

RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co)

On the art of practicing criticism

At Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in February, the exhibition “Who Pays?” opened, where it not only owes its luminescent neon heading but also its final plausibility to the RELAX artist collective. chiara & hauser & co demonstrate again how critical art, even in the White Cube of the museum, can preserve its differentiated and spirited disruptive force. Verena Nora Doerfler



The artists just before the peak of their career, 2008, 180x125 cm. *Foto: the artists*

The art of practicing criticism is probably one of the most difficult of all arts. Especially in a capitalist social system like our own, in which an economic manner of acting and thinking is ubiquitous. There is a golden rule in western capitalism: namely an expectation that any criticism of its success-orientated article of faith will be rendered harmless. This operates by converting criticism into leverage that imperceptibly appropriates and maximizes profit. If not long ago “eco” with its criticism of our hardly sustainable life style was considered an ideology adverse to reality, it has meanwhile become something now not only the food industry recognizes regarding the label “eco”, which insures the benefit that turns “sustainability” into the choice magical word of the marketing scene. However for the balance sheet of global environmentalism such superficial, critical-free, lifestyle ecology plays as good as no role. Well meant or, say, effective criticism must therefore adopt a chameleonic character that permanently renews itself and does so without being recognizable as such. Which, as initially stated, requires a high degree of practice.

With stoic composure and joyous serenity

This is a practice that the artist collective RELAX, operating from Switzerland, has for over thirty years mastered well nigh completely. Often you stand before an intervention by chiara & hauser & co and don't rightly know what to think of the heavily encoded, artistic, experimental set-up. If you step back a bit and look at all of the collective's long-years of work-in-process, it then becomes clear what it is capable of. Namely, articulating a criticism of society without characterizing it as such: with laid-back composure and mindful serenity. Since the beginning of February, these RELAXian Zen practices can now be viewed at close range at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. Under the neon-lit heading “Who Pays?”—likewise originating from the RELAX studios—Christiane Meyer-Stoll pursues the theme of our “changing ideas of money and capital and the resulting transformation in their significance and status”. All starting with Beuys' concept of art, creativity and capital and based on 43 art contributions from the 60's to the present day.

Attack on the aestheticizing atmosphere

This makes sense in times when a multimillionaire, an oil baron and other dubious figures direct the (political) fortunes of the once largest world power. A visit to the exhibition “pays off” just for this alone. Also because many of the works assembled here very poetically follow the substance of market policy as well as that of the politically motivated financial system. However, the exhibition also brings two problems along with it: on the one hand a relatively uncritically formulated concept in which, for instance, Beuys' “creativity” terminology is taken over without question. Yet today such “creativity”—forty years after Beuys—has lived on as a magic formula of neoliberal reality, which has come to mean: Anyone with little success was not creative enough.

On the other hand, in the context of Liechtenstein's architecture, put through all its White Cube paces of white walls and bright upper-lighting, seems to have robbed many of the artists' socio-critical interventions—here once again strangely fenced-in—of their effectiveness. This is only to a limited degree the fault of the curator. All criticism aside, contemporary museums designed as galleries quickly tend to display the exhibited works like capital objects of the art and financial market. So it was a clever move of the curator to ask the artist collective RELAX for a valuable contribution to the exhibition, apart from the work that provides the title. Not because here RELAX—following the logic of a continual progression—is showing a completely newly designed work. But

because their self-quoting intervention relevant to the context looks like a direct attack on the slickly aestheticizing (Liechtenstein) art museum and its subsequent remoteness to everyday life.

From afar you can already recognize a cage enclosed within construction site fencing that contains a motley assembly of objects—weirdly formed cushions from the year 2000, so-called “useme*s”; bundles of stubs that are mostly receipts from purchases of alcohol; cartons that contain artworks from the Liechtenstein collection; as well as monitors on which two worthwhile films flicker in an unending loop. All of which seems to be a random and diverse assemblage, almost as if the artists hadn’t succeeded in finishing their environment on time. Accordingly the best thing is first to sit down on the chairs in the so-called “Waste-Room” outside of the cage and try to collect one’s thoughts. Next, however, to ask the security guard for entry into the cage in exchange for access to a “time-limited area for barter exchanges” where you leave behind a personal object of value and then are followed in a somewhat claustrophobic, step-by-step manner by the guard as well as by almost life-size, full-body portraits of the artists while you pad animal-like around the sundry objects, videos and texts within the cage, puzzledly questioning what the point of all this may be.

