

An Art and Exhibition Project by
Klaus Littmann

TREE CONNECTIONS

from Christian Friedrich Gille to Christo

11.05.–11.07.2021

K B H.G

LIST OF DISPLAYED WORKS

In the following all descriptions are listed chronologically in alphabetical order following the surnames of the exhibiting artists.

Texts on the exhibits:

Regine Bungartz and Isabel Zürcher

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VITO ACCONCI

(1940–2017)

Model for War Memorial in the Middle of the Trees, 1984

Mixed media, Plexiglas, wooden box,
43 × 116 × 119 cm

“It’ll grow over in time,” or “Let’s just wait for the dust to settle.” These sayings, often reeled off in passing, imply that a catastrophe has gone before. Getting over it will take some time and depend on the reliability of natural cycles. In the face of war and annihilation, plants are bearers of hope. Eucalyptus trees grow quickly and their leaves form a canopy that is at once dense and airy, while their slender, branchless trunks enable them to be planted in closely packed rows. Vito Acconci’s *War Memorial* nonetheless leaves room for architectural elements to be placed around the roots. Seating conforming to the order of the forest provides a shady oasis for commemorating the countless unknown departed.

ANONYMOUS

Komposition mit morschem Baumstamm, around 1820

Oil on paper, 34.5 × 27.2 cm

The small format is the key here. Views from above and below converge so closely that our own point of view begins to waver. Here is a tree revealing its innermost secrets while—like a morbidly evocative eruption—it shoots up into the sky. Its consistency seems mossy, with thin shoots disappearing into the blue ground, hopelessly trying to tether the overpowering creature. The soft greens and browns, mottled and porous, are reminiscent of a painter’s palette, intermixing flatly with streaks of impasto paint. Such primeval power from an anonymous hand heralded the art of Surrealism in the nineteenth century. Max Ernst would later call his pictorial fantasies intermingling massed roots, masks, and monsters “swamp angels.”

ANONYMOUS

China, 17th century (Ming & Qing dynasty)

Tree root sculpture for meditation
made from different parts, H: 60 cm

The material astonishes with its multiple levels of reality. There is root wood at the base, looking as though churned by stormy seas, riddled with unpredictable whorls and shadowy hollows. A bough marked by notches rises from it like antlers, obstinately pushing upward in its urge to grow. In the dynamic interaction of the two elements we see a windswept tree standing on an exposed crag: Who is holding whom, what has this wood witnessed in its long life and how old will it still become?

ANONYMOUS

(Mali, 10th–15th century)

Small door, ironwood, 35 × 23 cm

It is difficult to discern how human and animal relate to one another here, but they both emerge from the same wood. Whoever it was that released them so straightforwardly from the grain, it is clear that carrier and sign, ground and figures are one. The old door from Mali reveals once more the fascination felt by many modernist European artists for artifacts from far-off continents and cultures. Paul Klee comes to mind with his reduced figures—coming together and diverging again in their loose distribution across the picture plane. Witnesses to bygone days seem to have been excavated out of this wooden panel, the tool marks intermingling with the fibers of the material. Depending on the fall of light, the figures look as though engraved while begging us to be remembered: We engrave in our memories things that should be preserved and not lost.

HANS ARP

(1886–1966)

Figure-Fleur-Chute, 1951
Relief, 27 × 21 × 4 cm

Constellation ‘Amphore’, 1955
Relief, 31 × 21 × 4 cm

Working in relief—not quite sculpture and not quite picture—Hans Arp tried for decades to strike different balances: between presence and absence, here and there, shadow and light. In his hands, even solid wood gives the impression that the forms could shift again at any moment. It’s all very simple. And everything is in motion, dream figures and metamorphoses on a wooden game board. A vegetable form or the outline of a human body? Top and bottom seem interchangeable; for Arp, amphorae are related to female forms. Every element is animated and personified; positive and negative are interdependent, either tectonically like a blueprint for architecture, or perhaps like the contour of a sandbank spared by the waves. Has the wood grain inspired the sometimes flowing, other times geometric edges, or was it chance and the magic of their inventors?

PI-RO AUTENHEIMER

(1933–1997)

Untitled, 1962
Wood, metal (chainmail),
22 × 38.5 × 25 cm

We are asked to accept the boards as they are: too short, too long, sometimes riddled with nails. Pi-Ro Autenheimer offers found objects as a sculptural collage, undramatic and rapidly assembled. Horse and rider exhibit a crude whimsy that would be hard to top. Harking back to the portentous tradition of the equestrian statue, they are the diametrical opposite of bricolage: Astride his magnificent steed, the proud commander was for centuries the embodiment of state and military power. All that remains here of such omnipotence is a frail skeleton, like a rickety chair that would not even support the weight of a child. As a throw-away relic of the commander’s armor, the chainmail likewise undermines any gesture of menace, its rattling long since silenced by rust.

