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## Have Sanity

Lisa Biedlingmaier, Anton Bruhin, Lissy Funk, Roman Gysin, Liz Magic Laser, Shirana Shahbazi, Manon Wertenbroek, Trevor Yeung 12.02.21 – 10.04.21

Spread across three locations on the premises of Sihlquai, *Have Sanity* in a very expanded sense looks at the topic of sanity. The title might be reminiscent of some kind of good wishing for others, as in "Have faith" or "Be Good" but here rather as a made-up wish "Have Sanity."

The exhibition comes as a reflection on the many ethical considerations that we've been exposed to during the pandemic, such as the politics of choice, neoliberal rhetoric, biopolitics, self-care and mental health, spirituality and death. The positions, both new site-specific works and works dating back as far as 1972, have allowed us to relate to and grapple with many of these current topics. Varied in its approaches the exhibition features video, sculpture, installation and textile-based work which oscillate in different directions be it in their formal or conceptual attitude.

The word *sanity* from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin word *sanus* implies being rational and having 'soundness of mind' and inherently implies a certain kind of recollection. In the past year this composure was in some ways or another imposed on the individual. We needed to 'stay calm and collected.' It was a regulatory induced call for inertia, a humble submissiveness to forces that the individual as part of an organism could not in close flesh and blood collectively act upon.

On display are four wall hangings by Swiss textile artist Lissy Funk (1909-2005) whose art is often characterized by a serene and spiritual aesthetic. Funk's biography is a rich and fascinating one. One that was marked by contradictory influences. She started out as a member of the troupe led by American dancer Mary Wigman. She was a gymnastics teacher, a needlework teacher and a Home Economics teacher. Despite the penchant toward abstract imageries her work was not well-received in the artworld at the time. The concrete artists were en vogue in Zurich and in hindsight we've experienced how textile art was a gendered issue. Her grandson Cyril Kuhn (an artist himself) describes her as a bizarre yet touching woman. When listening to her he found it hard sometimes to tell the truth from fiction and it was only until later that he was able to fully appreciate her eccentricities: "She started out as a horrible authoritarian, but later in life became very moderate and kind. At 90 she was incredibly flexible due to her dance background. I remember her saying, "I'm just a grey little mouse," while being secretly the toughest, strongest person you'll ever meet."" Her early work portrays mostly folklore motifs and it was in the 1960s that Funk began to increasingly move towards abstraction. In the catalogue for Funk's 1989 retrospective at the Chicago Art Institute curator Sigrid Barten compares

Funk's work to Alfred Manessier and points out the following: "While representational images are no longer perceptible, their compositions cannot be characterized as totally abstract. Manessier, a leading figure in the field of abstract religious art, equates the ecclesiastical with the meditative and considers it the duty of religious art to help create an atmosphere conducive to devotion and composure." There is historically a rich web of relationships between art and spirituality. Perhaps as solace during trying times or as a means for reflection, as well as a fascination with the sacred regardless of it being someone else's.

Italy has recently seen one of its institutions turn into a haven for healthcare. Castello di Rivoli has been turned into a Covid-19 vaccination center wherein patients will be able to experience the murals by Claudia Comte while being treated. In a recent press release the director Christov-Bakargiev expressed the following: "Art has always helped, healed and cured—indeed some of the first museums in the world were hospitals. Even while our exhibitions are closed, our buildings can continue to serve this purpose and fulfill our mission: *Arte cura*—art helps." Another initiative closer to home is that of a cluster of museum associations in Switzerland who are currently pushing for the reopening of museums for individual visits because they are sites that amongst other things "contribute to the spiritual and mental well-being of all."

The pandemic has brought forward a whole set of issues that were latently settling their roots into our post-truth, post-internet, post-capitalist, post-... society. Based on the modern illusory belief that humans try to circumvent death, by means of technical and scientific advancement, humanity as a whole has become ever more powerful, strong and longeval while at the same time leaving individuals alone in facing their fragility. The lockdowns have brought about oxymoronic catch phrases such as "shared solitude" and "new normal" and of course "social distancing."

In various of Roman Gysin's new wall sculptures the material juxtapositions or spatial compositions evoke a feeling of human presence. In *Doppelstück II* there is a dialectical tension between the separated parts, giving perhaps rise to thoughts about distance and proximity or alignment. The volumetric blocks are irregularly assembled forming elements of architecture, namely a stone-like wall. Their making involves a laborious process of chipping wood with a special forestry tool called a bill hook. The works reflect an introspection in the act of making, an endearing commitment to craft and detail. A hybrid of painting and sculpture there is something suggestive of postwar abstract shaped canvases of the 1960s. The artist states: "The conventions of painting is something I am very interested in. The referential aspects of art and what they convey because of historical context is what I like to play with."

