

Converter

3 February – 6 May 2018

The exhibition *Converter* deals with a special kind of contemporary sculpture. As the title suggests, the artwork becomes an aid that transforms space, our perception of time, and our stance toward social developments. From ways of using materials to their symbolic and social values to the form of the installation in the room, the participating artists analyze sculpture in the seemingly neutral exhibition space, which presents a variety of opposing positions through the artworks.

Very different references to time and the work emerge in the exhibition. The nature and treatment of the materials of the sculptures, which offer clues about the production process, add a further temporal dimension so that the works contribute to an altered perception of the present moment. The time inscribed in the works seems to become visible. The language of everyday things changes in the proportions of the space and through changes of position. The combination of different artistic expressions also allows the artists to take a critical stance toward a society of consumption. The resulting tenor that develops in the exhibition presents new perspectives and takes new positions. Similar to the pulse of the human body, the works take us on a journey through everyday references and relations, creating seemingly vibrating connections between sculpture, space, and the viewer. The exhibition consists mainly of new works that the artists realized specifically for the exhibition.

Room 1

Pamela Rosenkranz (*1979, Altdorf)

Pamela Rosenkranz's conceptual work is based on insights from philosophy and science, especially neurology, her observations of contemporary culture, and art-historical references. The materials she uses often refer to the lifestyle and fitness industry and the social trend toward mental and physical self-optimization. With material reflections of the physical, the Zurich-based artist often exposes the domestication of nature by a society based on economic principles, as in *Purity of Vapors* (2012). Since 2009 she has filled plastic bottles from the brands Evian, Fiji, and SmartWater with transparent and skin-colored silicone. The skin colors correspond to the main target group of the product, which, according to the marketing strategy of the manufacturer Glacéau (a subsidiary of Coca-Cola), is a perfect imitation of the natural water cycle: the transparent bottle symbolizes the preserved purity of the original raindrop, which is free of pollution from our industrial atmosphere. This impression created by clever market strategists is not only strongly counteracted by the viscous silicone mixture with artificial skin pigments from the film industry, but also reinterpreted as a fragmented consumer body. However, the human subject exists only as a liquid mass and degrades into an object in the serial arrangement of synthetic materials.

The body composed of fragments, the serial sequence, and Rosenkranz's looping projections reinforce the impression that the body on display is devoid of all life. By contrast, the title of the video animation *Living Colors* (2012) suggests the opposite: the liveliness of the colors. In the projection of alternating colors on a large screen, Rosenkranz directly refers to the monochrome painting of avant-garde artists such as the patented International Klein Blue, with which the French artist Yves Klein (*1928, Nice; †1962, Paris) "immortalized" himself in art history. The digital colors that Rosenkranz shows in sequence at short intervals in a dimmed light—white, blue, pink, orange—correspond to a single, pure RGB color; they are absolutely immaterial and only exist as substance-less projections. With this work, Rosenkranz refers to the absence of the human body. The artist's voice can be heard alternating between "no" and "yes," which leads viewers to position themselves for or against the colors.

Room 2

Gabriel Kuri (*1970, Mexico City)

While Pamela Rosenkranz alludes to the absence of the human body, with his installation created especially for the exhibition *Converter*, Gabriel Kuri also refers to the body and its movement in space. His installation seems to accompany us through the room. A twisted greenish-blue painted metal pipe moves through the long hall, but is interrupted by various objects on the way. It creates a kind of three-dimensional drawing in space, consisting of lines and points. Movement is also suggested in the title *Attempt 1 to Arrest the Flow from Event A to Event B*. At the same time, it lends the work a temporal dimension and gives the impression that it could be a kind of experimental setup.

Gabriel Kuri works with found, everyday, or natural materials as well as industrially manufactured elements. All the materials are separated from their original context and reinterpreted in the exhibition space. The viewer cannot help but try to interpret the individual elements. The iron pipe is reminiscent of a railing in a public place, the rocks recall a natural environment, and the objects suggest consumer products.

The gestures and processes in this work reveal an evaluation of the qualities of the various materials, an inquiry into physical properties such as weight, flexibility, rigidity, transparency, and the degree of human or technical intervention.

Room 3

Raphael Hefti (*1978, Biel)

Raphael Hefti is also interested in materials and their properties. He likes to experiment with materials such as steel by changing them and subjecting them to different conditions. Often he arrives at artistic ideas based on production processes. In this way, he is continually able to coax new forms from materials that are otherwise used as functional building materials, for instance, and shaped by force.

The corroded steel beams seem to divide up the room like dinosaur skeletons, while a breeze blows from the doorway covered with a grating. Hefti exposed steel beams to extreme conditions for this work. For five years the bars were left in an oven that was alternately heated from 20 °C to 1200 °C and back to 20 °C. With this stress test, Hefti simulates the aging process of the material (under weather conditions) over 1000 years. He thus attempts to compress time and provides an imaginary glimpse of the future.

The beautiful structures that formed on the surface of the beams are not the result of a sculptural process, but were created by physical processes on which the artist himself had no direct influence. The originally perfect, minimalist shape of the steel bars was transformed into organic structures. The objects could just as well be excavated relics from the distant past, but in fact they point to the future.