STEPHAN BALKENHOL

(* 1957)

Katzenfrau (Cat Woman) 4, 2004
Wawa wood, colored, 172 × 39.5 × 30 cm

Complete with pedestal, the nude statue is life-sized—a stylite that looks almost dainty, in a tranquil pose. Splinters and furrows in her surface keep her at a distance, bearing witness to the artist’s manual labor. Balkenhol carves and hews each of his figures from a stake of African Wawa wood. They display the characteristic traces of his work openly, even flagrantly. A human body with a cat’s head would normally strain the imagination, but the soft wood fuses them in peaceful coexistence. A long cultural history demonstrates how conducive this organic material is to conveying a vision, releasing never-before-seen beings from its core. flowing, other times geometric edges, or was it chance and the magic of their inventors?

JOSEPH BEUYS

(1921–1986)

von hier aus 7000 Eichen
(Mitwirken durch eine Baumspende)
1982
Poster, offset, signed

On March 16, 1982, Joseph Beuys planted on the edge of Friedrichsplatz in front of the Museum Fridericianum the first tree for his action 7000 Oaks.

Joseph Beuys and Bernhard J. Blume,
Kontakt mit Bäumen, 1982 Print on paper, signed by Beuys and Blume

7000 Eichen, documenta VII, 1982
Black-and-white offset, graphite signature, 14.7 × 10.5 cm

Rettet den Wald, 1972
Offset on paper, signed and numbered,
41 × 29.3 cm

“Save the forest!”: This 1972 appeal has lost none of its relevance. Armed with brushwood brooms, the group sets off, Joseph Beuys (with hat) in the lead, a visual artist, founding member of the Greens Party, and professor of

monumental sculpture at the Academy in Düsseldorf. Beuys responded to the “forest of sculptures” he re-called from the days of the Nazi regime with the aspiration to set social processes in motion through art. This idea was new at the time, as were Beuys’s art “actions,” and proved highly attractive to students in particular. Resistance is not futile and no institutional rule is sacrosanct. *7000 Oaks* was what Beuys called his contribution to the 1982 documenta in Kassel, with the subtitle “City Forestation Instead of City Administration.” Seeing more and more high-priced status symbols circulating in the art market, Beuys planted tree after tree in Kassel—not for sale and with the participation of a public that is likewise far removed from art.

FRANZ BURKHARDT

(* 1966)

Rue Chateau de Graaf, 2020

Pencil and ink on paper,
26 × 20.7 cm

Böschwey, 2021

Pencil and ink on paper,
40.5 × 28.3 cm

Container 2 Kubik, 2020–2021

Mixed media, plywood, Styrodur,
Styrofoam, paint,
12 × 200 × 210 cm

There's not much left of the barn, the wooden wall, or the roof truss. A motley assortment of boards, painted and gone gray over the years, the rubble of a wooden structure, is now heaped in a container. Used, spent, unusable, and ready for removal. Is art now trying to pillory our material consumption? Is it suggesting that the patina of aging roof battens makes for a modern-day painting? In the drawing, the chaotic jumble, several times removed from its natural origins, returns to its roots. A tangle of intractable branches, sketched

quickly by a masterful hand, overlooks a section of the wayside. The artist zooms back here to the nineteenth century, evoking images of longing. Or does this leafless growth instead capture a scene of the impenetrably dense present?

MIRIAM CAHN

(* 1949)

Untitled, 1989

Charcoal on paper, 58.5 × 58.5 cm

Drawing is touch, the hand coming into contact with charcoal and paper. Traces of the working process are part of the motif. Unadorned and for that all the more striking, a lone small tree juts willfully into the field of paper. The branching packs emotional power. Firmly anchored in soft charcoal black, short lines fan out straight to form the figure. Vehemence and tenderness could hardly be more closely aligned. Basel-based artist Miriam Cahn has attracted international acclaim for her relentless, politically motivated visual language. Like a seedling of her art, drawing strength from refusing to ingratiate itself, the tree defies the dusty winds.

ALEXANDRE CALAME

(1810–1864)

Fallen Tree – Struck by Lightning,

ca. 1840
Oil on paper on canvas, 29.4 × 51 cm

Tronc d'hêtre, c. 1849

Oil on cardboard, 45.5 × 33 cm

The almost tender precision in the rendering of foliage, trunk, and moss fails to distract from the drama. The trunk lies rent open, its insides erupting in all directions like flames. Badly wounded, the sturdy tree has been forced to surrender to the lightning strike. Alexandre Calame's trees are more than mere nature studies. Their knotted boughs, mottled bark, and subtle torsion bear witness to long lives, testify to their defiance and majesty, demand our respect and inspire wonder. We can sense the crown of the beech tree towering far above us by the way it filters the fall of light.

CHRISTO

(1935–2020)

Wrapped Trees

Project for the Fondation Beyeler,
Riehen, Switzerland, 1997
Pencil, charcoal, pastel, wax crayon, and
fabric sample, 106.6 × 244 cm

Wrapped Trees

Project for the Avenue des Champs-
Elysées, 1987
Color lithograph with collage of
transparent polyethylene, thread, staples,
felt marker, 71 × 56.5 cm

The plans never fail to impress. Christo and Jeanne-Claude knew just what they wanted to do and brought many an ambitious idea to fruition through drawings, sketches, or collages. And they not infrequently did so in the face of official resistance. Each visualization, designated as a "project," speaks for feasibility and anticipates what has since become, and will remain, an indelible memory. For example the 178 trees on the Berower estate in Riehen that were each wrapped in a polyester cocoon in 1998. Their isolation, indeed their dis-

appearance, had the effect of revealing for the first time the sculptural power of their crowns. Transforming the Champs-Elysées into an avenue of surreal-looking fabric creatures has so far remained a utopian dream—a symbolic act of protection for the city's trees.

