

At Your Service

“NOT WORKING – ARTISTIC PRODUCTION AND MATTERS OF CLASS” KUNSTVEREIN MÜNCHEN 12 SEP – 22 NOV 2020

After two centuries, it takes considerable effort to imagine a world without museums and their attendant economy of small- and medium-scale art institutions, galleries, and project spaces. The now vast literature on museum studies and exhibition histories has placed the development of art institutions within narratives of modernity, positing the museum as the producer of a new social subject for the modern bourgeois nation-state in Europe and its colonies. For her first group proposal at the Munich Kunstverein, “Not Working – Artist production and matters of class”, director Maurin Dietrich draws attention to the institution as precisely this – “a place for the formation of ‘a society of taste’” – and puts its own archive in

conversation with conditions of artistic labour today.

Founded in 1823, the Munich Kunstverein was first composed of local artists, wealthy bourgeoisie, and lower nobility, and is one of Germany’s oldest membership-based art institutions, occupying Bavaria’s formal royal residence. In Germany, *vereine* are self-governing associations structured around a membership and a common purpose; they owe their existence to Germany’s federal structure and perceived need for socially-engaged practices and not for profit public-private partnerships, but soon became “the playground for social climbers and industrialists”, as Walter Grasskamp has argued.

Interrogations of this sort are not new to the Munich Kunstverein: Dietrich’s statement draws from Andrea Fraser’s solo exhibition “A Society of Taste”, held in 1993, for which the artist interviewed the nine members of its board of directors. The recordings were edited and organised along thematic lines, and ultimately reproduced as a ninety-minute sound piece installed along with objects borrowed from the members’ private collections. Both the voices and the

twenty-five artworks were anonymised, presented instead as a chorus of attitudes. Fraser’s work represented social class as articulated by the Verein’s own constituency, and captured the transforming of “private interests into public ambitions,” explained then director, Helmut Draxler in the accompanying catalogue. The scripts, installation views, and programme notes from Fraser’s exhibition are on display in the Kunstverein’s new archive space designed by artist Julian Göthe.

Two years after Fraser’s exhibition, Josef Kramhöller, who was a young graduate of the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich, presented a series of photographs of a brightly lit jewellery shop window stained with a single fingerprint. In *Untitled (Fingerprint)* (1995), the viewer’s gaze is directed towards the smudge, an embodiment of the limits of artistic labour and public space. It is no accident that the model for contemporary art’s visual consumption is derived from flow-management strategies in department stores, and that this image inaugurates the curatorial narrative of “Not Working”. Composed by Dietrich and co-curator Gloria Hasnay, the dramaturgy



Gili Tal, *The Grapefruit Trees’ Small, Beautiful Blossom Looked Like Stars*, Digital print on Fortex plate on aluminium, recycled plastic, 2020, 220 x 500 cm, Installation view

Photo Sebastian Kissel, courtesy Kunstverein München e.V.



Still from Matt Hilvers, *Decadance*, 2009–2019, colour, sound
10 single channel videos, c. 1–5:35 min. each

of the exhibition – artistic practices thoughtfully interwoven with aspects of social life – along with a comprehensive reader, film and accompanying programme of events traces the interdependence of artistic production, gender, race and social class as possible grounds for the critique of class relations.

Presented at the exhibition’s entrance, Matt Hilvers’s *Decadance* (2009–19) is a circular ten-channel video installation of iPads presented on stands that depict the artist dancing to the sounds of Vengaboys, Outkast and Aphex Twin, among others, in several artist studios which often double as living spaces. Hung on the adjacent wall, his unpaid medical bills and health care payment reminders position Hilvers’s moving, yet vulnerable body at the foreground of artistic labour.

A sculptural proposal for a new currency and alternative economical model, *DSB für die Zukunft* (DSB for the Future, 1993–96) by Annette Wehrmann

points to the unresolved mental and emotional aspects of commodity exchange. She offered small concrete casts of shell-shaped soap to passers-by and asked them to renegotiate their value at every transaction, placing the public space once again at the centre of the exhibition’s narrative. Placed alongside is Stephen Willats’s four-part work *Trying to Forget Where we Came From* (1977) and the complete archival display of *Brentford Towers* (1985). Willats contrasts the amplitude of social housing projects with the abandonment of British working-class communities portrayed through their connections with household objects. In their bold suggestions for alternative systems of value, both works are compelling critiques on middle class aspiration and its urban spatialisation.

A newly commissioned work by Angharad Williams, *My Best Suit* (2020) attempts to articulate a social language of belonging. Hanging on a wall, a tailor-made suit by one of Munich’s leading

dressmakers is fitted with flowers, which an outfitted Williams collected in the French-styled gardens nearby the Kunstverein. Her work alongside Guillaume Maraud’s *12.09-22.11.2020 Public Consultation* (2020), a survey of public funding structures in Germany, sensibly position the Kunstverein’s contemporary role in close dialogue with the circumstances that have produced Munich as one of Germany’s most expensive cities.

Reading through the wealth of formats and materials made available for this project, it becomes clear that for the curatorial team today as for Fraser in 1993, the Munich Kunstverein is a social space defined by its ample access to various capitals (cultural, educational, social, and economic). Still, “Not Working” manifests a critical foundation for extending the frame of curatorial narrative into a commitment toward the city and labour inscribed in the Kunstverein’s ongoing history.

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