



HELMHAUS ZÜRICH

15 February to 14 April 2013

serge stauffer – art as research

For the first time, an exhibition is being held that provides an insight into the life and work of the important Swiss artist, art theoretician and Duchamp expert Serge Stauffer (1929–1989). As co-founder of the F+F art school, Serge Stauffer influenced an entire generation of students. The exhibition presents works by Stauffer and his circle, shedding new light on the creative experimentation of the 1950s to the 1970s and on the unconventional approaches to art that rippled out from Zurich through the international art world.

A very special surprise awaits in the biggest room of the exhibition: a landscape made up of 216 cubes that visitors can move around, stack up and push together to use as seating. The concept is based on Stauffer's own design for a cuboid version of his combinatory piece *jardin public* (1960) and has been specially handcrafted for this exhibition. It forms a space for relaxation and play, where children are more than welcome.

The first part of the exhibition focuses on works from the period 1960-65. Stauffer and his wife Doris studied photography under Hans Finsler and Alfred Willimann at what was then the Kunstgewerbeschule, precursor of today's Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK). Stauffer also worked in Josef Müller-Brockmann's graphic studio and as an assistant to Max Bill. In spite of the New Objectivity that had influenced his mentors and teachers, Stauffer, like André Thomkins, was attracted to Surrealism, which prompted his fascination with the work of Marcel Duchamp. When Stauffer himself began teaching photography from 1957–64, he took an interest in the contemporary avant-garde movements of the day such as Fluxus and the Vienna Group. Nevertheless, his works of that period, such as his studies of geometric and optical illusions or his combinatory piece *jardin public*, are unadorned and formally objective.

The second part of the exhibition begins with the Form and Colour class run by Stauffer and Hansjörg Mattmüller at the Kunstgewerbeschule in 1965. That class, which was called Form & Farbe in German, gave their new art school (F+F) its name. It was primarily focused on Pop Art, as evidenced, for example, by the works of Ellen Classen or Bendicht Fivian. By 1969, at the latest, Happenings and political engagement also became a core element, with Doris Stauffer's *Teamwork* course centred to a large degree on the women's liberation movement, or FBB, as it was known in Switzerland. This political engagement culminated in the protests of 1970 that saw many teachers and students abandon what they saw as the constrictive environment of the Kunstgewerbeschule. From 1971 onwards, the newly founded F+F art school provided a haven of experimental design in Zurich, where a more open and liberal approach to art education was developed and tested.

The third part of the exhibition demonstrates clearly how Stauffer, in his capacity as co-founder and teacher at the F+F art school, evolved his concepts of art into a theoretical discipline in its own right. His theories, fuelled by hands-on experience, formed a critique of social, psychological and ideological systems that provided a valuable groundstock for new approaches to art, in much the same way as the British-American collective Art & Language, while at the same time reflecting the openness to individual global concepts that was a hallmark of the 1970s. Although Stauffer's ideas laid the foundations for the experimental aspect of F+F as a kind of laboratory of art and were adopted by such students as Ruedi Bechtler, Liliane Csuka, Rudolf de Crignis, Max Frei (ALMA),

Christina Kubisch and Klaudia Schifferle, a lack of publicity meant that their importance went largely unnoticed.

This retrospective exhibition shows that Stauffer, not only in his capacity as a teacher and school director, but also as a public speaker, performer, translator and publisher, regarded his entire oeuvre, including his own art, his poetry, diaries and commitment to emancipation, as an integral part of being an exploratory artist. This wide-ranging image of the artist, so commonplace today, was visionary at that time. Stauffer set about meticulously translating the texts of Duchamp, realising just how profoundly Duchamp had plumbed the depths and charted the boundaries of art – an art explorer *par excellence*.

With this in mind, and with a view to the future, the fourth and final part of the exhibition addresses the question of how the highly topical concept of art practice as research can be productively applied to Stauffer's work. Current research projects by former Stauffer students M. Vänçi Stirnemann and Reinhard Storz clearly illustrate how strongly the conditions of today's institutionalised research contrast with the utopian approach of the F+F. The Visionary Art Laboratory symposium that is being held as part of the exhibition also examines these issues.

Needless to say, the discussion will centre on Stauffer's own writings. And so, an anthology of his texts outlining his ideas on art as research and the context in which that occurs is being published by Scheidegger & Spiess. The illustrations in the publication, and the exhibition as a whole, show just how diverse and multi-faceted art practice as research can be, and just how vibrant and compelling these works remain, even today.

Michael Hiltbrunner, Curator

An exhibition with works by Ruedi Bechtler, Peter Blegvad, Peter Blumer, Chintan Bolliger, Anton Bruhin, Ellen Classen, Liliane Csuka, Rudolf de Crignis, Marcel Duchamp, Bendicht Fivian, Max Frei (ALMA), Karl Gerstner, ppa. Good/Könz/Weidmann, Emanuel Halpern, Felix Kälin, Christina Kubisch, Lawrence Lee, Rut Maggi, Hansjörg Mattmüller, Fredi M. Murer, Jürg Nutz, Nam June Paik, Chrig Perren, Walter Pfeiffer, Urs Plangg, Georg Radanowicz, Markus Raetz, Dieter Roth, Klaudia Schifferle, Peter Schweri, Roman Signer, Michael Simpson, Doris Stauffer, Salome Stauffer, Serge Stauffer, Veit Stauffer, M. Vänçi Stirnemann, Peter Storrer, Reinhard Storz, Ida Szigethy, André Thomkins, Clara Tice, Oliviero Toscani, Peter Trachsel, Wessely/Wildi, and others.

Partners of the exhibition: the Stauffer family, the Institute for Contemporary Arts Research (IFCAR) of the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK), and F+F Schule für Kunst und Mediendesign Zürich.

The exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich follows a research project undertaken by the ZHdK's Institute for Contemporary Arts Research (IFCAR) and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) to process the estate of Serge Stauffer.