TONY CRAGG

(*1949)

Level Head, 2005

Wood, 91 × 65 × 60 cm

No living body is ever completely at rest, but not many rotate as exuberantly and yet strictly horizontally as Tony Cragg's Level Head. Neither column nor torso, the figure tries to capture at once both inner turbulence and outward velocity: Does it perhaps evoke a drastic state of personal agitation? Or perhaps the frozen trail of a frenetic dance or a vortex in swirling water? "I am interested in formal construction that runs through the work," says the artist. The laminated wood is conducive to conveying dynamism, able to be sawn, layered, sanded. The elongation, inclination, multiplication, and rotation of stacked ellipses play variations on an irresistible pull that draws the gaze into ever new circumambulations. The layered tempo, the liquefied wood are dizzying, putting our visual habits to the test as we continually discern a new head or bust from every angle.

HANS EMMENEGGER

(1866–1940)

Waldbild, before 1934

Oil on canvas, 46 × 31 cm

What is surface here and what is transparent? Are we looking at a forest, or does the image spirit us away into a world of visions and dreams? Warm sunlight casts the silhouettes of trees on the tall trunks of their companions, raising almost symmetrical branches out of the darkness like a slender cross. Hans Emmenegger camouflages this artful lighting with the pretext of a simple forest scene. There is movement here, as trunk for trunk the trees send us wordless signs via the shadows of their neighbors.

SONJA FELDMIEIER

(*1965)

The Peepul Tree, 2020

Video, 25 min 13 sec

The felling of the tree is violent; it is physical and unintentionally sculptural. For days on end, a team of several men sawed, hacked at, and dismantled the sturdy tree shrine in the northern Indian city of Haridwar. The old giant had to make way for the main road to be widened in advance of the pilgrimage festival. Sonja Feldmeier captured the event with her camera, condensing it down to twenty-five minutes. *The Peepul Tree* renders us speechless as we stop in the midst of all the hustle and bustle, market activities, noise, and traffic to bear witness to a baffling sacrilege. There are still visitors in the shrine at the foot of the sacred peepul tree even as it is being felled. Why must a Hindu shrine be destroyed to make room for a Hindu pilgrimage festival? In order to distract from this contradiction, the authorities engaged only men of Muslim faith as tree-cutters.

AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA

(1865–1931)

A lake view (Lake Keitele), 1905

Oil on canvas, 47 × 36.5 cm

Akseli Gallen-Kallela sets two trees against a luminous backdrop at the precise moment when darkness is about to swallow up all the colors. A pine bough hangs down, protruding into our field of vision. It is answered by a filigree birch stem pushing its way up from the lower edge as a delicate counterpart, signaling spring and renewal. Like the rosy sunset with lake and forest in the background, both elements are characteristic of Nordic Expressionist painting.

CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH GILLE

(1805–1899)

Gestürzter Baum, um 1830

Oil on primed paper, 29,3 × 40 cm

Baumstudie freier Äste, um 1840

Oil on paper, 26,4 × 26,8 cm

Waldstudie, um 1840

Oil on paper on cardboard, 53 × 38,5 cm

Baumkrone gegen blauen Himmel, um 1850

Oil on handmade paper on cardboard, 37,7 × 27,5 cm

Zweigstudie, um 1860

Graphite on paper, 14,5 × 19 cm

Christian Friedrich Gille gives us in his sketch a course in both art and nature. Fascinated by the crooked growth of the tree, its contorted surfaces and the alternation between gnarled old wood and young shoots, the painter has recorded the details in color with scientific precision. Plein air painting was foreign to him. He instead set down on paper his rendering of the lichen-covered bough

in his studio, probably in order to paint it later in oil in a different format. There, his senses zeroed in on new details. His brushstrokes are sometimes impetuous, quickly sketching treetops almost impressionistically. The forest seems utterly windless—as if it had grown there primarily for the benefit of our observation. Looking more laid out than torn out of the ground, two trunks nestle together like legs, the protagonist having left the picture field, caught up in the cheerful green of the spring leaves.

MICHAEL GITLIN

(* 1943)

Improvised Shelter 2, 1987

Wood, 139,5 × 117 × 79 cm

Sculptural concerns I, 1987

Wood, 56 × 51 × 38 cm

At some point, something's got to give, right? We know, sense, feel when our own body is out of kilter before we can put it into words. We perceive and control our balance unconsciously in a highly complex, internalized process. But what if we were to observe a perpetual state of falling, sliding, drifting apart? Michael Gitlin's objects unleash stored sensations of weight, volume, and balance in space. The Israeli-American artist, who was born in South Africa, explodes the rules of Minimal Art, fragmenting the cube into individual parts to undermine any impression of monumentality. Finally, he hints via the title that sculpture is something that concerns us: "Improvised Shelter" and "Sculptural Concerns" are plastic physical evidence of the need to acknowledge uncertainty in life.

