



Silke Schönfeld.

Beyond All Reasonable Measure

EN

1 May 2021 until 15 August 2021

In her solo exhibition *Beyond All Reasonable Measure*, Silke Schönfeld (*1988) visualizes stories that range from the empty propaganda of the New Right to the emotional and physical struggles of 16-year-old boxer Aleya Asya Akgün. Schönfeld thus engages with highly political topics such as identity and community, belonging and exclusion, tradition and rituals. In her films she deliberately makes herself and her own background unobtrusive, affects the viewer with precisely planned cuts and camera angles, and thus prompts us to take a deeper look that penetrates beyond the surface. Gertrud Peters discovered Schönfeld's work two years ago at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf:

"I saw *Mainacht* for the first time in 2019 at the Academy's *Rundgang*. What I was immediately taken with are the strong images that she creates: At first glance, Silke Schönfeld reveals unspectacular realities to us, but at second glance, a world that is both new and strange at the same time. There are scenes in her films that remind me of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's paintings—they are tableaux in which the eyes and ears can get lost. Incredibly beautiful details such as the shot of the actor dressed as a monk carefully adjusting his robe in *Mönchszüge* establish art-historical references and appeal to our collective memory. At the same time, their topics have a contemporary relevance that arouses curiosity and stimulates thought." [1]

The title of the exhibition comes from a speech by Hildebrand Gurlitt, the former director of the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, which, among other things, served as the basis for a work of the same title in 2017. Gurlitt states:

"Great art always wants the unattainable, the impossible, and so it must appear senseless, almost offensive to anyone who thinks practically; but it is precisely this 'beyond all reasonable measure' that gives art its dignity." [2]

While considering titles for her solo exhibition at KIT, Schönfeld thought back to this phrase. It sounds open and associative, but also has undertones of officialese. The question immediately arises about the person who goes or wants to go beyond what is reasonable: Is it the artist herself who embeds herself in the action? The protagonists in front of the camera? Or perhaps the camera itself?

When we enter the exhibition space, we enter a place of contemplation and reflection. We have become increasingly aware of the importance of museums and exhibition venues as such places, especially in recent months. Right at the beginning of the exhibition, we are confronted with the experiences of the past year. In the narrowing end of KIT, seat cushions made of brown synthetic leather invite visitors to relax. The gaze is directed to the screen, where the work **Rhetorics of the Unknown [room plan number 1]** conjures up the atmosphere of self-isolation. Our own senses are sharpened by the invisible threat of the pandemic, as is the importance of our own home, which developed a new sense of safety during the Covid-19 pandemic. The work was created last spring, when many things that now seem ordinary to us were still new: The microcosm of our own home became the center of our life, in which the medium of video played a significant role: Could the screen be our last remaining window onto the world? This metaphor leads us back to the original "Threshold . . . between inside and outside": [3] The window has been a recurring subject in pictures throughout the history of art. In Schönfeld's work, we are even denied this view from our own window. Through frosted glass or plastic sheeting, we only ever catch a fragmentary glimpse of the outside world—through a tear in the sheeting, for instance. Everything else remains hidden from us.

“The contemplative experience with fictional worlds serves as an individual coping strategy for many people in these times of crisis. But the escape into a digital space proves to be unsatisfactory for most people. Faced with countless Zoom conferences, it seems promising to turn our attention back to the perception of our own body.”[4]

We find precisely this turning back of attention in this comfortable yet oppressive-seeming situation between a synthetic leather seat, which recalls a familiar couch, and the screen, which could show us unpleasant memories.

Anyone who moves on from this initial situation quickly realizes that reflecting back on the time of the lockdown, which we would otherwise tend to avoid doing, is significant for experiencing the exhibition. It serves as a threshold experience, so to speak, and prepares us for four other films that show not isolation, but events and festivals that find a direct translation in the trusses that extend across the room as a design element. The films move thematically between association and community building, humanity and exclusion, and the contradictions between these nodes. It is precisely this aspect of the experienced community that has become so alien to us that we want to immerse ourselves in the situations on view here, even if they appear as far away from our own environment as possible.