Not till you leave the cage, perhaps not even till after you have left the museum complex—which seems gigantic within tiny Liechtenstein—do you realize what RELAX has once again contrived to get you to do. How chiara & hauser & co—despite their physical absence—have involved you in a very real “discussion” on our economic thinking and acting, on the art system, on feminist questions, or also on personal self-concern in times of imperative self-optimization. One begins to ponder over the so-called “Wealth Manifesto” and



WHO PAYS?, 2006, Neonschrift, 130x20 cm, © Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. Foto: Stefan Altenburger



WHAT IS WEALTH?, 2010-2017, Installation, 1100x700x200 cm, © Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein.
Foto: Stefan Altenburger

over how—even outside the room that RELAX has invited us into—more time could be spent on this. Or remembers “die belege, les quittances, the receipts” of RELAX from 2005, the carefully collected sale slips and bills from 1984 to 2004 that, in comparison to the strong decline in the “reality curve” from 1990 to 2005, was available to the Collective’s exhibit sites and budget, making abundantly clear what a hard and deprived existence an artist can lead. In addition you have to chuckle in hindsight at such personal awesomeness during a brief stroll around a museum’s collected work and the realization you get of how little the price of such art can be gauged.

To hinder hasty interpretations

All this functions without any moral wagging of their index fingers, but with (self-)ironic, self-critical, inquiring and not easily deciphered tranquility. RELAX manages to catapult us from a sedated art-viewing routine to a kind of artistic instability, within which not even the slightly irritating security guard charged with completely new supervising duties can really offer any help. Nevertheless the laughter and the dialogue accompanied by unanswered questions—as well as the one or two clever maxims from the house of RELAX—still resonate after many days. Just like how a RELAX cup printed with the inscription “you pay but you don’t agree with the price” in your living room bookshelf has reminded you everyday for years that you pay for the centrally located apartment, good food or a kindergarten place but in no way concur with their cost. Whereby the final say may actually have succeeded as to what the artists themselves have paraphrased as the main theme of their work: “to prevent hasty interpretations”. And thus, with stoic equanimity, joyous serenity and in conspiratorial complicity with their public, they practice the (ephemeral) art of criticism.

Marie-Antoinette Chiarenza (*1957, Tunisia) and Daniel Hauser (*1959, Bern) have worked together since 1983 under the names RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co). The «& co» indicates possible forms of working together.

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Solo exhibitions (selection)

2015 «a word a day to be wiped away 2», Center of Contemporary Art Tbilisi (Georgia)
2010 «what is wealth?», Cornerhouse Manchester
2008 «GO MIO, der geheime grund der weltkultur», Museum Folkwang Essen
2005 «die belege, les quittances, the receipts», Kunsthau Centre PasquArt Biel-Bienne
2003 «parking avenir», Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin
1999 «for sale», Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire (USA)

Group exhibitions (selection)

2016 «die künstlerinnen kurz vor dem höhepunkt ihrer karriere», Manifesta 11, Zurich
2015 «up-close and amnesiac 2», Sviluppo – Parallelo, Kunstmuseum Luzern
2015 «the heretics or sophie’s laughter», art en plein air, Môtiers
2015 «up-close and amnesiac», voglie vedere le mie montagne, Museo Arte Gallarate (Italy)
2014 «a word a day to be wiped away», 5. Sinop Biennale, Sinop (Turkey)
2012 «USE (unexpected side effects)», 1. Tbilisi Triennale, Tbilisi (Georgia)
2011 «invest & drawwipe», dislocacion, Kunstmuseum Bern