In *Doppelstück II* the individual pieces are covered in canvas and treated with a glue-chalk. Assembled together they hint at masonry, a fragment made up of many compartmentalized parts. The metal chains are reminiscent of a door chain suggestive of being bound indoors and in many cases around the world, strict confinement. In severe cases there are those that have been painfully struck by fear of what is

happening outdoors and "securely" locking themselves inside. They are separated units that make a whole yet are separated by a crooked spacing, a gap. A metaphorical image that could bring to mind many contemporary situations or references be it existential quotes by Orson Welles, isolate visions by Francis Bacon, or ideas of limits of language and the deep gulf of Bataille.

There is an antithetical quality to his work: a genuine sincerity in the artificial and a desire to escape the everyday. Yet, it unravels all sorts of strangeness in the ordinary. There is a visual semblance of a staged environment be it a castle, the interior of a restaurant with its faux stone panels or an amusement park haunted house. It is this simulated quality that Gysin is interested in. The potential of a fabricated reality or an escape from reality made up of loaded symbols or forms that have the capacity to create or insinuate aura, nostalgia or homeliness. Gysin takes a liking in this kind of fetishization of objects in that these gestures or modes of showiness raise questions about taste and the establishment of aesthetic codes as well the desire to obtain cultural capital through aesthetics. Home décor items as peacock tails. Unhewn stones as spiritual portals. (Natural rough stones having historically in ancient societies been believed to be the home of spirits and gods.)

Wall Fence (2021) is work composed of wood and textile. The horizontal poles are found objects used to make fenced zones, perhaps for animal stock to be fenced in/out. These architectural fragments abound with visual connections be it a log house or the lifestyle associated with country living. The chiffon could evoke certain imaginings of a veiled presence. The contrast between materials is stark, as is the play between density and color. There is a polished rectangular wooden piece embedded within. One could go as far as to compare it to a standing draped figure or an icon. A reference can be made here to Renaissance painting or religious historical painting. For Gysin, an admirer of Titian, one of such paintings is Titian's *The Burial of Christ* (1559). Emotionally evocative, the painting engenders feelings of sacredness, tragedy, movement and tension.

The symbolism of cloth is prevalent in many depictions of the "The Resurrection of Christ" be it by Veronese or Botticelli or "The Immaculate Conception" by El Greco or Rubens. In Donal Cooper's review of *Veiled Presence* an insightful connection is made between body, drapery and metaphor: "... drapery was central to the figurative and rhetorical intensity of Renaissance art, comparable in importance to the human form (which it could animate and extend)... In pictorial terms drapery did not simply cover or reveal; it was inherently multivalent and paradoxical: cloth could stand for the corporeal form at the same time as diaphanous veils could blend into the atmosphere." The chiffon in Gysin's work with its sheerness for us evokes precisely this. The polished wood grain as a potential simulacrum of skin, the streaks reminiscent of veins.

It is a new and different technical process and way of thinking for Gysin. His *Satinbilder* series (2019-now) and canvas-based works have previously consisted of encasing material while here it is the opposite in some sense, a revealing of the support structures. It is also a gesture that finds itself interested in a more immediate result, produced faster it has a more raw and direct aesthetic.

Sanity is inherently linked to both physical and mental well-being. At this point in time when the world is facing the Covid-19/20 pandemic the quest is to rationally try and protect the physical health of millions of people. Yet many have been currently teetering on the edge of sanity. The alarming hypothesis that the pandemic will cause a global mental health crisis seems like a plausible one. There is the contagion of the virus, but how about contagion of emotions? Some psychologists think that we are susceptible to "catch" other people's emotions. We have seen this in an altogether other instance. The "cult" of positive thinking in America, and its discipline of "positive psychology" suggests that mere thoughts can enigmatically directly affect the real world and that there are health benefits related to it.

The word *meme* first appeared in Richard Dawkins' first book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. They were described as entities that compete with one another for limited resources and for attention. He states: "Memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation... I believe that, given the right conditions, replicators automatically band together to create systems, or machines, that carry them around and work to favor their continued replication." This analogy with viruses was inevitable. In the 1980s Douglas R. Hofstader wrote a series of articles for *Scientific American* on the "viral nature" of the meme. In the article "Virus-like Sentences and Self replicating Structures" Hofstadter engages with one letter received by a reader (Stephen Walton of New York City) who described these self-referential, self-replicating sentences as "viral sentences." Like the virus that they were satirising, Covid related internet memes have spread like anything before. They were there to console, uplift and connect us. As part of the exhibition, we have selected a collection of memes that debunk this mystical idea of "feeling good."