NIKLAUS HASENBÖHLER

(1937–1994)

Autumn Leaf, 1993

Charcoal on Ingres paper, 65 × 50 cm

The oscillations ripple outward and the lines circle around their model as if poised to take off and transform the autumn leaf into something altogether new. In autumn especially, growth rebels against wilting and withering away. Niklaus Hasenböhler has inflated his autumn leaf like a sail that wants to capture one last time everything that has motivated, indeed driven, his art up to this point. The artist was drastic in his treatment of the themes he came upon in the social margins, dashing loneliness and doubt onto his canvases with expressive vehemence. His drawings only came to public attention late in his career. In retrospect, an "autumn leaf" seems like a harbinger of his untimely death—and like a stark departure from nature studies of earlier

EDGAR HONETSCHLÄGER

(* 1967)

Ki, Vienna, 2020

Japanese ink on Washi (Japanese hand-made paper), 63 × 93 cm

Alba, Vienna, 2020

Japanese ink on Washi (Japanese hand-made paper), 63 × 93 cm

He has been described as a utopian realist. But the artist, filmmaker, and environmental activist Edgar Honetschläger is also a mobilizer. Something needs to be done, and he is a doer. For his international renaturalization project *Go Bugs, Go*, land is being acquired collectively to be barred from human use for the sole purpose of giving insects back their habitat. Giving, not taking, is the order of the day if we are to constructively combat the destruction of the environment. Honetschläger's ink drawings bring to light the endangerment of nature reserves. How much longer will the trees in the foreground last? Is there a sky without power cables, and where do they all lead anyway?

KIM JUNG-MAN

(* 1954)

Drawing Shadows (from the series

Street of Broken Heart), 2012

Hanji (Korean traditional paper), black wood frame, 150 × 110 cm

Perhaps the tree trunk speaks of affection without using words. Doesn't the sight of the slender shadow cast upon it presuppose tender attention? A silhouette runs through the body of the tree and cuts it in half below the V-shaped fork. The line is soft and playful, undramatic like a strand of hair that falls across a face it distracts us for a few moments from the robust growth. We feel the urge to reach out and touch the smooth bark, like an arm, a torso, a leg: a presence more comforting than cunning. *Drawing Shadows* is part of the photographic series *Street of Broken Heart*, which Kim Jung-man published both as individual prints and in book format. The perforations along the top edge allude to a before and after, like a tear-off calendar. Moments follow one upon the other, sensitive observations made in passing on a solitary walk.

TADASHI KAWAMATA

(* 1953)

Tree Hut in Madison Square Park, NY,

2008

It is the most rudimentary of dwellings and yet it signals a lawless realm. Cobbled together from simple boards, the hut bespeaks poverty and the will to survive but, even more, civil disobedience. In Madison Square, where the property prices are the highest anywhere in the world and the airspace is now also being sold on the stock exchange, the tree house defies capitalist profiteering. Without taking up expensive ground, it nests in a habitat usually reserved for birds. *Tree Hut* is the symbol of an upward flight and a memorial that is perhaps also meant to remind us that the urban park was once a place for ephemeral games. David is challenging Goliath here. Because no matter how provisional and model-like this hunter's aerie may look, it leaves a lasting impression as a cunning attack on civilizational megalomania.

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

(* 1955)

Lekkerbreek, 2013

Linocut on *Universal Technological Dictionary (or Familiar Explanation of the Terms) used in all Arts and Sciences* by George Crabb, 1826 Paper, 170 × 108 cm

"Lekkerbreek," which means "breaking easily," is the vernacular name for a small tree that grows on sandy ground in South Africa. So the title already tells the whole story. Because the constantly rewritten, blurred, invented, and fabricated political reality of that country remains the challenge and frame of reference for William Kentridge's entire oeuvre, which has grown out of drawing. Ground and figure are related here in such a way that the horizontal lines of text disrupt the image. Conversely, the motif—the tree—lambently rebels against a canonized, neatly ordered realm of knowledge. Fractures are inscribed in the sharp contrast of black and white, and cracks are everywhere. There can be no unified story on a ground that has been subject to such massive interference.

PER KIRKEBY

(1938–2018)

Crystal Tree, 1985

Oil on canvas, 200 × 150 cm

Gemstones are created in absolute darkness, under enormous pressure. Luminous and precious, they are retrieved from the earth after gradual geological processes have lent them a variety of intense hues. Crushed gemstone is used as a pigment, one of the original ingredients in the production of paints and dyes. This was surely doubly significant to the geologist and artist Per Kirkeby, because the dynamics of paint layered onto canvas and the layers of rock are related. Body-high brushstrokes—in agate black, amethyst, emerald green—have spent several seasons in the studio, storing a previous stage in each overpainting. “To paint,” Kirkeby once said, “means to surpass intellectual clarity.” To accomplish this, he opens up color spaces that are almost physically accessible and invites us into the earth’s interior.

