

# Three weddings and the public

On Nina Staehli's most recent performance

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On January 21, 1962, the people walking past the Church of Nicolas-des-Champs in Paris cannot help but stare at the row of gentlemen in extravagant costumes – even wearing capes and feather-topped bicorns – whose blades are crossed to form a canopy under which a newly wed couple is leaving the church. The bride is dressed in the typical white gown with a veil; the groom wears the same habit as the gentlemen in line, as a Knight of the Order of Saint Sebastian inaugurated into the order at the same church in March 1956. And so, the ceremony six years later is all the more surprising, given that no wedding ceremonies are held in the church on Sundays. But the groom is determined not to allow this convention to stop him from carrying out his plan. His characteristic energy, at times unsettling – and ultimately a factor in his untimely death a few weeks later – is what helps him overcome these obstacles to celebrate his wedding precisely on January 21, the anniversary of the death of Louis XVI. This energy also enabled Yves Klein – for the groom is none other than the jack-of-all-trades of French postwar art – to be a judo teacher, artist and his own best promoter.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, on 12.12.1964 to be exact, Ben Vautier – who has, as Yves Klein, been active in the young art scene in Nice – and his partner Annie participate in a civil marriage ceremony at the city hall of Nice, dubbing it "Geste: me marrier". In 1973, in conjunction with one of his exhibitions, this performance becomes a part of Ben's "Gestes" work cycle. Ben covers small blackboards in photos and white writing, documenting simple, everyday performances – like taking a walk or sleeping – as well as unusual performances – like shaving only one side of his face or getting married. On one blackboard that faces the ceremony, it says: "faire les formalites – aller à la mairie – écouter l'adjoint à la mairie – se lever – s'asseoir – dire oui – sourire"<sup>2</sup>.

And so, one can imagine the surprise of the customers of a Coop supermarket in Zug half a century later when, between the shelves of home appliances and the freezer section, they discover a bona fide bridal couple: the bride in a white, floor-length dress with a lace cloak, and the groom, in keeping with his role, in tails and a top hat. But the fact that the groom is Remo Heggin, a local celebrity, gay, and visibly younger than the bride, does not seem to bother any of the customers. The traditional marriage ceremony is powerful enough to stop anyone from doubting its authenticity. Any initial irritation, curiosity or excitement quickly fades. People wish the couple the best of luck as they embark on their journey together, even posing for pictures with them. Even when the bridal couple, the wedding party and the musicians take their places at tables in the department store's restaurant for the wedding banquet, any disquiet is still minimal. The guests and the staff enjoy themselves, welcoming the unexpected and joyous event, a change from the monotony of everyday life at the store, and become the audience for the ceremony at this rather unusual venue.

By staging a wedding feast entitled *The Wedding* in a supermarket in Zug in 2015, Nina Staehli, who lives and works in Lucerne and Berlin, is, without claiming any direct link to her artistic forebears, inserting herself into the tradition of Yves Klein and Ben, who performed artistic interventions in the public sphere.

In all the previous events, the artists have been protagonists in the marriage ceremony. Klein, as a born self-marketer, may have also seen the event as a spectacle to draw the audience's attention to himself and thus to his art, which was directly linked to him.<sup>3</sup> In Ben's case, on the other hand, the artistic documentation of the wedding conforms to his goal of turning everything, however trivial or meaningful, into art. Earlier works by Staehli already make it clear that her artistic intentions point

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<sup>1</sup> Heinz Stahlhut: "Biografisches", in: *Tinguely's Favourites: Yves Klein*, Ed. Margrit Hahnloser, Ausst.Kat. Museum Jean Tinguely, Basel 1999, p. 127-164, p. 161f.

<sup>2</sup> "Les Gestes", in: *Ben Vautier. Ist alles Kunst?*, Museum Tinguely exhibition catalogue, Basel 2015, Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2015, p. 136ff.

