

# Lena Rosa Händle

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Ranging across photography, installation, collage and sculpture, Lena Rosa Händle's practice negotiates a vast openness in conjunction with an intense focus on people and their social realities, their visibilities and cultural codes. Her art is often linked with (queer-) feminist discourses and questions identity.

She works with methods like rewriting and appropriation, which lead to shifts of meanings and unmask the construction of culture. In this search, she transmits an intellectual confrontation combined with a sensitive approach to her use of materials.

Lena Rosa Händle's works critically reflect on socio-critical, political and historical issues and foreground utopian potentials for more livable futures.

## Chapter 1: Portrait/Identity/Social/Care

I (We) Feel Seen, 2017-18

To Care is Revolutionary, 2019

Reclaiming Gestures 1, 2015 & 2, 2017

Laughing Inverts, 2015

## Chapter 2: Environment and Crises

Thank You for Shopping with us! 2021

That comes from within/

Das kommt von innen, 2020

## Chapter 3: Queer-feminist History

Pelze/Furs, 2015

Mädchen Unter Bäumen/ Girls under Trees, 2016

# I (We) Feel Seen

9 C-Prints, 11 Inkjet Prints, framed, 50 x 65 cm, Text, 2018

In the current political climate in which cis-male camaraderie is gaining power, this installation explores the in/visibility and diversity of queer-feminist artists. The analog portrait photographs are testimonies of dialog-based encounters at the artist's Residency Studio in New York. How do the encounters and connections between Lena Rosa Händle and the protagonists become visible?

Taking time, seeing, listening and engaging with are the starting points of this series, which subsequently produces connection, a process of learning, appreciation and (temporary) community.

A text by the protagonist about their picture hangs, equally framed under each portrait. An additional text by Lena Rosa Händle shares observations, feelings and comments on the encounters.

Through these two layers of text, views are expanded, levels of social inequality made visible, as well as questions asked about the portrait itself.



I (we) feel *seen*, not glamorous but *there*.



As we look at this photo, larger than when we first saw it, we realize how tired we both look. Being in these bodies, these black, lesbian bodies, is exhausting, but every day we keep moving forward and holding each other's hands through it all. When we face the world, we try to cover up how tired we really are, but we realized through your photographs of us that it's powerful to show exhaustion because that's where the strength lies.



My studio is a meeting place, with the city at its feet rumbling. I invite a variety of queer-feminist artists from New York, whose work touches me to my residency studio apartment in Chelsea to take a dialogical portrait. We meet for the first time for two to three hours. It's afternoon, we drink coffee on my balcony. I watch, feel and listen. Connections form. Our eyes meet.

I take pictures on three roll films.

What does the portrait produce? What does it depict? How do the individuals portrayed perceive their picture chosen by me? What do I learn from these encounters? What does the picture convey? What does my gaze show?

The artists use their picture with my name, I show their pictures with their names.

# Encounters and Biographies

text by Lena Rosa Händle, translation Kelly Ann Gardener

## Eva Kollisch and Naomi Replansky

The reading by the two Jewish Poets moves me profoundly. Eva survived the Holocaust by emigrating with a Kindertransport from Baden near Vienna. The vast dimension of this experience is felt in her essays. I am the only German in the room. I approach them after the reading. Their openness towards me and their enthusiasm for talking German eases me. We become friends, go for dinner while discussing politics and thinking about translating between languages. When Naomi and Eva first met, they were in their sixties. They've been a couple for thirty years and live together in two separate apartments in a building on the Upper West Side in Manhattan.

Eva Kollisch (\*1925 Baden near Vienna) is a writer and literary and German scholar. She was a Professor at the Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York.

Naomi Replansky (\*1918 Bronx, New York) is a writer and was a translator of among others texts by Bertold Brecht. Additionally, she worked as a programmer for many years.

## Ness and Nia

Nila & Ness enter my studio and give me a warm hug. Their great love is constantly present. In front of the camera, they melt with each other and seem to have forgotten me completely. I say „It feels like a mirror of my own relationship“ and just at that moment, I receive a message from my partner. As a white couple, we always feel safer. I can tell by looking at Nia that constant awareness and defensiveness are tiring.

## Lena Rosa Händle

This self-portrait was taken with a self-timer during the early days of my residency in New York. I turn my gaze towards the city, I feel lofty and free yet at the same time a responsibility for this scholarship. Lena Rosa Händle (\*1978 Berlin) is an artist, photographer and teacher. Alongside her artistic practice, she has worked at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna for the past four years.



# Cuidarse es revolucionario/ To Care is Revolutionary

20 inkjet prints (10 text poster in spanish), framed, 50 x 75 cm,  
Text, 2018  
text by Wendy Navarro, translation Kevin Gil

The specific conditions of the context in Cantabria and the contacts she establishes with a series of people and their works as part of the investigative process, lead her interest towards the lives of women from different generations, social classes and both rural and urban environments -linked to the cultural, political and social history of the region-, whose lives and/or professions revolve around the care to others. The artist's studio in Barcenilla de Piélagos was the setting for meetings where the affinities, connections and shared experiences acted as a common thread and link between all the works, and where Lena Rosa Händle provided the care to them by listening, looking and reflecting their stories.

Each photograph goes along with a text written by each one of this women about their own portrait. That way Lena Rosa Händle equals two perspectives and planes of meaning: on one hand, her point of view through the photography and, on the other hand, the point of view of each women portrayed through their writing, making us participants to these meetings, and privileging, in any case, the value of their voices, emotions and thoughts.



Good. CALM.  
It reminds me of my mother.  
Thank you.



My studio is a meeting place. When I connect with someone or their works during the first two weeks in Santander or Barcenilla, I invite them to my studio at "Los Nogales" in Barcenilla de Piélagos, Cantabria, Spain. They all have something in common: they deeply care for others.

To care is revolutionary. To care is not visible.

We meet for a couple of hours and drink coffee on my terrace. I watch, feel, listen and learn. Connections start to grow. Our eyes meet. I take pictures.

What does the portrait do? What does it show? How do people see those images of themselves? What do I learn? What does my gaze reveal?

The protagonists use the photos with my name, I show their photos with their names.



What a life full of surprises mine is. Just when I only expected grief and some joy now and then (as one of my granddaughters says these days), I look like a "media" woman. I really like the photograph on the terrace of that beautiful big house, "Los Nogales" (The walnut trees). Well, actually I don't like it, I absolutely love it.