Room 4 / Skylight Hall

Nina Beier (*1975, Aarhus)

Encoded by matrices of power, value, commerce, gender, and work, Nina Beier's vocabulary of objects and images tends to point out and emphasize contradictions. She produces bricolage sculptures (bricolage refers to crafts made of ordinary materials at hand) that question, test, and juxtapose the qualities of the different materials and their meaning.

In *Beast* (2018) the robot bull simulators ceaselessly perform a choreography of resistance. A ballet of the animal rejecting domination projects through the lens of its dominator. However, the bulls are presented as pack animals carrying containers of powdered milk—a product obtained from the milk of domesticated cows. The tension between the different poles (human/animal, female/male, wild/domesticated, real/simulated) becomes visible and tangible in the museum's expansive Skylight Hall.

The themes of commerce, consumption, and mass-produced goods as well as their ecological effects are echoed in the work *Mars* (2018). The asphalt that makes up our roads and allows goods to be transported around the globe comes from our planet's rock and petroleum resources, which we exploit to satisfy needs suggested by the advertising industry. The meticulously cut chocolate bar with the name of the ancient god of war on a fragment of asphalt combines the idea of man as ruler of nature with the image of the will-less and often overweight consumer who can be controlled by the self-created god of consumption.

Room 5

Olga Balema (*1983, Lviv, Ukraine)

With its white plastic floor, the exhibition hall shines like never before. The absorption of light by the parquet flooring has disappeared, and the "white cube," which simulates the ideal neutral exhibition space, redefines the historical room. In a photo, the floor is visually and symbolically broken through. In dialogue with the other artists who occupy the rooms in different ways, Olga Balema responds with a completely empty room in which visitors can move freely. However, the supposed freedom of movement is broken by the illusion of a hole in the floor, which leads to uncertainty and a reflection of their own movement through the room.

Room 6

Michael E. Smith (*1977, Detroit)

Michael E. Smith's installations always focus on people and their physical and mental appearance. He makes these visible with minimal changes. Five commonly sold, apparently much used camping chairs made of white plastic are lined up facing the windows of the long room. An initial glance reveals tiny LEDs integrated into the middle of the front edge of the seats. In the darkened room, the thin light strips radiate out into the room and structure the surroundings with fine lines. This work also suggests the presence or absence of the body in all its dimensions and heaviness, but then scatters it in all directions using something as ephemeral as light. It is these fine, silent gestures that make Smith's work touching and almost poetic. And yet, the viewer also perceives something uncanny in this work. The mass-produced plastic chair, a readymade with visible traces of use, here becomes a singular object with an obvious past that literally radiates into space.

Room 7 (Collection Room)

The adjacent collection room with works by Bill Bollinger, Donald Judd, Gary Kuehn, Keith Sonnier, and the large mural by Sol LeWitt offers an excellent context for the exhibition. For instance, Gary Kuehn's mattress tied with a cord was part of the 1969 exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern and is one of the mythical works of Postminimal sculpture. The artists presented in *Converter* have close material and conceptual links to this development in the late 1960s. For the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, the acquisition of the Rolf Ricke Collection was a "quantum leap" that filled historical gaps in art from the 1960s and 1970s and provided a historical context for the important group of works by Roman Signer (*1938), for instance.

Raphael Hefti and Michael E. Smith's works in this room form a link between the museum's collection and the exhibition *Converter*. The almost haphazardly placed rod in the corner of the room comes from the series *Replaying the Mistakes of a Broken Hammer*. As suggested by the title, this seemingly minimalistic work is based on an observation the artist made during a failed attempt to produce a hammer. During this process he noticed how the properties and appearance of the steel changed during production. This insight inspired Hefti to create a visually arresting series of works: he subjected a common steel rod to a hardening process by alternately heating it and allowing it to cool. The production process changed the surface of the steel, resulting in a patina of a remarkably painterly quality.

Michael E. Smith's work *Untitled* (2018) creates an analogy to Keith Sonnier's work hanging on the wall. Like a clock or a decorative object, a round object with hoses, tubes, screws, and nuts is mounted at eye level on the wall. At first it is not easy to discern what this item is, until the inscription "thoratec" arouses a strange suspicion: the word "thorax" in combination with the reference to technology makes clear that this is an artificial heart. The feeling of general security turns into a strange sense of individual illness, suffering, and the fear of death.

Foyer

For the series *Subtraction as Addition* (2012), Raphael Hefti had glass panes of various sizes treated with countless layers of anti-reflective coatings. As a result, the original purpose of the coating turns into its opposite: unexpectedly iridescent color gradients become visible on the glass. This work as well as the above mentioned work *Replaying the Mistakes of a Broken Hammer* were acquired by the Kunstverein St. Gallen for the museum's collection. It marks the end of the exhibition as well as the beginning. When visitors enter the upper foyer, they look directly at the coated pane of glass and are reflected in it, and so are confronted with their own body at the very beginning of the exhibition.