In the exhibition space, a monumental velvet curtain in forest green initially dominates our view. In front of it, the brown of the larch benches shines particularly brightly and quickly evokes references to dark pine forests. The forest as a place of longing and identification has always shaped German ideas of national unity and freedom, from Romanticism to the National Socialist instrumentalization of the forest to what is now seen as a place of rest.[5] In her series *invented traditions/imagined communities*, Schönfeld does not deprive the forest and other regional landscapes of their magic, but gives them a dark, even ominous undertone. In this way, she localizes the traditions and rituals that take place in these environments in a specific political and social frame of reference.

For instance, **Mönchszüge [2]** takes us to the actors in the historical procession of monks by the association Historische Mönchszüge Berg Oybin e.V., which has been organizing choir processions in a small town in southeast Saxony since 1990. Even before the association was founded, beginning in the mid-19th century, these processions were conducted in defiance of the anti-religious ideologies of the Nazi and East German regimes. As reenactments they are loosely based on the traditions of the Celestine monks, who lived in Oybin until the mid-16th century, but at second glance they are not primarily about religion. Rather, the members of the association see themselves as part of a community that connects this historical place with rituals and group cohesion.

“When we watch Silke Schönfeld’s films, we go on a journey: We discover worlds that we might otherwise pass by without noticing. This place could be right next door, a street, a few kilometers, a few hours away by train, which was inaccessible to us and which we can now discover sitting in front of the screen. We immerse ourselves in other life circumstances and customs, find them strange or fascinating—in any case, we experience something new.”[6]

Yet the radical right-wing association Ein Prozent e.V. is also based in Oybin. The AfD-affiliated members with connections to the radical New Right use social media and propaganda videos with the aim of convincing at least one percent of the “responsible, homeland-loving citizens” to participate in the “patriotic protest.”[7] Silke Schönfeld captures what remains of the association’s rhetorically exaggerated self-portrayal with silent, sober, pronounced camera work in **Ein Prozent – Imagined Communities [3]**. Empty parking lots and bus stops are the original locations of various “protest events,” which lose almost all their appeal with seemingly lexical text insertions. As quiet as this work may be, it creates a disturbing awareness of how close and familiar the stage used by the right-wing movement can be.

Behind the curtain lies **Mainacht – invented traditions part one [4]**, which marked the beginning of the series in 2019. It shows the Rhineland May customs in Rurich and the local participants who keep this tradition alive: In **Mainacht** we witness the preparations for the eve of May Day and the May ball. The local bachelors drive through the town in a covered wagon, give out May hearts, and cut down trees, whose branches serve as decorations during the festivities. The camera

captures almost everything: the parade, the “auctioned” women getting dressed and having their hair done, the photo shoot of the May Queen, and the merry dancing in the assembly hall. This historical custom may seem anachronistic and archaic to many due to its patriarchal structures, yet it is indispensable for the structure of many village communities in the Rhineland:

“Works such as *Mönchszüge*, *Ein Prozent*, and *Mainacht* are impressive testimonies to invented traditions and imaginary communities, when the monk costumes offer consolation for the rivalries of the post-war and post-reunification period, when the New Right establishes communes based on the model of the 1960s, and when, according to Lower Rhine tradition, during the May night the village’s unmarried women are auctioned off. The conviction and self-conception with which these rituals and customs are observed in Schönfeld’s films leave no doubt that they fulfill an important community-building function right here and now.” [8]

Silke Schönfeld is able to present not only these community-building traditions and their connections to patriarchal structures in a self-effacing way. Although she and her camera remain unobtrusive, she leaves traces in the situations she shows—on the one hand through her mere presence at the location, and on the other hand through her precise editing. “Deep insights into [the] dynamics of the reciprocal building up and amplification” create “the observing access to the resonant spaces” without making value judgements about them. [9] This step is up to us. But it does not stop at sober consideration: “The artist also draws attention to the small gestures, the routine movements, the scrutinizing gazes, and the words, often mumbled in dialect, that keep these processes alive.” [10]