JANNIS KOUNELLIS

(1936–2017)

Untitled, 2004

Tree trunks, barbed wire, steel, 200 × 360 × 45 cm

Steel, tree, barbed wire—it doesn’t take much to evoke associations of imprisonment, torture, and extermination. What non-place did this fence once screen off, what wasteland yawns behind it? Jannis Kounellis runs the wire through each tree trunk as if through a body. And yet these posts still have growth potential; their weight could put the wire’s tensile strength to the test. Dented and bent, it too attests to tremendous willpower. Tree trunks, barbed wire, and steel set the pace here, a mute appeal to flee this fateful situation.

KRIŠTOF KINTERA

(* 1973)

Nervous Trees, 2013

Electro-mechanical object, fiber glass, globe, DC motor, electronic control unit, battery

Humor can provide fertile soil when it comes to dealing with tense or hopeless situations. Krištof Kintera’s *Nervous Trees* seem to have been nourished by just such humus. They hold the globe, trembling, in their uprooted clutches. A troupe of electromagnetically motored skeletal trees displays to us the fateful reversal of the usual conditions: In the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources, the globe becomes the nerve center of a system spiraling out of control. Can growth also be a bad thing? Head over heels, the little trees start to dance—and we may find our laughter sticking in our throat.

SOL LEWITT

(1928–2007)

Square #4, 2004

Wood, paint 97.2 × 36.8 × 36.8 cm

It has already been quite some time since design, handwork, and manufacture were disassociated once and for all. While originality, along with the artist’s personal handwriting and skill, long gave art its special aura, in the 1960s industrially produced products, including laths, grids, and sheet metal, made their way into art studios and workshops. Artists became contractors, delegating the actual execution of their work. In the case of Sol LeWitt, this freed him up to focus all the more intensely on his own alphabet of space. Here, cubic spatial elements framed by square timbers are placed on top of and next to each other. Their stacking is in the process of growth, pushing up a permeable volume and building a prototypical framework. *Square* is free of any architectural function, merely enveloping empty space according to the principle of repetition. The seemingly rigid, modular order hones our sense of rhythms and proportions, of planning and ordering, and of the stupendous mobility of shadow and light.

KLAUS LITTMANN

(* 1951)

Arena for a Tree, 2021

Site specific installation, 8 × 12 m

The layout of the space here harks back to the dawn of occidental culture. At first a battleground, then a theater, and finally an arena has since antiquity offered a setting where everyone has a view of the events taking place in the center. The rows of seats build a horizontally structured shell. Their stacked arrangement protects without enclosing and screens without shutting out the air. In such an arena, the protagonist can find a place for itself in the city. As a growing sculpture, a source of shade, or a host for birds and insects, the tree proposes itself as a one-off event. The arena will remain standing on Basel’s Münsterplatz until May 24—and then seek new audiences in other cities, in each case for a different tree.

DAVID NASH

(* 1945)

Crack and Wrap Column, 2010

Oak, 197 × 53 × 51 cm

Wood is a consuming passion for the British artist David Nash. He continually puts its malleability to the test, watches its natural growth, and also lets the material speak for itself in sculptures made for interior spaces. In his *Crack and Wrap Column*, the artist has formulated both a design principle and its opposite, presenting a concept and its paradoxical counterpart: Fracture and envelopment, a continuous chain and intermittent cracks determine the rhythm in which the individual parts rest atop one another. Joining and separating are the two opposing operations that make the column grow. In the upward-tapering silhouette a tree is still present—and at the same time flirts with the simulation of a tower or skyscraper. The reproduction of natural growth creates its own architecture.

LOUISE NEVELSON

(1899–1988)

Untitled, 1976–1978

Wooden relief, paint,
213.4 × 87.6 × 12.7 cm

A door can be locked and bolted, but Louise Nevelson's relief is more than that. Along its central axis, three openings are suggested, and yet there is no sign of a handle or knob to open these supposed hatches. The heads of the screws sunk deep into the wood are likewise camouflaged. Black as coal, the wood takes on a metallic character. Precisely aligned elements evoke a wide range of images: mischief black as night or the strict principles of composition; suffocating rejection or a curiosity that is ignited especially by a blocked passage. Louise Nevelson, the daughter of Jewish immigrants to the USA, worked with material that literally lay at her family's feet: Her father owned a sawmill, and wood waste and furniture fragments would become Nevelson's raw material, which she invested with the vocabulary of modern art.

HANS OP DE BEECK

(*1969)

Blossom Tree, 2018

Steel, concrete, polyurethane, exposy resin, coating, plywood,
1656 × 1706 × 275 cm

Few building materials are considered less natural than gray concrete. And steel or polyurethane can also be cast smoothly in virtually any form. When melded together, they swallow the ambient light. These material qualities give Op de Beeck's *Blossom Trees* a soulless air, making them seem like mere models that quote and echo a memory of Asian prints. Rigorously cultivated and tamed, the tree seems to have become here nothing more than an easycare prop. Summer and winter alike, it delights us with a touch of pink—delicate like the spring? Op De Beeck is putting us to the test: How far can he push his artificial naturalness before it fails to seduce us? How little does it take for a synthetic blossom to awaken in us the magic and fragrance of an entire cherry blossom festival?