It perfectly captures my current mood. From the bottom of an immense sadness, my spirited nature emerges and, somehow, shines through my expression. I didn't expect such an accurate photograph, that's why my joy is so sincere.

I feel well and protected, carrying a simple messenger bag over my shoulder with a beautiful tribute to the wonderful Rosa Luxemburg printed on it. And on my chest I pinned a badge, that I wear as my flag.

The flag of the Republic of the people.

# Encontros and Biographies

text by Lena Rosa Händle, translation Kevin Gil

## Amparo Echevarria

She quickly earned my affection with her kind and restrained way, and fast we establish a warm connection. Actually, she had a different idea of what her life will be, but there isn't much work in Spain, says Amparo. She has always tried to please others, first her parents and then she got married at a very young age. She separated from her husband when their children were still very young. She talks with great pride about her sons. Both of them are studying right now and she wishes a better future for them. She worries about one of them, because he is gay. I take pictures of Amparo during her shift at her workplace and I hope that she feels comfortable with it. The next day Amparo is radiant. She tells me that I helped her out of a dark place by inviting her to participate in my project.

Amparo Echevarria (1958, Maliaño) has been working seventeen years as a housekeeper at the hotel "Los Nogales", where the residency is located, in Barcenilla de Piélagos, Cantabria. Before her children were born, she sewed elaborate clothes.

## Marta Peredo

Marta talks with plenty of love and bright eyes about her family and her four grown children. She has an incredible energy and an active life in which she feels needed. Her energy reminds me of my mother who has the same age. She comes to the photo session with a gift for me, a fabric bag with a printed image of Rosa Luxemburg, after whom I'm named. I don't understand some of the words she uses, they are from another time. However, our conversation gets very personal at the end. She tells me that her ex-husband cheated on her for a long time while she was taking care of her sick mother. I know it's something that happens often. My mother went through the same thing.

Marta Peredo (1936, Santander) started working at a very young age in a pharmacy where she treated and advised her clients with love and joy until she got married. Later she worked part-time in a bookstore. She has been politically active from an early age, organized in feminist and social movements. She also fought against Franco, so she had to spend time in prison several times. She is still attending and organizing feminist plenary sessions and demonstrations.

## Ester Aguado Izquierdo

Restrained, cautious and at the same time with a great sense of humour, I immediately feel that a nice and friendly connection is created between us. She comes to the photo session with a wonderful self-made ointment as a present. During the session she is quite tense and shy. I take pictures of her until it gets dark. She is lovely and cares about how I will get to my next appointment and drives me to the station. She lives in the neighbouring village and we become friends. She has a very independent relationship with her partner and they do not have children. Later he invites me to Luz's house, her mother-in-law. She spends a lot of time there taking care of this family and the garden, as well as of her own family in Valladolid. Ester Aguado Izquierdo (1975, Valladolid) works as a nurse.

## Lena Rosa Händle

I take many pictures of myself with the self-timer on the balcony of my studio. I turn my gaze into nature and at the village of Barcenilla de Piélagos. This view gives me peace and tranquillity. I pay all my attention to others—to people with a captivating personality, to feminists and those who do not call themselves like that, and often receive little attention.

Lena Rosa Händle (1978, Berlin) is an artist, photographer and teacher. In her current projects she invites (queer) feminist artists to her temporary studios (New York, Cantabria). She will continue this project in London and Graz (Austria), where she has already been invited, as well as in other locations.

## Patricia Manrique

We quickly got into a long conversation about the political situation, feminism, racism and the lack of education about queer concepts in Cantabria. She says that there is a lot of social control in Santander and that many live without coming out of the closet. The title of my work comes from her article "Fürsorge ist revolutionär" [1]. I am fascinated by her words, her clear thinking and her devotion to the community and social movements. We formed a strong connection during the conversations and the photo session. Patricia Manrique (1974, Santander) is a philosopher, journalist and lover of community. In addition, she works as a tutor and gives orientation classes in philosophy.



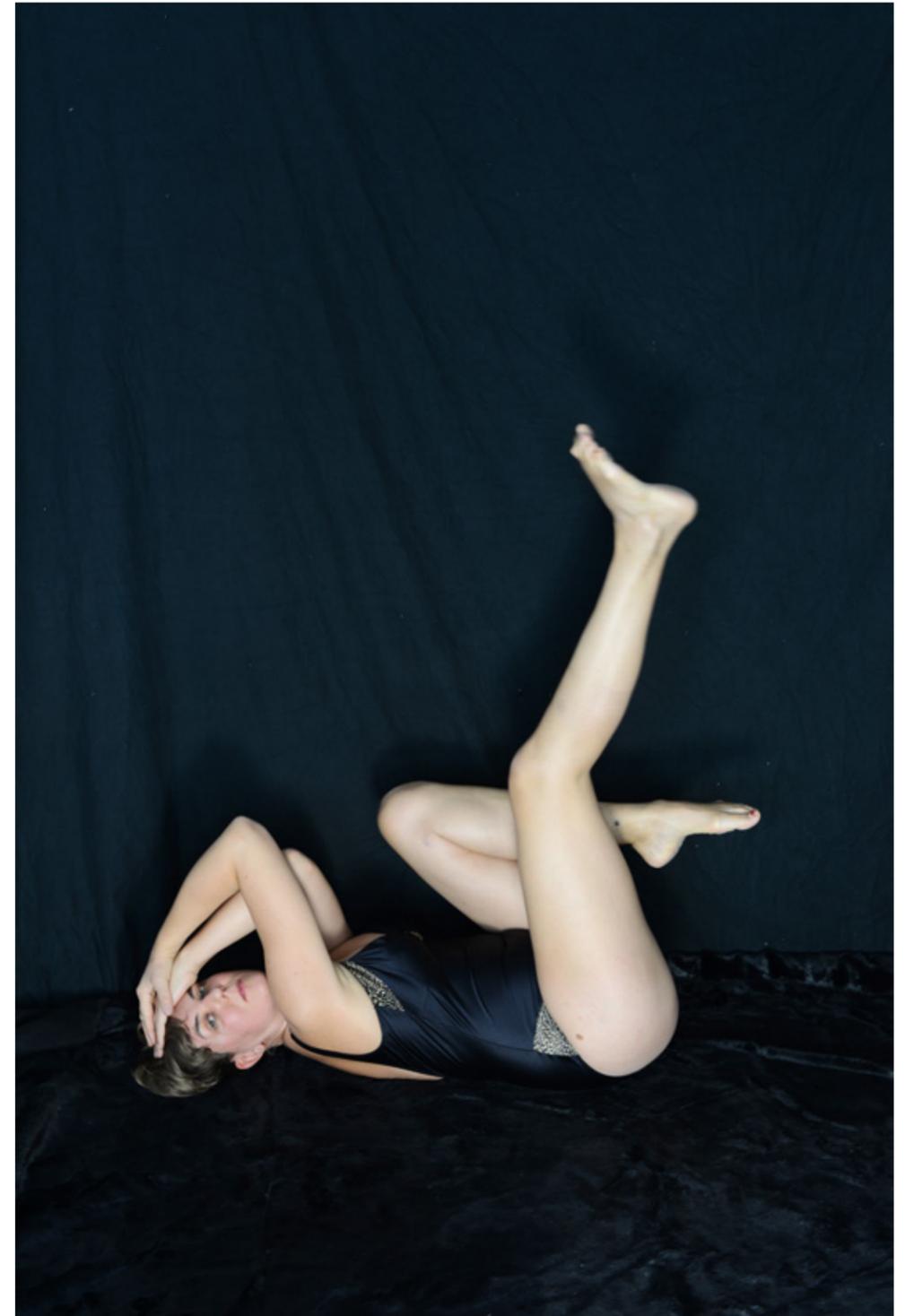
To Care is Revolutionary, Office Shows, Postsparkasse, FOTO WIEN, 2019

