

Ruth Horak

On the Playing Fields of Art

Sigrid Kurz's works bear the imprint of the transformation that artistic practice underwent at the end of the twentieth century when artists radically expanded their fields of activity, overturned traditional borders between the artwork and the art business, placed a reliance on artistic research, and became "discursive". Even in her earliest photographic series she observes these "defining parameters of institutional art"(1), the spheres of activity and of role models, the "conditions of work and representation"(2), or the politically charged spaces of the galleries, those semi-public spaces where the price of art is negotiated. Her discreet behavior within the art scenes of Paris, London or New York allowed her to "chart the gallery in its most mundane and profane state."(3) A single photograph from 1991 stands as a metaphor for the game that is often clouded in secrecy, the game that is played out on the fields of art. *SPIELFELD*, a playing field located in an urban environment has been prepared for potential players, but before they can gain entrance they must prove that they know the official and unofficial rules and their skills.

Sigrid Kurz is familiar with all the rules. As an artist with a part time job in a Vienna gallery she knows about producers' struggles with substantive and formal issues as well as the institutional strategies and, as an astute observer, she consumes the changing and increasingly immersive offerings of art institutions. She meticulously explores the cities, combs through the playing fields of art and cinema, observes both formal and social changes, registers attitudes embedded in actions or understatements, and authentically documents conditions and sensitivities. The large neon signs suspended in free air that are installed at the Centre Pompidou as a guidance system and the glass cube containing computer work stations for researching (*PLATEFORME*, 2019) can be read as standing in for the immense interdisciplinary offer and as a reference to the users trying to orient themselves there. She has addressed these other players since 1998 with the series *FRAGEN*. Animated by the double meaning of the word "reflection", she embossed mirror foils with questions so that viewers are initially confronted with their own reflection. When they then decipher the letters and words that "flow" through the soft foil they see themselves confronted by sober demands for them to reflect their own feelings and activities, to think about the conditions of art, and to even take a stand: *How do you feel in front of the camera? What is your next move? How do you see the relation between the artist, the institution and the public?*

IS IT REAL?

Sigrid Kurz also poses questions about situations that can no longer be reconstructed because the game is over, the figures have left the playing field, and all that remains of the stage sets is the incidental furniture. The jacket draped over the arm of the chair keeps the performance that has just happened alive, but only at a bare minimum. Whether the scene is a complete illusion – though merely a meticulous reconstruction of banal (dis)order – remains unclear. For Sigrid Kurz the question *IS IT REAL?* (2011) popped up at the London Frieze Art Fair when she observed an ambiguous scene of this kind and the reactions of passers-by to it. With the two versions of the same shot – a positive and a negative print – one can compare the two images as in a "find the mistake" picture to determine what the effect of the reversed tonal values has on the visual hierarchy of the depicted objects. In light of the current debates surrounding AI images and their reality, the question *IS IT REAL?* takes on a new urgency. The advanced congruence between authentic and generated images raises double doubts: How reliable is one's own judgement? What effects do generated images and other automated processes have on our creativity, and on how our pictures look, besides their effect on our professions?

ALTERED VIEWER POSITION

Since every observation is dependent on the personal experience and selective approach of the observer, and to the same extent regarding the premises of time and/or the changes it brings with it, Sigrid Kurz sometimes proposes a change of perspective. From 2014 on, she has been reacting to the fact that expectations relating to presentation have changed: Instead of being static and representational it should be inflected by performative, processual and interactive forms. In *EXPERIMENTAL SETS* Kurz turns the image of the exhibition space on its head with a single, simple gesture: turning the ceiling lights into spotlights. In this way she directs the relations of futuristic illuminated platforms on which transformations of all kinds can happen, as in Stanley Kubrick's illuminated, energetic hotel room at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

[...]

CLOSE UP

Navigating the art world, engaging with "institutional rituals"⁽⁹⁾, with the works and their authors, leads to countless impressions and demands regular critical consideration, sometimes even distance and absence. In 2021, Sigrid Kurz once again renewed her perspective when, instead of placing the results of her observations at the centre of attention, she chose her own physical *movements* on the playing fields of art. Here, she is conspicuous as an actor and sometimes even physically present, as when the tip of her shoe protrudes into the image. Above all, however, her presence is expressed indirectly by the movement of her body. The images develop from movement, pulling us along through spaces, across markings and along walls, over the floor coverings and boundaries to scribbles and shadows that otherwise accompany abstract scenes. The few concrete elements are unobtrusive, traces of blanked out activity, allies of absence. In these *CLOSE UPS* the artist once again comes closer to the field of art, but completely erases the context, leaving the stage to surfaces, colours, lines and light.

Sigrid Kurz puts *herself* and *us* on the playing fields of art, here and now, though too with a backwards glance into history. The title of her retrospective, the palindromic "here we are we here" is both statement and question and, last but not least, an indication of the competitive atmosphere that prevails on the playing fields of art.

1 Astrid Wege: *Die Arbeit geht weiter*. In: *Beziehungsarbeit – Kunst und Institution*, Künstlerhaus Vienna, 2011.

2 Ruth Horak: on the photo series *GALLERIES (WORKING FOR)*, 1995/2004. In: Sigrid Kurz, *On Display*, n.p., Vienna, 2010.

3 Ruth Horak: *Bildressourcen*, In: Sigrid Kurz, *Issues*, n.p., Salzburg, 2024

9 Sabeth Buchmann, *Regeln des (Un-)Möglichen. Zur Kunstpraxis der später 1980er und frühen 1990er*. In: *To expose, to show, to demon- strate, to inform, to offer – künstlerische Praktiken um 1990*. Pub. Matthias Michalka, Exhibition catalogue, mumok, Vienna, 2015, p. 25.