Restrictions during coronavirus have engendered a larger conversation about ethics and the building blocks of society and its infrastructure. These are conversations that we have inevitably been having or following recently. Some of these questions are: Will our day-to-day ever be the same? We have seen an increase of multiple kinds of inequality, how will this look post-Covid? Will cities emerge stronger after the virus? Can solace be found by focusing on the idea of choice?

When Rousseau had to isolate during the Black Death he chose the Lazzaretto over a ship, a sort of part hospital-part prison, in which one had to isolate in full confinement. Trevor Yeung's *Night Mushrooms Colon I* (2017-18) are an assemblage of mushroom look-a-like mini lamps equipped with a cascade of electrical sockets. To create an island (insula) is to withdraw into oneself. Their configuration is a cluster of isolated self-dependencies which brings to mind the following take on quarantining, namely that of a "radical nakedness of the soul that allows to build a dwelling in one's house, to make the house habitable by locating the psychic space where it is possible to do something, (...) a place in the place where nobody could enter and that at the same time was the condition for my exchange with others."

There is also a profound sense of altruistic forces that drive the exchanges of the underground. Within mushrooms reside mycorrhizas, organs in which substances are exchanged between the tree and the

fungus. While the tree is feeding the fungus with sugar as a product of photosynthesis, in turn it receives from the fungus several different nutrients. Yeung vividly describes *Night Mushrooms Colon* with the following statement: "Inhabiting dark corners unlikely to perturb a sleepy walker, these mushrooms thrive in fecundity, and reproduce through polyamorous converters and tempting colours. Their casual disinterest to human hegemony and agency provides a viable alternative for multispecies entanglement and survival."<sup>ix</sup>

Anton Bruhin's *Siegerpodest* [*Winner's Podium*] (2014) as the title also suggests illustrates the absurdity of a winner-take-all dominance. Playfully made out of Lego blocks, the mosaic sculpture is reminiscent of a pixelated image. We come to perceive a satirical take on situations of inequality in today's light. It brings us to think about human priority and inequality. The word Lego comes from the Danish "Leg Godt" meaning "play well" – Bruhin's work is a pursuit well-played.

In the Middle Ages, death was a brutal part of most people's everyday experience. In order to cope with the high infant mortality, diseases, famine and wars, death needed to be looked in the face. From the decomposed effigies of 15th-century 'cadaver tombs' to the humorous medieval iconography of the skeletal *danse macabre* or even the prayer's book *Office of the dead*, death was represented with morbid imageries of skulls, skeletons and rotting flesh, tropes of pious warning. These *memento mori* (Latin for "to remember death") were more than simply a call for banal acceptance of the imminence of death and at once also a call to piety and conformity.

Inspired by iconographies of 17<sup>th</sup> century European still life painting, in the series *Flowers, Fruits & Portraits* Shirana Shahbazi stages and rearranges skulls, shells, butterflies and fruits in estranging still lifes. With flat and coloured backgrounds, these photographs also refer to the stock pictures of advertising brochures. Yet they remain very ambiguous. One does not know whether these could be digital or analog images, real or fake objects. From the series is *Schaedel 02-2007*, a photograph depicting a human skull against a bright blue backdrop. Its staged presentation heightens the scull's symbolism making it at once a signifier of the historical, archaeological and existential.

In contemporary pop culture, the memento mori is still very much a readily available trope. Ingrained within the aesthetics of punk and goth, the skull looms as symbols of cultural rebellion. Death today is related to a mediatic infatuation, undesirable but prompting also curiosity and perversion. It is visible in news reports, mainstream blockbusters and to its extreme in "watchpeopledie" videos. The latter could be described as a pornography of suffering. These illegal channels of extreme perverse voyeurism bring about an interesting complexity with regards to our relationship to death nowadays. In part they represent a desire to evoke and experience the real and also refusal of death itself.

Artist Lisa Biedlingmaier has recently been exploring the topic of death, taking on a cross-cultural perspective. Looking at life through the lens of death and the myriad of attitudes and rituals that exist and how death can be looked at in holistic ways. Biedlingmaier's sculptures contain macramés, rope,

felt, resin and porcelain with each material chosen for their imbued connotations be it reflective of our need for security and proximity or our vulnerability as bodily beings with finite lifespans.