# Reclaiming Gestures 2

5 pigment prints, light boxes, aluminium frames, 60 x 90 cm, 2017



**GROSSE FOTOGRAFEN UND OLYMPUS (Great photographers and Olympus)**  
carbon print, light box, aluminium frame, 60 x 90 cm, 2016



**Verführerisch unser neuer Bodenbelag... Das sinnliche Erlebnis auf Parkett.**  
(Seductive our new flooring...The sensual experience on parquet.),  
carbon print, light box, aluminium frame, 60 x 90 cm, 2016

# Reclaiming Gestures 2

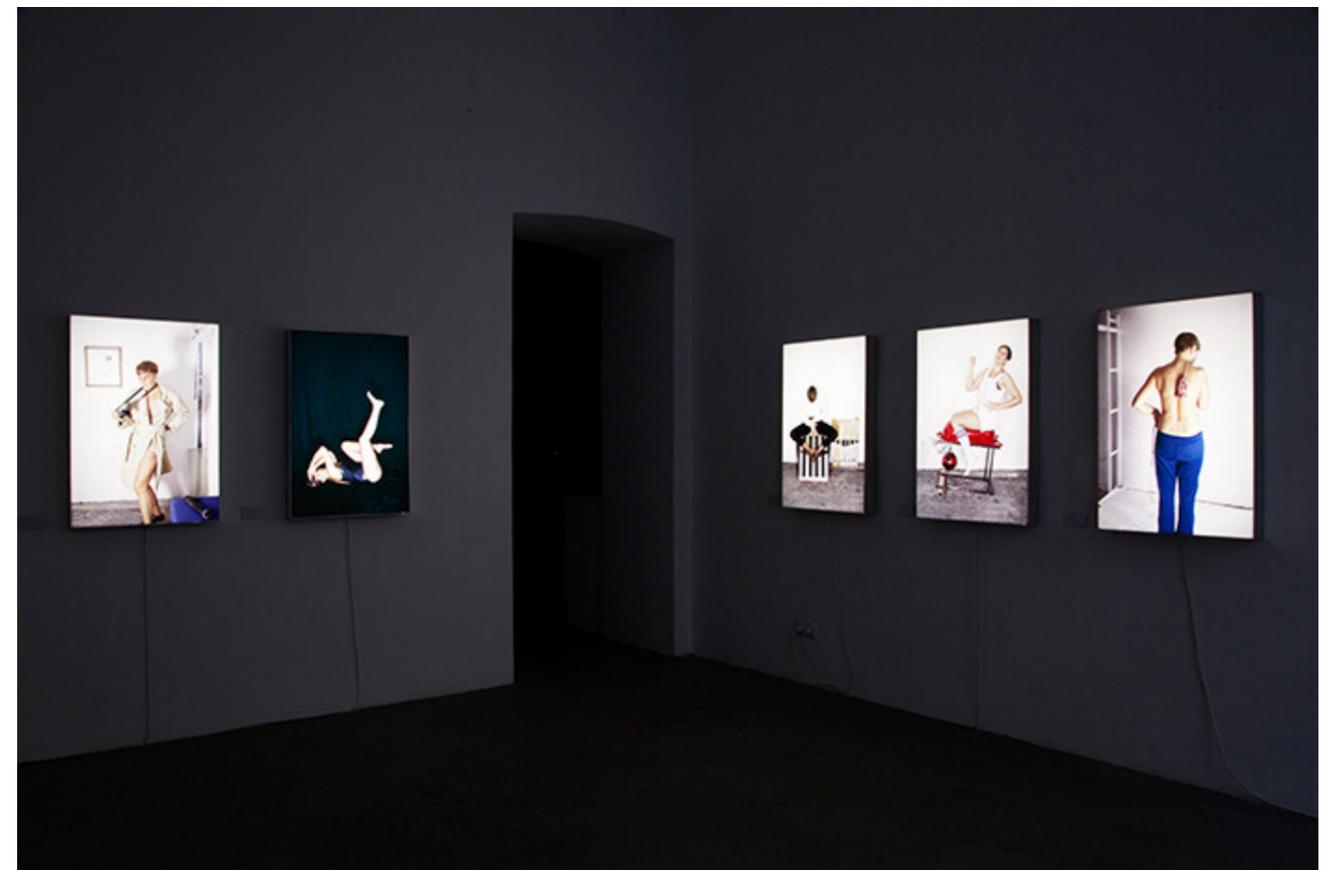
Exhibition Lena Rosa Händle and Katharina Aigner, T/abor, Vienna