MERET OPPENHEIM

(1913–1985)

Herbst, 1930

Watercolor on paper,
25 × 31 cm

Er sieht sich um, 1971

Cadavre exquis, wood, metal, bicycle reflector,
H: 29 cm

Waldtempelchen, 1974

Mixed media,
31.5 × 37.5 × 29.5 cm

Nothing is impossible and certainly not in dreams, which sort things according to their own laws. As if in her sleep, Meret Oppenheim was able to dissolve the boundaries of established object art. The artist simply called the beings she created, often from found items, *choses* (things). Taking a playful delight in alienation, she coaxed out the poetry in inanimate objects. Craft and mystery are not contradictory, and shells and pebbles are there to inspire witty flights of fancy that display to the world charming new designs for nature: Didn't the

root wood fluff itself up like a bird all by itself? There he turns to and fro on the branch like a flag in the wind, a dancer with head held proud but a bit unsteady, a piece of plastic for his beak. "He's looking around," is the succinct name Oppenheim gave her piece. And we suddenly remember what it is to be creative.

GIUSEPPE PENONE

(*1947)

Ripetere il Bosco, Frammento 14, 2007/2008

Wood, 261 × 30 × 14 cm

Sculpture is what it is, what it is made of. With no need for a pedestal, the core detaches itself from its sheathing. The beam—a building component, ready to become part of a floor or roof—seems to reclaim its origins. A beam is a piece of wood is a beam is a work of art is a tree. The levels of meaning flow into each other, or more precisely: grow into each other. Few artists of his generation have dealt with trees as long and intimately as Giuseppe Penone. Trees are for him much more than just a motif or "theme": Their growth and bracing, their stability and vulnerability, are at the very heart of his entire artistic production.

MARKUS RAETZ

(1941–2020)/Daniel Spoerri (*1930)

Palette, 1989

Mixed media, 97 × 96 × 26 cm

It is possible to draw using little sticks—no one knew that better than Markus Raetz. Or one can declare a tabletop to be a picture and marvel at the way the remains of a working session or a meal look when hung on the wall—in his "Tableaux-pièges," or "snare pictures," Daniel Spoerri pays homage to the moment. Both artists realized that what we see is a matter of perspective. In this work, the friends came together and each contributed in his own way to a playful moment of illusion. One of them seems to have scribbled on and then collaged slips of paper and photographs, while the other froze his studio table and threaded it in as a tribute to his friend and part of his own oeuvre. Immune to any artistic handwriting, the wood bows to this appropriation and, as always, adapts the shade it casts to the given situation.

JOHANN MARTIN VON ROHDEN

(1778–1868)

Baumstudie (Rom), c. 1810

Oil on primed paper on cardboard,
35.2 × 44.2 cm

The tree has been dashed down on paper rapidly, free from the pressure of creating a successful large composition. It simply grows out of a vaguely implied rootless trunk into the sky, as a form of possibility and a set piece for a landscape in the making. The focus on precisely rendered painterly details alongside diffusely fraying areas offers the eye disparate depths of field; as if the painter was anticipating photography, we experience in his study an exposure time that reveals branches swaying in the wind. Due to his obsession with detail, Johann Martin von Rohden left behind a comparatively small oeuvre, making every meticulous production from his workshop all the more valuable. The illusion and reproduction of experienced reality emerges bit by bit here from layered dabs of paint that gradually condense into an image.

TIM ROLLINS

(1955–2017) and K.O.S.

Pinocchio, 1991/92

Wood, acrylic, wax, tung oil,
H: 106 cm, ø 15 cm

The tree trunk was already breathing with life when the woodcarver in the children's story *Pinocchio* freed the rogue inside. The name of the legendary wooden marionette is a neologism made up of *pino* for pine, *pinco* for fool, and *occhio* for eye. But who is it exactly that is peering out at us here so defiantly, fully veiled by the bark? Should we take tools in hand and free this imprisoned being? For Tim Rollins, that would probably not be taboo. The art teacher set out decades ago to use artistic methods to help fight poverty, drugs, AIDS, and gang warfare in the South Bronx. His amalgam of hands-on assistance and explanation, Arte Povera, performances, and gallery visits is a decided departure from traditional academic art education. Perhaps *Pinocchio* is meant to be the godfather for self-empowerment? The possibilities offered by the tree trunk as relatable model and initiation into artistic practice have not yet been exhausted.

DANIEL ROTH

(* 1969)

Encounters at a Possible End of the Inner Chambers, 2010

2 part-installation, fabric, epoxy resin, glue, tree bark, metal,
220 × 60 × 60 cm and
180 × 50 × 40 cm

Encounters at a Possible End of the Inner Chambers, 2010

C-print, 35 × 5 cm

Daniel Roth has been called an “associative cartographer.” He tells stories without words, using materials instead to reconstruct, as it were, the gaps in our memories. Extremely selective in his choice of media, he reinvents cultural history in precisely dosed arrangements, assigning us a place in the events beyond any concrete indications of place or time. His picture here turns us into explorers on an expedition into the earth's interior and accomplices in the search for the unknown. But isn't everything we see in fact verifiable and concretely formed? Two characters made of felt and wood face each other in the White Cube, silent witnesses to

inner spaces, open to projections.