<sup>3</sup> Yves Klein's widow, the artist Rotraut Klein-Moquay, remembers in 2010, that TV teams were present at the ceremony as Klein had at that point already become something of a star (link in German):

[www.welt.de/print/die\\_welt/kultur/article11247749/Komm-mit-mir-in-die-Leere.html](http://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/kultur/article11247749/Komm-mit-mir-in-die-Leere.html)

in a direction similar to those of the aforementioned artists. Given that many of her performances aim to bring together art and everyday life, she is continually using the public sphere to "perform a reality check," as Sibylle Omlin put it when writing about Staehli's 2007 performance, *Touching Heroes*.<sup>4</sup> But even just the title of this performance, for which Staehli set up 101 small-format ceramic sculptures on Helvetiaplatz in Zurich, suggests that she is interested in far more than contemporary art's now standard repertoire of the assimilation of art and life. Because the word "touching" has two meanings: on the one hand, it signifies the invitation to passers-by on Helvetiaplatz to physically touch the ceramic figures and, on the other, it expresses the emotional impact the figurines have. Due to their miniature size, their often sad-looking facial expressions and bodily deficiencies are clearly meant to arouse the viewers' protective instincts and touch them emotionally - which alludes to the artist's plan to later put up the figures for adoption in the public sphere. It is nothing new for Staehli to arouse her audience's emotions, whether empathy, irritation or disgust: her other performances and the intervention *The Wedding* do the same. The fact that she chose the wedding of all things as the material for her intervention was no accident. There is hardly another event in the life of a(n above all, heterosexual) Central European that better exemplifies the fluid border between private and public life. As a process that only actually matters to the two people being married, it points to the fact that the union between two people must be validated by a governmental or religious authority: that it is not enough for two people to just make a silent agreement with one another. There are legal reasons for that in the case of a civil ceremony. But a church wedding is a different matter altogether. In recent years, the church wedding has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity among young people: people who otherwise never attend places of worship and consider themselves educated, anticlerical, and sometimes even atheistic. The ceremony is often embellished with a score of symbolic rites - such as the release of the white doves, the ride in the wedding carriage, etc. - that have become a standard part of the basic package offered at wedding trade fairs all over the world. Such wedding ceremonies clearly emulate the ones taking place in royal houses or among celebrities, which often attract a lot of public attention. In that sense, the staged weddings fulfill Andy Warhol's dictum that everybody will have their 15 minutes of fame in the future.

But such staged celebrations, as Christian Saehrendt suggests, may actually be so popular now, in an age of virtual reality and synthetic selves, because they assure the wedding participants, and the bride and the groom, of the couple's deep devotion to one another and, to produce the authenticity they yearn for in this act of all acts.<sup>5</sup> The white of the bride's gown suggests this authenticity - only to be soiled once again. The white wedding gown had actually been the exception to the rule until the late nineteenth century - most women simply wore their nicest dress or an outfit in the local tradition - whereas, in the 1920s, the white dress prevailed as a visible symbol of purity and innocence. Right at a time when, due to the emancipation of women, the patriarchal demand for virginity no longer fit with the spirit of the time or the way people actually lived. But the white of the bridal gown in Nina Staehli's wedding performance falls into an entire series of white sculptures and performance props.<sup>6</sup> A recurring color in Staehli's work, white signifies openness and transparency - a significance that began to take hold in the art world in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> It stands for the interpretational freedom of the open art work and, in turn, for the uncertainty and irritation felt by certain viewers at the many performances by the artist, just as various customers at the Coop supermarket in Zug may well have felt when they witnessed the misplaced wedding.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://ninastaehli.ch/images/touching\\_heroes\\_sibylle\\_omlin\\_d.pdf](http://ninastaehli.ch/images/touching_heroes_sibylle_omlin_d.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [www.nzz.ch/wider-den-terror-der-authentizitaet-1.18667188](http://www.nzz.ch/wider-den-terror-der-authentizitaet-1.18667188)

<sup>6</sup> [http://ninastaehli.ch/images/holy\\_pig\\_urs\\_kuenzi\\_d.pdf](http://ninastaehli.ch/images/holy_pig_urs_kuenzi_d.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Hartwig Fischer: "Im weiten weissen Raum", in: Weiss. Skulpturen und Bilder des 20. Jahrhunderts in der Öffentlichen Kunstsammlung und der Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung, Basel Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition catalogue, Basel 2001, p. 7-45, p. 26.