text by Juliane Bischoff, translation Emily Lemon

Lena Rosa Händle's five light boxes are part of her series *Reclaiming Gestures 2*, where she negotiates depictions of the female body. The five photographs show the artist in different poses with props that cannot be clearly identified. The titles are *Grosse Fotografen und Olympus (Great Photographers and Olympus)*, *Verführerisch, unser neuer Bodenbelag...Das sinnliche Erlebnis auf Parkett (Seductive, our new flooring...the sensual experience on parquet)*, *Filter Rillos (Filter Rillos)*, *Macht Spass im Mund! (Fun in your mouth!)*, and *Jungs kommt Grillen! (Boys come to grill!)*. The high-quality carbon prints in light boxes can be interpreted as advertisements. The composition and slogan-like titles draw on advertising images, although they contradict the usual advertising aesthetic. A break occurs between the written message and the image. The artist occupies the picture in a self-determined pose. Instead of advertised products, improvised seating made of metal frames and wooden palettes, a hasty drawing on paper, and the studio space become props in the picture. In the re-staging in her studio, Lena Rosa Händle works from real existing historical and current advertisements. Roland Barthes refers to the fact that advertising photography is a system of symbols that operates with cultural codes, whose purpose is to reinforce the desire for certain products. In the advertisement this desire is no longer created only through the products and the associated lifestyle, but also through the half-naked to naked "sexy" bodies depicted. Lascivious poses serve the objectifying view in male dominated power structures. The written message in the picture steers the interpretations of the viewers. Photography, as the preferred advertising medium, creates a myth of photographic naturalness, which is connected with a heteronormative construct.

Lena Rosa Händle's staged performances appropriate the visual repertoire and give it new humorous and queer-feminist meaning. As a result, the sexism and objectification in advertising becomes obvious. In appearing as "commercial realism" (Goffman), the advertisement photograph is able to (hyper) ritualize ideas about roles. An idea of that which is absent in the supposed social situations emerges through Lena Rosa Händle's use of a visual repertoire of interactions. In her re-staging, the advertising images depart from ascriptions determined by others. The artist presents strong, self determined and humorous poses of bodies and eroticism in which queer feminist codes can be found. One reference point here is represented by writer and activist Audre Lorde, who suggests the self empowering potential of eroticism, which independently becomes the lustful moment of social interaction.

As analyses of the culture of advertising images, Lena Rosa Händle's works change the unreflected sexist prerequisites of perception that precede thought processes. They challenge everyday assumptions and present a self determined, queer-feminist, lustful appropriation of images of women.



Reclaiming Gestures 2, Exhibition: Lena Rosa Händle & Katharina Aigner, T/abor, Vienna, 2017

# Reclaiming Gestures 1

2 digital fotos, frametex backlight, dual-sided LED lightbox, steel, 2074 x 1074 cm, 2015

In Reclaiming Gestures1 Lena Rosa Händle works with gestures and poses from sexist advertising. The images include staged performances and artist portraits, depicting queer-feminist appropriations in the studio. The individual images refer to specific historical and current advertisements whose iconographic poses the artist appropriates, reinterprets, and presents as light boxes. The self-portrait photographs suggest references to female artists of the feminist avant-garde.

Two photographs from this work were shown in the solo show Reclaiming Gestures, 2015, supported by the City of Vienna Women's Department. The two-sided large format light box engaged in a dialog with the artwork 'Kubus EXPORT - der Transparente Raum' and with public space.



**Zu schön um wahr zu sein (Too beautiful to be true),**  
digital foto, dual-sided LED lightbox, 2074 x 1074 cm, 2015



**Wenn's lustig war, wenn's lustig wird (When it was fun, when it gets fun),**  
digital foto, dual-sided LED lightbox, 2074 x 1074 cm, 2015



Reclaiming Gestures 1, Kubus EXPORT, 2015

# Laughing Inverts

Photographs 2006 – 2010

Artist book, Kehrer publisher Heidelberg-Berlin, 2015

Texts in german and english by Diedrich Diederichsen, Elke Krasny,

Elly Clarke & Lena Rosa Händle

16,4 x 24 cm, 200 pages, 82 color- and 44 b/w images

3 c-prints 100 x 120 cm, 2 c-prints 70 x 100 cm

2 c-prints 60 x 80 cm, all framed behind glas

**Jump Cuts on Laughing Inverts,  
text by Diedrich Diederichsen, translation Emily Lemon**

The last time I read the term “inverts” was in Proust, or more specifically in the translation of research by Eva Rechel-Mertens. It is one of those antiquated words for homosexuality that now seems to make it possible to describe non-heterosexual orientations differently than through narrow classifications like homo or bisexual. It actually seems appropriate for contemporary projections, because it bespeaks twists, turns, and folds that are more reminiscent of a Möbius strip than a two-part society in which we either belong to one part or the other. Indeed, Proust uses the term in the multifaceted sense.

On one hand, the inverts have anything but a solid foundation of a simply antagonistic, anti-normal sexual orientation beneath them. Unlike a significant part of contemporary queer theory, which emphasizes overcoming the gender binary in favor of an open continuum in a liberating sense, for Proust it was precisely the polarity of man and woman that ensured endless depths. Because within every woman could be a man or another woman, within every man a woman (or another man), and the same thing would be repeated on the next level in a complex branched system of increasingly more confusing bifurcation. The inversions continue spiraling downward and undermine every clear vision of orientation, but not without using the two sides again and again.

On the other hand, Proust sets the real heteronormative world surrounding him in fiction as a great lesbian conspiracy. Because in the novel, Proust's real male lovers become women (in order to avoid outing himself), who, when they resign themselves to the heterosexual pressure of reality, begin relationships with women who then become inverted – i.e. lesbians – in the fictional perspective. This results in an unreality in which normal appears as though it were always “inverted,” where as the world of the inverted is merely another twist and turn of those people who were already twisted or ready to turn anyway.

In Lena Rosa Händle's book *Laughing Inverts* the subjects have long since plunged into this abyss and have let the Möbius strip of inversion show them the tangled way