We slowly move to the tapered end of KIT, where brown stools on blue carpeting await us. Or are these punching bags spread out on gym mats? The aforementioned engagement with one’s own body is epitomized in this last room. The young Aleyna Asya Akgün from Dortmund boxed her way—not just metaphorically—through a world that is still dominated by men. We quickly realize that this is not just about a sport, but about a real inner drive, a burning passion. After all, not only does Akgün demonstrate physical and mental strength in the ring, and not only do we witness the ritualistic processes of fasting, weighing, and massaging, but also the opposite: the admission of vulnerability. Akgün cries in pain while training. She does not try to hide her disappointment when her opponent fails to show up for the fight. She leans back and relaxes as her hairdresser gently braids her hair before the fight. We get very close to Aleyna Asya Akgün as she lets us take part in her ups and downs. She is simply present and neither hides from nor flirts with the camera. The title of the film, **Die sehen ja nur, die wissen ja nichts** (They just watch, they don’t know anything) [5] gives us a hint: We can look, but behind the facade things remain unclear. After all, the camera shows the niche that is Akgün’s life in the ring, far from school, friends, and family.

Silke Schönfeld’s films document intertwined social and mental structures, yet they are not documentaries. As Jean-Luc Godard described, the difference between “objective documentary and art lies in being involved: ‘As soon as you are interested, fiction is involved.’” [11] When we watch her films, it becomes immediately clear that Silke Schönfeld is interested. Her restrained style moves us to lend what is shown our own meaning. It moves us to endure contradictions, and precisely for this reason also to ask questions about the content. In her films’ protagonists we always recognize one thing above all else: our own humanity. “Perhaps with this sensitization to interpersonal vibrations Schönfeld opens up a possibility of social relationship therapy.” [12]

1 Peters, Gertrud, 2021.

2 Gurlitt, Hildebrand in “Düsseldorfer Kaufleute sammeln moderne Kunst, Ansprachen zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung zum 125-jährigen Bestehen der Industrie- und Handelskammer zu Düsseldorf im Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 25. Mai bis 15. Juli 1956,” p. 18–19. In 2017 Silke Schönfeld produced a work of the same title for the exhibition *Akademie [Arbeitstitel]* (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf). Texts from *Mitteilungen des Kunstvereins der Rheinlande und Westfalen* (1929, 1932) and a speech by Hildebrand Gurlitt from 1956 served as the starting point for three film chapters that raise questions about the continuity of National Socialist entanglements in German art institutions. Schönfeld’s work questions the mystification of the social role of artists evoked in this speech. Gurlitt’s personal enrichment through Nazi-looted art in particular overshadows his admiring statements about the artists of his time: “I know they were dreamers who did not feel supported by the time, not by society, not by the state; rather, they stood as admonishers crying out against the time. In their work they captured what threatened to disintegrate and dissolve.”

3 Selbmann, Rolf: “Ausblicke, Einblicke, Durchblicke: Eine kleine Geschichte des Fensters bis zur Moderne,” in: *Kunstsammlung NRW* (ed.): *Fresh Window: Fenster-Bilder seit Matisse und Duchamp*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2012.

4 Schönfeld, Silke, May 2020.

5 Breuer, Reyna, in „Mythos Wald. Verehrt und verteufelt: der Wald und die Deutschen“ at Deutsche Welle Online, 2018.

6 Peters, Gertrud, 2021.

7 Ein Prozent e.V. at <https://www.einprozent.de/ueber-uns>.

8 Semmerling, Linnea, 2020.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Stange, Raimar, “DemonstARtion: Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und postdemokratischer Politik,” *Kunstforum*, vol. 205 (“Vom Ende der Demokratie”), 2010.

12 Semmerling, Linnea, 2020.