The location wherein her works are featured was formerly a makeshift party location with local djs mixing records. She has incorporated a Wonder-Baum (Little Trees) air freshner into her work *Relax* (2021) as a site-specific reaction to the space. A playful gesture implying that the party is over. The artist notes: "I... assign a broad spectrum of meaning to my macramé nodes. Sometimes they stand for tensions and trigger points, sometimes for traces, memories, opinions, concepts—on a physical, mental and spiritual level. Everything that forms and influences our existence.... Sanity is a continuous process. To stay sane requires flexibility and openness to other perceptions, new possibilities, opinions. To be able to embrace the unknown future, and here we come to the topic of death. In the yogi tradition they say, dying is like taking off a shoe that is too small."

Her recent research on death and "dying wisely" (Stephen Jenkinson) has brought about various questions: What kinds of coping mechanisms are we equipped with? Can we manage our fear of death by becoming macabre or comedic? How can we have an easy-going attitude toward death? Are our phobias all related to the ultimate fear of death? Is death anxiety something that comes out of the unknown or is it heightened by society? How can we as a society take on a shared responsibility in "dying well"?

On the online platform innerself.com writer Charles Eisenstein makes an interesting and perhaps somewhat controversial remark about the ethics of dying and the idea of being assisted while dying:

"The War on Death gives way to the quest to live well and fully, and we see that fear of death is actually fear of life. How much of life will we forego to stay safe? I asked a friend, a medical doctor who has spent time with the Q'ero in Peru, whether the Q'ero would (if they could) intubate someone to prolong their life. "Of course not," she said. "They would summon the shaman to help him die well." Dying well (which isn't necessarily the same as dying painlessly) is not much in today's medical vocabulary. No hospital records are kept on whether patients die well. That would not be counted as a positive outcome. In the world of the separate self, death is the ultimate catastrophe."xi

Biedlingmaier's new sculptures *For thou art with me* (2021) are composed of sticks that have been knotted together with rope. The stick has several symbolic images related to it. As an object it shoulders a weight, a holding of an "other." It can be used for rituals and as a helping tool indicative of the transitory nature of life.

If sanity is namely that of being able to cope with all aspects of life it is then also the understanding and acceptance of death rationally as part of life. The stick can also be a reliable "companion" assisting one through life. The artist found a passage in the Bible (Psalm 23:4) that is illustrates this idea with David

as a shepherd: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Civil society and governments in its disciplinary ways have insisted that its citizens take on individual responsibility. This ideal of a society rationally oriented and governed by rules imposed on its citizens has been both praised and criticized.

The protagonist in Liz Magic Laser's 2015 video *The Thought Leader* is a 10-year-old boy who stands before a supposed TED talk audience. The artist adapted Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) which is arguably one of the pioneering modern literary works. In a *L.A. Times* review on Laser's work Leah Ollman states how Dostoevsky's novella is "itself an inconsistent, alternately apologetic and aggressive address about the relationship between self-interest and the social good."xii There is something uncanny in seeing this boy utter the words of a hostile self-assertive character with disapprovals of Western ideas of progress in this very kind of scenario. Under the slogan "ideas worth spreading" the TED talk model is the epitome of techno-utopianism with engaged 'media celebrity' intellectual speakers displaying their showmanship and idealistic solutions to contemporary issues.

Travis Diehl in *Artforum* points out how it is not only the intellect that is triggered and underscores the role of bodily language in the work, one that is somewhat infantile though also a gesture of lighthearted accusation:

"Rigged with LAV mic and sports shirt, this kid is eerily practical—as when he quips, for example, how we all want a perfect world, but your perfect world makes his impossible: "I can't even stick my tongue out at it," he says. Not that he loves sticking his tongue out. "But I resent systems that stop me from doing so." Cut to a shot of the boy executing a fidgety plié. The montaged audience, meanwhile, laugh or jab out their tongues at improper times—punctuating the contrarian nature of free choice."xiii

The work is played in a loop with Laser's *My Mind is My Own* a related work that takes on the format of an instructional video. The eleven-year-old actor Ella Maré plays the role of a speech coach and in real life that is the very profession of her mother. Working together with the mother-daughter Laser subverts the standard script and brings in her own flavor by changing the analogies and exercises.