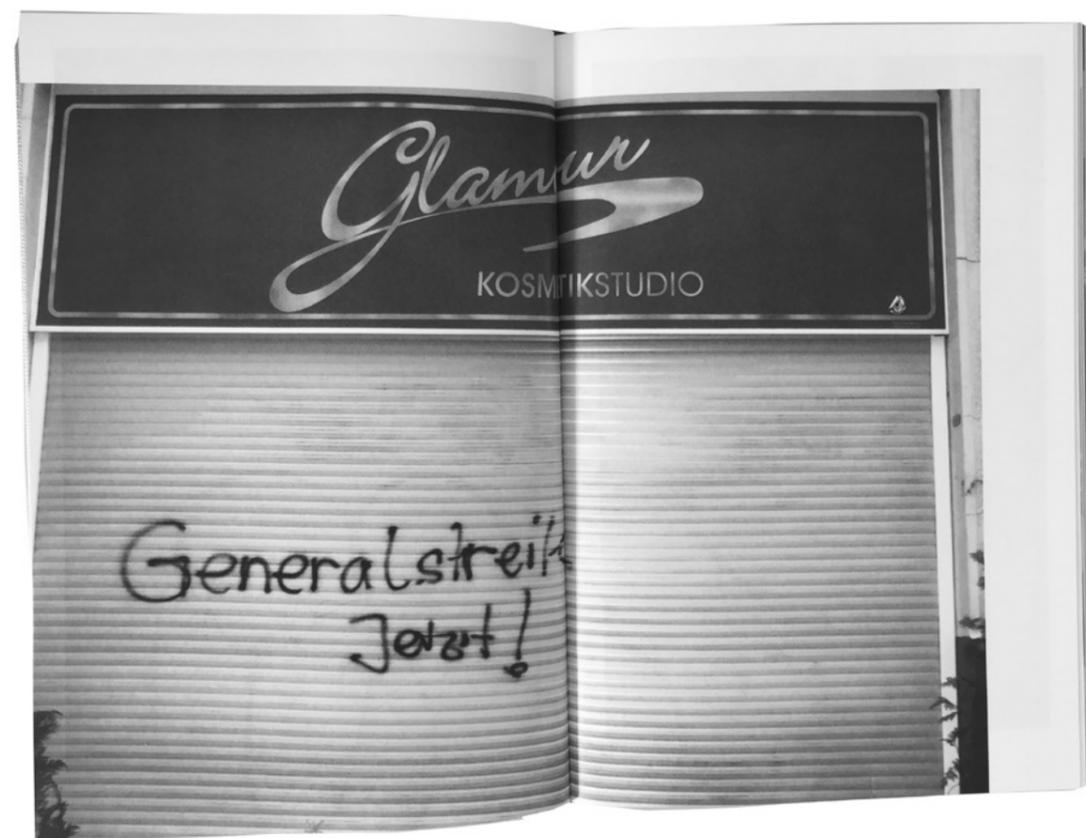
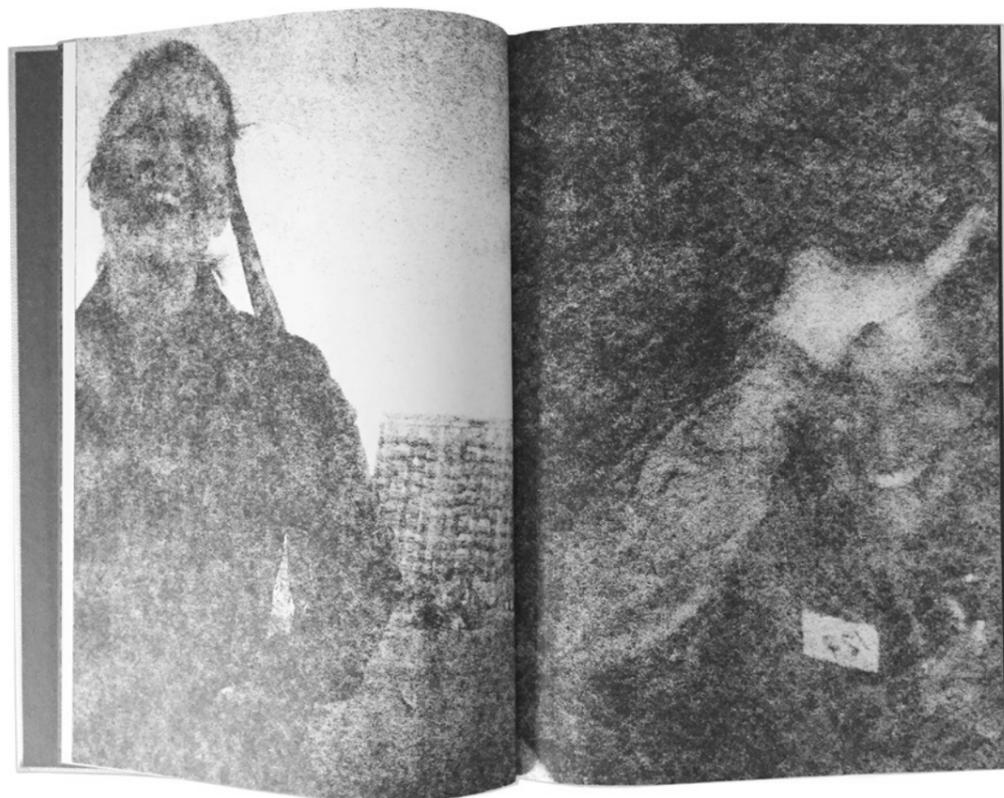
– albeit not necessarily tragic, bitter and heroic, like in so many stories, and also not melancholic. Instead, as the title suggests, laughing. This laughter is not coming from the distance of a safe, possibly ironic position; it is the laughter of people who are in the thick of it – and yet often somewhere else.

At first glance, the book follows a certain tradition of sub and counterculture photography that is based on testimony and mainly communicates that another life, which few can imagine to be real, was or is possible – which is why it requires the testimonial medium of photography. One need only think of the often diary-like depictions of Larry Clarke, Peter Hujar, or Nan Goldin's own circles of friends living on the edge, also with shifted focal points Wolfgang Tillmans' early work. But what distinguishes the described practices, both historically and in their artistic character, is that the artists mentioned above generally try to cohere the story and the sequence of images. The dialectic of the subcultural in its classical period, specifically liberation at the expense of compartmentalization to attain exclusivity, was incredibly effective.

Lena Rosa Händle's approach is almost the opposite of this. Although we can assume that the scenes from the exciting, intense, excessive life that we see here are not taking place far away from each other socioeconomically and that they include people who not only share commonalities of life content, culture, and politics, but actually know each other or could have met, each photograph seems like a new world to us. Changing the frame of reference is the main strategy of the whole story, more than that of each photograph. Outside/inside, natural/artificial light, group/individual, interaction with the camera/absorption, transparent readability/opacity – all of these contrasts and their potential modulations are thoroughly savored in the sequence of the individual photographs.

The result is a quality of photography that is only just evolving, mainly in the sequential storytelling element of the book, which literally presents photography's political-subcultural side in a very different light than what was common in earlier (self) representations – the artist appears in at least one photograph. What we see is a precarious, threatened, more crisis-laden environment, a world in which there are no more guaranteed safe spaces. But at the same time, there is no exclusion and formation of a subcultural elite, which was associated with earlier movements and scenes. The outness and openness that characterizes these images leads to laughter with which the subjects confront the situation you end up in today if you want to lead a life that someone sang so dreamily about more than a half a century ago: “I don't know where I am going, I don't know who I am going to be.”