The void is embraced, the vague takes on contours; one step beyond all that is familiar, the work captures an air space, offering the mantle of tree bark as a prop for a journey into the interior.

MICHAEL SAILSTORFER

(* 1979)

Waldputz, 2000

C-print, 250 × 480 × 480 cm

Forst, 2010

Steel, electric motor, oak tree,
dimensions variable

Whether wooded or arable land, recreational area, fallow land or building site: Hardly any terrain in our latitudes is left entirely untouched, and the parcelling of land into usable plots has long since reached the forest as well. But what purpose does this square serve that Michael Sailstorfer uncovered not far from his father's farm in Lower Bavaria? The word ‘Waldputz’ means primarily clearing the ground of all vegetation. Tree trunks assume the role of building outlines here, demarcating this unusual stage. Is the dark coloring the result of a pesticide, or does it anticipate the height of a planned construction volume? Nothing is clear here—and thus the image summons the idea of a forest replete with thousands of unpredictable unknowns. A painful caesura in natural cycles is likewise

evoked in the work *Forst*. Here, in a machine-generated manege, a tree is unnaturally upended and forced headlong into the ground, the crown dragging round and round until all sense of life is vanquished.

HERMANN SCHERER

(1893–1927)

Striding Child with Two Women, 1925
Fir wood, 146 × 54 × 52 cm

Looking back today, it is hard to understand why Hermann Scherer's figures caused such a sensation in their day. They were deemed morally offensive and even banned from an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1925. We feel that we recognize in the minimal differences of posture and facial expression here "three ages of man." And yet the boy is striding forth like a little man. If we are tempted to identify the sculpture as a nuclear family from the back, the two female bodies we discern from the front then subvert the expectation of this social norm. Scherer's sculpture has assimilated the archaic calm, even tenderness of medieval depictions of the Virgin Mary and at the same time points a hundred years beyond itself. What image could today more compellingly express our human affiliation than this small group hewn from a single fir tree?

ROMAN SIGNER

(* 1938)

In the Styrian Forest, 2002
Video transferred to DVD, color, sound,
9 min 8 sec

If a new forest is to grow, something must make way for it. Acts of liberation are radical and follow a precise plan. A double spiral of boreholes testifies to the subtle humor with which Roman Signer deals with explosives. Although the detonations bring to mind a military operation on enemy soil, leaving thick clouds of smoke wafting over the lumberyard, in the long run, each bang made room for a young beech. There they grow in synchrony, looking almost tame in their carefully planned rows. And with them there quietly germinates the hope that new life can take root in soil that has been blasted apart.

KLAUS STAECK

(* 1938)

Deutscher Mischwald (regenfest),
1984
Poster, offset print, 84 × 59 cm

Lasst uns nicht im Regen stehen,
1983
Poster, offset print, 84 × 59 cm

The message could not be any clearer: Profit destroys habitats. Graphically, the superimposition of a dead forest and a bar code, the symbol for internationally identifiable commercial articles, breaks down to a fatal common denominator. The "German mixed forest," shooting up straight as an arrow above barren moorland, acts as a border fence cutting off our view of any far horizon. "Acid rain" was a pressing issue on everyone's lips in the 1980s, not least in West Germany. More than just alluding to the threat of forest die-back, the term became synonymous with widespread man-made environmental pollution. Demands were made for an about-face in environmental policy, including the shutdown of lignite-fired power plants, while farms

started going organic and individual responsibility advanced to the status of a moral imperative. Nearly forty years after they were made, Klaus Staeck's posters still strike a chord today. If the detoxification will succeed and we can once again offer the forest healthy soil is an open question.

NIKLAUS STOECKLIN

(1896–1982)

Kapelle mit Erhängtem, 1929
Oil on wood, 54 × 61 cm

The stumps of trees stand in isolation around a pink chapel in a grotesquely forlorn landscape. The world has been smothered under sand. The painter applies the brush like a fine scalpel to make the bough bend under the weight of the hanged man. A human life is extinguished with ruthless subtlety. The black interior of the house of worship provides no consolation. *New Objectivity* was the name of the 1925 exhibition in Mannheim, Germany, in which Niklaus Stoecklin exhibited this work, the only Swiss artist represented. The title said it all: Those who had witnessed war were seeking relentless objectivity—a hyper-clarity suppressing the expressionistic exuberance of painterly gesture and allowing for not even a quantum of charm. Nothing overlaps or merges here. As if in glaring neon light, the wasteland and the bitter truth slap us in the face. The world we once knew has slipped through our fingers.

