

## »touching heroes«

### 101 heroes in Helvetiaplatz in Zurich

The installation "touching heroes" by the artist Nina Staehli brings together 101 painted clay miniatures: figures that all share roughly the same toy-like dimensions. The artist calls them "heroes", but it is clear from the first glance that they are actually very strange beings - a form of "anti-hero", in fact. They are moulded in brick clay in the manner of Art Brut, fired, and then their faces and clothes are painted on. Many of them are standing, some are lying down. They wave or stamp their feet, cry or distort their mouths in a silent scream. Some have signs on their breasts: crosses, small texts, letters such as MISS or CEO. Many are missing fingers, toes or whole limbs. The figures parade their incompleteness and coarse aesthetics directly in front of the observer without any modesty. Due to their smallness they are transformed into beings whose obvious deficits and deformities impact directly on the spectator's compassion.

Falling as they do between doll and mascot, archaic plastic and expressive sculpture, these figures are not easy to read. By setting the figures up as a group in a public space with an installation-style setting complete with photo shoot, the artist tries to relate them to each other as an assemblage - as a team. Nina Staehli chose Helvetiaplatz in Zurich as the public meeting place for her figures, an imposing, empty square in front of the modernistic administrative building of 1963, within view of the *Volkshaus* (concert hall) and the *Denkmal der Arbeit* (monument to work) by Karl Geiser (1898-1957)<sup>1</sup>. The square itself looks back on a chequered history: it was always the place where socio-political views were aired or even the scene of violent social clashes. The bloody escalation of the strike of 1932, where the police had to resort to using firearms in Helvetiaplatz, comes to mind. The strike ended with dead and badly wounded workers; the "Zurich Night of Blood" gave rise to vociferous communist unrest and protests against the Zurich social democratic government. The square remains a magnet for union and socialist activists on May Day, and also for anarchists bent on causing chaos.

The square is loaded with historical and aesthetic references. The public strolling past Nina Staehli's installation one day in March 2007 also called the social context of the square to mind, naming the group of figures "A strange army" or "A battlefield". An additional aesthetic note is struck by the packaging of the figures for their journey to Zurich: white polystyrene boxes. The lids serve as an improvised catwalk on the square; the clinically sterile, seemingly empty boxes are piled on top of each other to form a series of shelves that ape the brutalistically harsh concrete architecture of the building in the background.

The different elements of the installation thus form a new ambiguity surrounding the aesthetic message of this army of anti-heroes. Pulled in front of the camera of a mobile studio for individual portraits, the figures once again become the plaything of an efficacious arrangement: as well as the exhibition in a public space, photography also plays a part in this parading of the anti-heroes. The whole arrangement seems loaded as a programme and evokes feelings of disquietude and helplessness. The artist is counting on this; above all, Nina Staehli loves to put experimentalism at the centre of her artistic work. The artist wants to question the

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<sup>1</sup> Original 1952-57, in bronze 1964. Posthumously erected enlarged on a scale of 1:3 from the plaster model.

personified otherness of her figures by placing them in the public arena. Similar - if more abstract - attempts have already been carried out by other artists. Peter Regli handed over his sculptural objects made exclusively of ephemeral materials - named "byby-sculptures"- completely to the care of the public. Whether they were taken by someone, destroyed or thrown on the rubbish heap was no longer of any interest to him.

Nina Staehli, however, would like to put her "heroes" up for adoption at the end of various installation exhibitions at different places and in different cultural contexts. Therefore there is an emotional attachment to her figures that is not automatically communicated to the observer. Will her audience be moved to buy or simply find her intentions totally incomprehensible? Would they develop feelings for the figures or become indifferent to them after looking at them for a while? Do people just look or do they actually touch the figures? Whatever the answer, the small beings on the square demand that you take a position, whether you meet them eye to eye or simply stroll past. Above all, it is this vacillation between closeness and distance on the part of the public that interests the artist.

Nina Staehli even puts her figures through a reality test in the public space. With a mother's love but also quite mercilessly she sends her heroes onto the stage of art, to elicit different reactions and provoke confrontation. Captured on film, these confrontations provide their own continuation to this story of heroes.

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