The fact that someone manages, wants to and has to manage, to make such a decision without the starry-eyed self-elevation, the eternal and latent colonial adventurism, that someone has and had to establish themselves in an everyday life that has the advantage of being attainable, the disadvantage of actually being threatened by the inhospitality of cities (which cannot be avoided) and their prices – that is the situation that is acknowledged here with a laugh.



Laughing Inverts, artist book, 16,4 x 24 cm, 2015



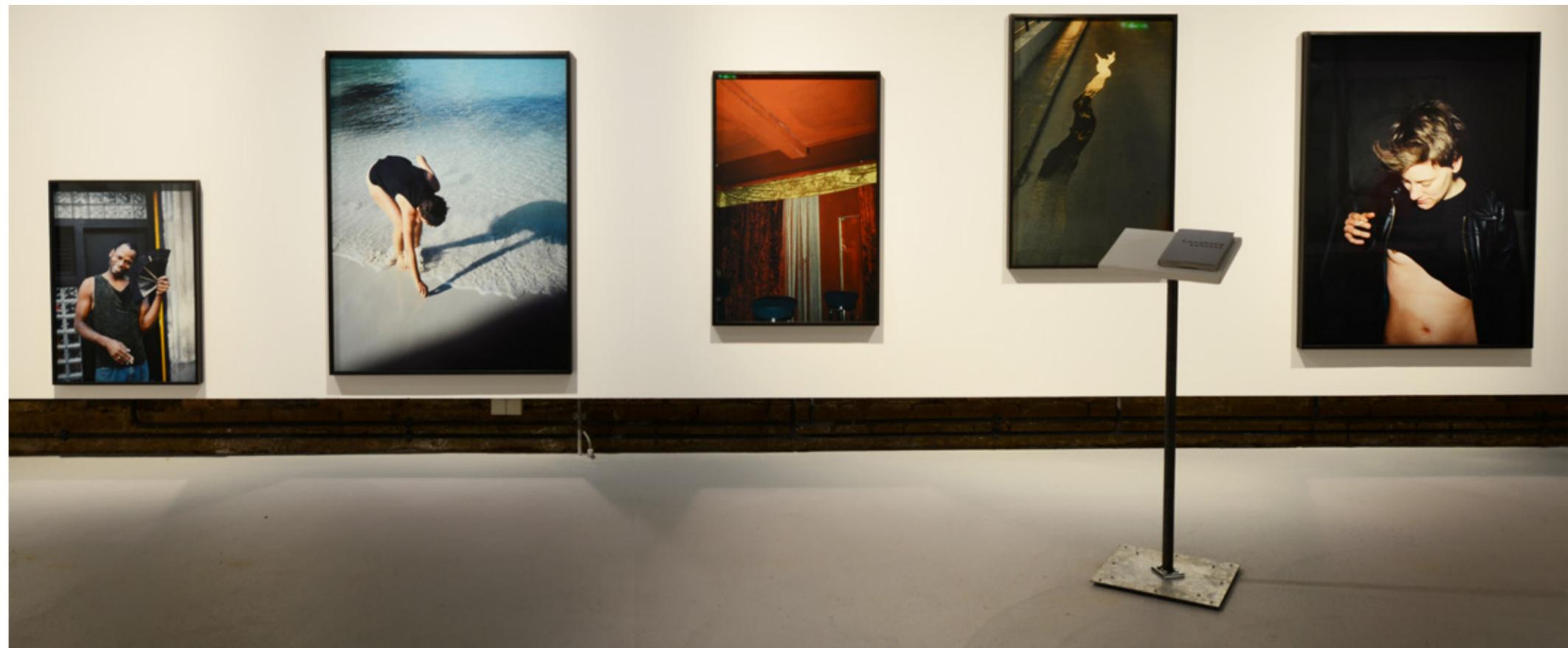
Waterbody (Wassermensch), c-print, framed behind glas, 70 x 100 cm, 2008



Cat, c-print, framed behind glas, 100 x 120 cm, 2007



Foto: Sven Bergelt



above: WIN/WIN, Laughing Inverts, Halle 14, Spinnerei, Leipzig, 2016

down: I Dreamt We Were Alive, Ausstellungsansichten, KUNST HAUS Wien, 2017

# Thank you for Shopping with Us!

Plastic sculptures, different dimensions, 2021  
text by Frederike Sperling, (das weisse haus)

Exhibition Hybrid Art Fair, RIU Hotel, Madrid, May 2021  
In cooperation with das weisse haus & Austria Cultural Forum, Madrid