In the May/June 2020 edition of *Artforum* philosopher Paul B. Preciado was asked to respond to the current pandemic. His attention was placed on the body noting how: "The body, your individual body, as a life space and as a network of power, as a center of production and of energy consumption, has become the new territory where the violent border politics that we have been designing and testing for years on "others" are now expressed, now taking the form of containment measures and of a war against the virus. (...) The new frontier is your epidermis. The new Lampedusa is your skin."xiv

Manon Wertenbroek's new rectangular leather wall sculptures come as a result of a reflection on the notion of dis/order, fetish, death/rebirth and the bodily. Dis/order as it especially relates to mental states, the political body and emancipation. They are at once hand-made and very tactile yet also in line with a minimalist art vocabulary. Wertenbroek has of late been researching the carnivalesque body through writings of Bakhtin in which carnivalistic symbols often excessive and grotesque always include their opposite within themselves: "Birth is fraught [filled] with death, and death with new birth." Their material splendor/pomp is alluringly seductive and decadent. Leather, steel, metals, jewels and accessories are selected for their arousing quality but also for their link to the body. The leather is pinched, scrunched and stretched and resembles internal organs, perhaps alluding to entities moving, an encasing, or a slithering snake or digesting intestines.

According to Georges Bataille eroticism is closely linked to the dissolution of death: "although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life it is not alien to death." This idea of dissolution is a key element in Wertenbroek's practice. She notes how one of life's most beautiful attempts is to try and regain a sense of unity: "You only regain this feeling when you die. And sex is another way to achieve that. In French they call the orgasm "the little death." You lose the relationship to your body and yourself. Everything is an illusion." Many have written about the topic: "There is only one real antidote to the anguish engendered in humanity by its awareness of inevitable death: erotic joy. Eros, the god of love, is considered a principle of creation; sprung from the original chaos, he is a vital element of the world." The folds and fastened metal clamps made out of palladium-plated brass pontets and steel piercings trigger desire, you can't reach in and at the same time are turned on by your restraint. Gilles Deleuze describes this process of expulsion/dissolution as the following: "One does not truly possess that which is expropriated, placed outside of oneself, doubled, reflected under the gaze, multiplied by possessive spirits."

The grid-like structure of the leather sculptures has a striking resemblance to Eva Hesse's *Sans II* tending to a similar interest in exaggeration ("repetition exaggerates" notes Hesse on her practice) and in pushing that tension between order and chaos. In 1968 Lucy Lippard wrote on Hesse's art: "The core of Eva Hesse's art lies in a forthright confrontation of incongruous physical and formal attributes: hardness/softness, roughness/smoothness, precision/chance, geometry/free form, toughness/vulnerability."<sup>xix</sup>

Traumarbeit [Dreamwork] (2020) is a sculpture made out of a pretzel. It looks burnt or poisonous, too dangerous to be eaten. It is also tied up, restrained with meticulously positioned strings of ropes, drapes, threads. It represents the hidden thoughts and desires that are being protected by the subconscious. In psychoanalysis dreamwork is a form of dream interpretation which tries to explore all the different images and emotions that are being presented in a dream. Instead of locking the symbols into precise definitions, the dream is kept "alive" and explored in all its intrinsic levels (the subjective, objective, etc.). The pretzel represents the work dreams do, which is to censor our unconscious desires under layers of symbols ready to be interpreted. The artist notes: "There is also a connection to bondage. It could be a chastity belt. Again, it's about repressed desires. The pretzel also looks like a laughing face you could eat. You think with your head and you feel with your stomach! In the Middle

Ages, laughter was considered a creative force: joyful, liberating and regenerating. I see a link between laughter, the Ouroboros snake and the form of the pretzel. It resembles an infinite circle, a symbol of renewal."xx

There is an interesting and quite morbid connection to the most fatal pandemic in recorded history, namely the Black Death, which killed an estimated 75-200 million people in the 14th century and the way in which it influenced the artistic outcomes of that time. Iconographies depicted cruelty enforced onto sinners. Back then and still nowadays questions on the fragility of life, the relationship to the divine, as well as more introspective and social interrogations on the role of self, others and society are still impending and unresolved.

xx Conversation with Manon Wertenbroek, November 19, 2020.







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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> Conversation with Cyril Kuhn, January 26, 2021.

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iii Christov-Bakargiev Carolyn as reported in Italy's Castello Di Rivoli Museum To Serve As Covid-19 Vaccination Center, *ArtForum*, January 15, 2021. <a href="https://www.artforum.com/news/italy-s-castello-di-rivoli-museum-to-serve-as-covid-19-vaccination-center-84914">https://www.artforum.com/news/italy-s-castello-di-rivoli-museum-to-serve-as-covid-19-vaccination-center-84914</a>

iv https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/open-letter-from-the-basel-museums

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Conversation with Roman Gysin, November 19, 2020.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>x</sup> Artist Statement, Lisa Biedlingmaier

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xiv Preciado, Paul B. Learning from the virus, *Artforum*, Print May/ June 2020

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xviii Deleuze, Gilles Logique du Sens, 1969, p. 328

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