SU-MEI TSE

(* 1973)

(in collaboration with Jean-Lou Majerus)

Trees & Roots #2, #3, #4, 2011
Bronze, 350 × 200 × 200 cm

Trees & Roots II, 2010
C-Print, 100 × 150 cm

The little trees and bushes look highly artificial and yet obstinately original. Cultivated in small planters, they have long been part of the inventory of sophisticated interiors. In Su-Mei Tse's work, the dwarf plants manifest a special relationship between roots and crown. Arranged equidistant from one another on raked sand, they are merely set in place. The white of the terrain, broken only by ten-der grass, appears even more synthetic under the dark root balls. Cultural refinement and natural erosion are indistinguishable here, and the tree becomes a transport commodity between climates and mentalities. Growing up in Luxembourg as the daughter of a Chinese-British couple, Su-Mei Tse found her way to an art that intertwines

JEAN TINGUELY

(1925–1991)

Western lore and aspects of Asian philosophy. Mobility is secondary here: Cast in bronze and with packed roots, the tree gives us all the time in the world for contemplation.

L'Ours de Bursinel, 1990

Tree stump, iron, concrete, electric motor, 220 × 230 × 230 cm

Eléonore, 1990

Floor sculpture, iron, stump, raising car tyre, animal skulls with antlers, electric motor, 250 × 400 × 360 cm

Junkyards were his studios and the source of the raw material for his art. Jean Tinguely welded together iron and sheet metal parts, rubber belts, bones and bolts, coils and wheels, eyelets and hooks to create expansive sculptures. Machines are extensions of, and replacements for, human physical labor, skeletons of pure efficiency. “The passion, tenderness, and drive he invested in his best works seem to elicit in viewers their own associations with life.” (A. Monteil, 2005). In the colossal tree trunk from Bursinel in the canton of Vaud, the artist saw the torso of a sitting bear. This trunk, a vestige of animal

strength, is being attacked from all sides by industrially manufactured set pieces. The battle here seems futile, and the “explosiveness” that Tinguely incorporated as a formal quality into his figures also quite painful.

MARK TOBEY

(1890–1976)

Forest Cathedral, 1955

Tempera on paper on cardboard, 53 × 39 cm

Oil paintings, glazes, stucco façades, even rock: The finest cracks may appear in their surfaces. Temperature, humidity, and the ravages of time inscribe dynamic structures into their intact skin. Other things are doomed to breakdown from the outset: The growth of tree bark or of crystals is accompanied by edges and fractures, the whole resembling its components. Mark Tobey often bases his pictorial abstractions on microscopic views of natural phenomena, details of the finest close-ups. Was *Forest Cathedral* inspired by weathered bark, or are we looking at a mineral structure or perhaps eroded soil? The “Informel” qualities of this painting call to mind myriad associations. The cathedral in the title evokes a place of inwardness, a space permeated by light: Here we feel a resonance, painting as silence and as an echo of the cracked webs of our selves.

SHIGEO TOYA

(* 1947)

Untitled, 1989

Fire treated wood, L: 40 × 48 × 0 cm, R: 30 × 40 × 35 cm

Most of the time, we understand “natural” as being diametrically opposed to “artificial.” We recognize either something grown or made. This habit of sorting is being scientifically questioned today, but it has already been faltering for decades for Shigeo Toya. The Japanese sculptor saws his pieces of wood, burns and scrapes their surfaces, in the process knocking holes in our supposed knowledge of growth, stability, and decay. His sculptures have the appearance of never-before-seen oversized fruits or seeds. Ruffled and notched, they lie there on the ground—evidence of harsh weather, a volcanic eruption, a relentlessly harsh existence. The craftsman’s treatment of the material becomes in Toya’s work an elemental force that gifts us with new totems in the form of swirls, folds, and notches.

GÜNTHER UECKER

(* 1930)

Baumskulptur, 2001

Mixed media, 120 × Ø 70 cm

A tremor ran through the new generation of artists. In its “zero hour,” the young Federal Republic of Germany wanted to, indeed had to, reinvent itself. There were plenty of sparks to light the flame. Art vehemently screamed and lashed out at everything that was considered to be established and all that had allowed the horror of history to take place. Some artists joined forces, among them Günther Uecker, a founding member of the “Zero” group. They tried out new things, staked their claims, provoked, destroyed. Uecker began to hammer nails into volumes and surfaces. The nails spread out in billows across furniture, boards, and walls, forming swarms of shadows and unruly patterns, scraping open surfaces and enlarging volumes with their spiky fur. The canvas was transformed into bandaging material. Here, the trunk wears its wounding crown of thorns with pride.

CHRISTIAN VOGT

(* 1946)

Skulptur Alfonso Hüppi, 2000

Carbon print on hand-made paper,
150 × 111 cm

It's all there, exuding a sober presence. Under homogeneously over-cast skies, Basel's Barfüsserplatz, otherwise busy day and night, is deserted here. How small the phone booths were back then, next to the tall tree. The tram stop and a row of houses appear to crouch under the trunk, which is tectonically encased in brick. Here a bench, there a bicycle, no trace of bustling activity across the urban square. Christian Vogt has documented here a sculpture by Alfonso Hüppi that was temporarily set up on the square for the cultural project *Skultur* in 2000. But the artist foregoes any situational punchline. The sculptural protagonist is shot with a wide-angle lens, adding even more distance to the image. An eerie silence pervades the scene—only along the edge of the large print does the second, momentary authorship of the photograph make itself known.

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