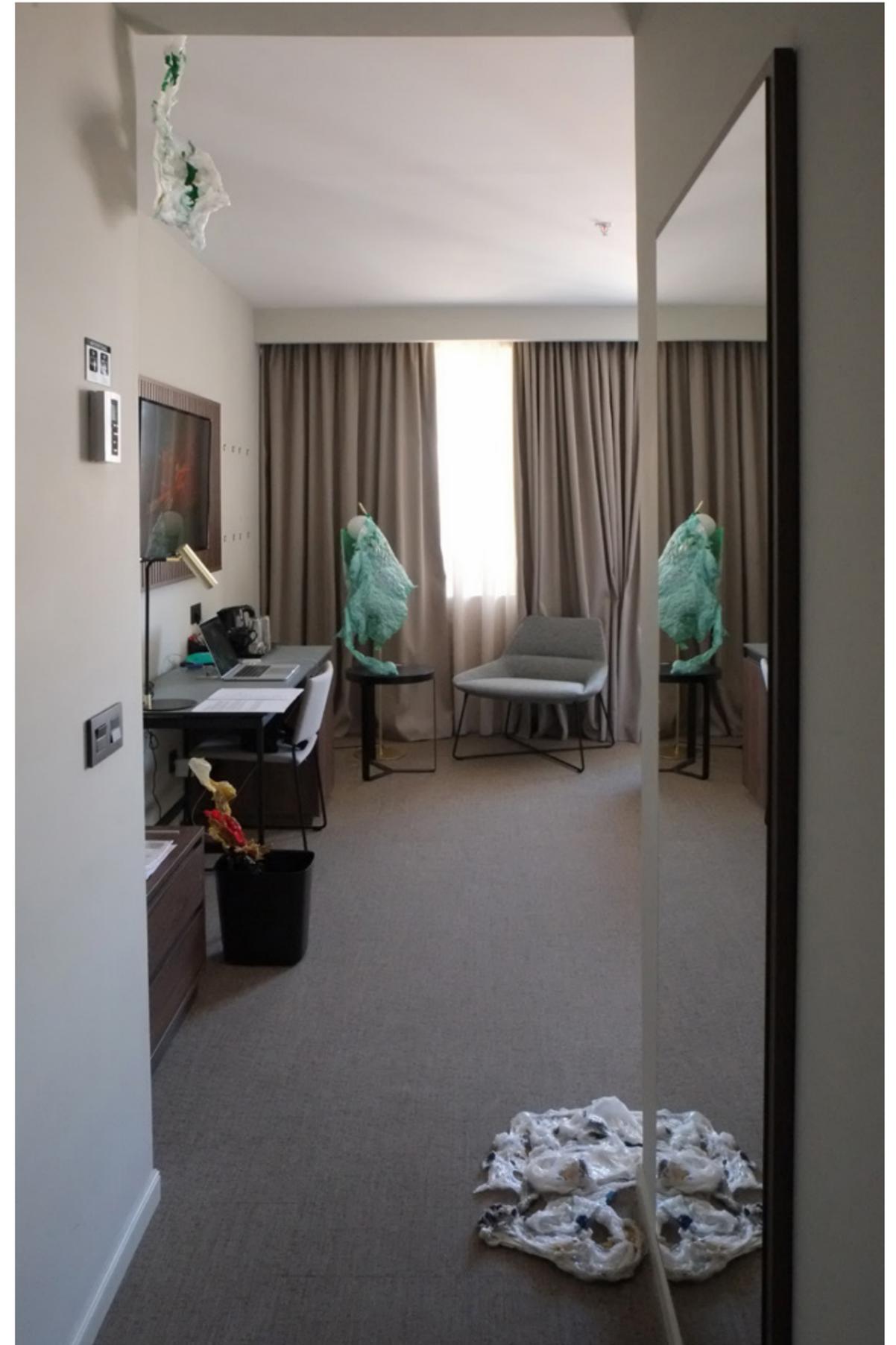
With her variously-sized sculptures, Lena Rosa Händle zooms into the complex dependencies between plastic and turbocapitalism, ultimately raising urgent questions around the affects and consequences of toxic waste for nature and its diverse ecosystems.

Multiple plastic objects are hanging or laying throughout the space. Like tentacular organisms, they gradually infiltrate the room – morphing out of the Riu Hotel's hidden cracks and crevices. What or who are they and what are they up to? Will they do harm? Oscillating between states of living and non-living, these creatures evade any deterministic fixation. Instead, they mutate and fluctuate, seemingly ready to change rhythms and directions in no time. Their skin, though rough, is ready to bend and twist into immediate action.

The versatility and animate features of Lena Rosa Händle's sculptures are reminiscent of the very material characteristics of plastic. Durable and hardly degradable, plastic is inside all of us and everywhere. In the course of the sixty years of plastic mass production, 8.3 billion tonnes have been produced – out of which merely 9% haven been recycled. Plastic pollution – especially in the form of microplastics – is a direct threat to wildlife habitats: In the Pacific Ocean alone, three million tons of plastic are floating between California and Hawaii with the size of Central Europe. Unsurprisingly, there are six times more items of plastic debris than plankton in that area.

Lena Rosa Händle transforms the uncanny truths about our relationship to a toxic material into an immersive spatial intervention. She makes us understand that plastic, a key component for global capitalism, will not go, it will only become more and ultimately take over.

... Thank You For Shopping With Us!



Thank You for Shopping with Us! Exhibition view, RIU Hotel, Hybrid Art Fair, Madrid



Green Skin 107 x 59 x 4 cm



Thank You for Shopping with Us! 268 x 59 x 2 cm



Black Nest: 98 x 15 x 19 cm



Black Water (Above): 45 x 22 x 5 cm; Skeleton: 31 x 10,5 x 9 cm



# Das kommt von innen/ It Comes From Within

essayistic photographic film, 6:20 min, 2020

In her thinking, Rosa Luxemburg combines political freedom with social justice and reminds us that freedoms in neoliberalism privilege the few and discriminate against the many. Various chains of association and levels of meaning concerning the current political situation during the corona pandemic are connected with Rosa Luxemburg's observations of animals and nature.

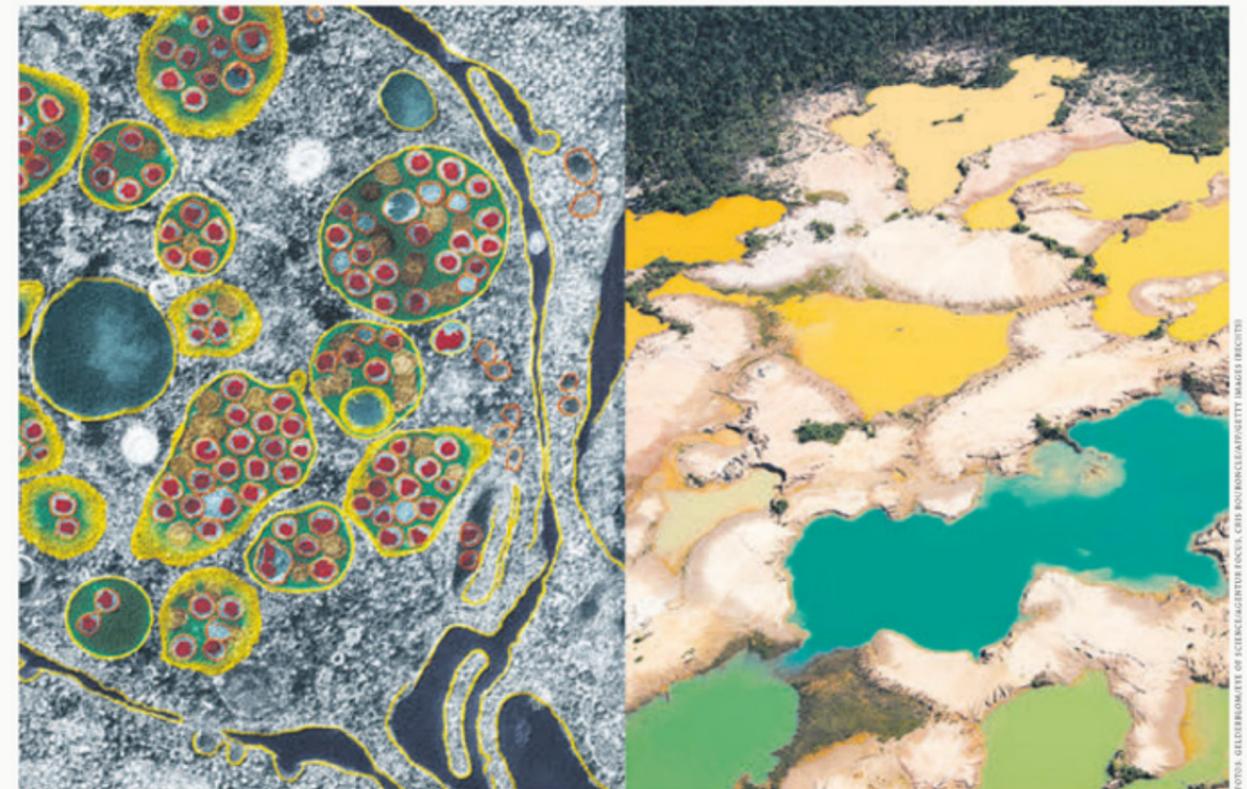
The corona crisis reveals social conditions clearly. Neoliberal globalisation and its treatment of nature and mankind are partly responsible for the emergence and spread of the virus. Questions about freedom and restrictions on freedom are being raised new by the pandemic.

