoken Work*. Nor is there any definitive form, or predetermined conclusion – there may not even be an ending at all. Like the political dialogue conducted within the framework of the *Parliament in Exile* at the Helmhaus in 2010/11, the work may follow certain rules, but the final outcome, in a democratic society, must necessarily remain permanently open-ended. Similarly, while San Keller's *Spoken Works* follow a structure that he has prescribed, their end result remains fundamentally unpredictable.

In this respect, Keller's works, ten of which can be seen in the exhibition, invariably offer people the opportunity to participate. The banners fluttering in the in-between space that divides inside and out, institution and society, image and prelude, are an explicit call for reflection: Keller not only delegates to his fellow artists, but also to his viewers and, in his case, delegating does not mean exploiting the knowhow of others in pursuit of his goals; it means opening up the artwork as a forum for active individuals in order to promote their freedom.

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The exhibition will be accompanied by a fringe programme of **concerts** and **discussions**. A few days after the opening, on 16 May, a performance by **Stini Arn** will probe the microcosm of all things audible using sound pick-ups, and will transform these, with other musicians, into an *étude ritardando* in which time stands still. On the penultimate day of the exhibition, Zurich's spoken word pioneer **Jurczok 1001** – a poet, singer, MC and loop artist – will premier his *a cappella* cover version of the Johnny Cash classic *Hurt*. There will also be four events involving **discussions** on the subject of the spoken word, addressing the speech act itself as well as the dialogue between exhibitions, artists and visitors. Freelance curator Stefan Wagner will provide a guided tour of the exhibition on 20 May, inviting participants to *Become An Instrument!* There will be a *Conversation about Conversations* in the form of a round-table discussion on 23 May, in which the May edition of the *Fabrikzeitung* newspaper will also be discussed. On 10 June, a conversation between the artist San Keller and the exhibition curator Daniel Morgenthaler will take place in a somewhat unusual

location – the public baths of the Volkshaus. On the same day, Keller will present a new publication on the *Temporary Realism* project, in which 27 fellow artists offered books for sale in an empty Zurich kiosk. Finally, on 14 June, graphic designer and psychologist Ivan Sterzinger will give a critical guided tour of the exhibition, using the same pointer that San Keller himself used for his critical guided tours of the exhibitions of other artists.

The **publication** accompanying the exhibition will take the form of a special edition of the *Fabrikzeitung* newspaper dedicated to the theme of *Discussion Formats*, with texts by Claudia Schmölders, Marianne Wagner, Tim Zulauf and several other authors.

As usual, there will be **guided tours** of the exhibition for adults and children, provided by Kristina Gersbach and Andrea Huber-Stutz. Further details of all these events can be found on the enclosed invitation card.