Lena Rosa Händle combines text excerpts by Rosa Luxemburg ("Letters from Prison", 1917 and "On the Russian Revolution", 1918) with media images, images of animals and nature, and with images that pick up on symbols of Western freedom to create an essayistic photographic film.

ema

der Freitag | Nr. 12 | 19. März 2020

iese Krise stellt unser System in Frage – das ist die Chance, neu zu denken



Links: Ultradünnschnitt von Corona-Viren (rot) im Inneren einer Wirtszelle. Rechts: Luftbild gerodeter Amazonas-Flächen

Image from: *Das kommt von innen (It Comes From Within)*, 2020



Earth Day observances in Florida in 1970. Associated Press



Images from: *Das kommt von innen (It Comes From Within)*, 2020

# Pelze (Furs)

Neon light, aluminium grids, 50 x 150 cm, 2015

*Pelze* refers to a space for women and lesbians (*Frauen Lesben-Raum*) *PELZE-multimedia*, which existed in a self-organized house project and former fur shop in Berlin from 1980 to 1994 as an international avant-garde meeting place for artists and activists.

*PELZE-multimedia* was, in many ways, a complex, and challenging project. Not only did the space host (international) exhibitions and events with monthly, often taboo, topics, it was also an important meeting place where a diverse mix of people (among others transgender people, sex workers, and women\* of color) were welcome. The project played an important role in developing a sensual, autonomous and self-confident handling of lesbian and queer-feminist roles and sexualities.

The sign for the former fur shop, a neon logo written with round typography, stayed outside the shop entrance and became the logo and name with the addition of multimedia. The iconography, SM (*Venus in Furs*), sexual connotation as well as their own interpretations of furs, formed the identity, self-label, and program of this women's\* lesbian, feminist, sex positive, and early queer project space.

For the exhibition at Kubus EXPORT – the transparent space, a women's\* space and artwork by VALIE EXPORT, the neon writing was transformed into a sculpture. Grids and chains are part of the sculpture, making reference to the aesthetics and (sado-masochist) connotation of *PELZE-multimedia*.

The translation of the original typography of the word *Pelze* by hand into a neon writing sculpture, is both a citation of the logo that *PELZE-multimedia* appropriated from the vacant fur shop and a homage to the project *PELZE-multimedia*.



Pelze, neon light, aluminium grids, 50 x 150 cm, 2015



Pelze, Gay Museum (Schwules Museum), Berlin, 2018

Pelze, Kubus EXPORT, Vienna, 2015

# Mädchen unter Bäumen

digital print on acrylic fabric, embroidery, 220 x 126 cm, 2016  
text by Barbara Mahlke

At the Master School for Art Education, it was compulsory for female students to take 22 hours per week per semester of needlework in the 5th and 6th semesters. In the course of establishing this Master School in 1941, the first female instructors at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna were appointed as teachers of needlework. *Mädchen unter Bäumen* uses the tapestry of the same name from 1941, which students embroidered in a laborious collaboration with their art teacher and needlework teacher. This ornamental wall decoration for the classroom shows a self-portrait of the girls in nature, which is framed by this saying: "Ye people, learn but from the meadow flower, how ye can please God and be beautiful as well."

The artistic work inserts two embroidered personal ads from the *Wochenschau* newsreel that appeared in Vienna in 1942 into *Mädchen unter Bäumen*: "Girl seeks correspondence with girlfriend under modern" and "Lady wants girlfriend for cinema and theater." Such displays are the only publicly visible words, and are among the few supporting documents, on lesbian life during the Nazi regime in Vienna. "Girl" and "lady" had been codes in lesbian subculture since the first women's movement. The colors purple and violet and the specifying of a girlfriend were other indicators of homosexuality in the 1920s. In her 1999 book *Verbotene Verhältnisse* ("Forbidden Relationships"), historian Claudia Schoppmann has worked on the history associated with the 1942 ads based on Viennese court records. The ad placed by the youth educator Lisbeth L. resulted in several exchanges of letters and at least one brief relationship. The Gestapo opened one of the letters and the women\* were brought to trial and sentenced to prison for "fornication abhorrent to nature."

Like a subtitle, the stitched-in notes in violet and turquoise create a lesbian connotation, and an appropriation takes place. The powerful ornaments are over-written; the original sentence and the image are blurry. The picture of the tapestry, digital printed on acrylic fabric, presented like a banner, refers to the public space as well as to the first women's movement. The title can be read in humorous, subversive, and ironic ways. What is the group of nineteen girls\* doing under the large trees? One gives another flowers, one plays guitar, one girl\* with short hair leans squatted on a tree, her fist directed at another – they seem to be having fun! Is it a perfect cruising area? Is this a formation of a subversive group? Is it possible to read the narratives in a queer way?



Foto: Lisa Rastl

Mädchen unter Bäumen, digital print on acrylic fabric, embroidery, 220 x 126 cm, 2016



Fotos Lena Rosa Händle and Lisa Rastl



Uncanny Materials, Founding Moments of Art Education.  
Mädchen unter Bäumen (Girls under Trees), Exhibit, Vienna, 2016