

Adoptive art

Nina Staehli's "A Feast for Yoshi and Moshi" (2012)

"It is demonstrable," said he, "that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for all being created for an end, all is necessarily for the best end. (...) Consequently they who assert that all is well have said a foolish thing, they should have said all is for the best." (Pangloss in Voltaire's "Candide, or Optimism")

Nina Staehli calls her newest work "a live performance loosely based on Thomas Bernhard + Voltaire". She thus frames her work with two eccentrics that wanted to stare human atrocities in the face. Voltaire ends his satire, "Candide ou l'Optimisme" (1758), with "Il faut cultiver notre jardin", and thus gives the philosophical confusion of the hero a pragmatic ending. This is because Candide was a follower of philosophical optimism, "all is for the best" in life, which the Leibnizian Pangloss, the philosophy teacher Candide looks up to, never tires of professing. You can in any case imagine that the laughter of both Voltaire and Bernhard in the face of such optimism would be just as loud as it would be sarcastic. It has to be even worse for the "heroes". They have to be exposed to horrors, misfortune and scorn, until they finally understand - and with them their readers and audiences. There is no philosophical magic spell for a life that makes people with greed, rapacity, bloodlust, religious warfare and intolerance into the reflection of a human nature that still needs to be cultivated first. That's what the garden work stands for: for beautification, for improvement, for constant, autonomous efforts, which require time and time again jointly reaping the good from (human) nature, and for the attempt to understand man through his work and activities - and to educate. In other words, it's about man, who, as Goethe explained, is the most distinguished object of study of man. Staehli is pursuing this struggle for meaning and significance with her sculptures and performances, not with the pen or in the garden. She is thus closer to the anthropological spirit of the Enlightenment than the pungent social criticism, misanthropy and fear of death exhibited by Thomas Bernhard, even though she shares his underlying occasional dark humour and constant reference to contemporary society.

Her "Touching Heroes" from 2007 are thus characterised by individuality, childishness and infirmity, seemingly conforming to the aesthetics of the ugly that belong to human nature and therefore move it, as for example the performance at Helvetiaplatz in Zurich showed. The audience was brought to life there; it watched, was carried back and forth and was at any rate fascinated and irritated. While the 101 clay sculptures also resemble primitive cult figures, the Yoshi and Moshi figures, with their smooth surfaces made out of Acryl and inflating limbs, invoke characters from the world of video games and the Internet. Seeing obese children in the ice-cold winter whose visual portliness is multiplied by thermal outfits, you can also see a hint of an intentional unmasking of social reality in the face of the characters.

The Yoshi figure appears in various different colours and transformable shapes and objects in video games by Nintendo and is a protagonist there. Yoshi is a true hero, who, for example, in *Super Mario's World 2: Yoshi's Island* hurries to help the kids and has to take on various bad guys. This Nintendo universe, with its variability, but also its infantile simplicity, is reminiscent of the myriads of sculptures, which are just as childish as grotesque, created by Staehli in her studio. The Yoshis and Moshis blend in with the society of "Touching Heroes" there and are supposed to trigger reactions as the latter do. That can also be understood as a conceptual reflection of a paradoxical social reality. Because the actual *Moshi Monsters*, which any Internet user can "adopt" ("Adopt Your Own Pet Monster!"), with their big wide eyes and bobbly, over-sized heads invoke the "baby schema" (Kindchenschema), which also makes the aberrant being appear

cute, and even makes it into a reflection of the viewer and player. Lady Gaga recently won a lawsuit against one of these animated monster figures, which is selected by 50 million users worldwide: Lady Goo Goo, a parody of one of the most extravagant and successful pop stars of our time, is no longer allowed to be invited to the "Moshi Dance", which apparently doesn't prevent the Internet from still showing the video on YouTube where Lady Goo Goo performs in silk pampers in front of her horde of monster fans.

The text-based iconography of Staehli also relies on recognisability and parody. The large figure with the giant head in "A Feast for Yoshi and Moshi" is already known from the "Ruby Dean" performance, with Staehli's inspiration for it including Tim Krohn's fictional and artistic character Vreneli. The large being once again serves as the alter ego of the artist this time. She presents a large ripped off piece of paper with the words "A Feast for Yoshi and Moshi", while the small figures, which look like her offspring, stand around or wander around as if confused. Staehli contrasts the virtual characters that are downloaded over and over again millions of times on the Internet with their material presence. This is how the paradoxical situation occurs where the sculptures are seen as the originals, and the virtual figures, which don't have any "real" version, are seen as their copies. This impetus toward reality that Staehli lends her figures does not become effective until she creates the social situations in the public and cultural sphere. Her figures become actors there, whether they are observed or touched, or whether they are incorporated into a dramatic composition through tracking shots and texts, even if they may still be random in that way.

The careful selection of photographed sculptures and their contrast with photographs depicting people behaving randomly and unconsciously one way or the other when faced with the figures (see Catalogue Touching Heroes, Zurich 2007) shows that Staehli is hot on the trail of typical postures, forms of bodily expression and forms of mimical expression, which instinctively cause viewers to reflect. This is where artistic oscillating puppets frequently in the form of a hybrid between man and machine have always gotten their appeal. Staehli's figures nevertheless puts less emphasis on the biological, psychological and technological conception of the "new man" obsessively pushed in the 1920s and 1930s and also distinguish themselves from the artistic experiments with the genetic controllability and reproducibility of man in the time of the belief in genome sequencing, which is already obsolete today. Digitally edited images of people, such as those of Inez van Lamsweerde, who works with hybrid monstrous shapes and the "heroes" of the fashion world, pop and film world, also remain analytical works that are geared toward the eye of the beholder. Staehli in contrast is about a social and societal awareness, and about with whom and why relationships are formed in the first place. She thus provokes adaptations and modes of behaviour on the part of viewers and audience members.

The electronic toy Tamagotchi, which was produced in 2004, could provide food for thought on this socio-anthropological subject. After its initial development in 1996 and sensational success upon being introduced on the market, it is now designed in a way where love and care for the individual toy is complemented by further relationships with other Tamagotchis and their owners: Tamagotchis can now thus also fall in love, get married, and even fight each other. The first Tamagotchis supposedly unleashed psychological breakthroughs in the 1990s, because they could "die" during just one life cycle - a problem that could be solved with a reset button. Opportunities for emotional references of this type to Staehli's figures occur in a very

similar way at the time of the performance and installation. They thus not only become partners in dialogue, but also partners in action. In this sense, the numerous constantly appearing figures of Staehli are part of a "Social Sculpture", in other words, a society that can be shaped which requires intervention and action from its members.

Here's what Voltaire had to say about the community of philosophers and gardeners, young and old in the last chapter of "Candide": "(...) and when they did not dispute time hung so heavily upon their hands, that one day the old woman ventured to say to them: 'I want to know which is worse, to be ravished a hundred times by negro pirates, to have a buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet among the Bulgarians, to be whipped and hanged at an auto-da-fé, to be dissected, to row in the galleys—in short, to go through all the miseries we have undergone, or to stay here and have nothing to do?' 'It is a great question,' said Candide." In other words, you've got to do something, produce something, set something into motion - and enjoy the fruits of the garden. That is however ultimately where the optimism is found that Voltaire pays homage to very sceptically, as well as the grotesque antithesis to the scenarios of violence, death and betrayal evoked by him. Naive enlightenment and the conjuring up of an ideal world yet to be attained were already alien to Voltaire. His image of the garden is not spared from the satirical and sceptical spirit of the author.

It is therefore good if Staehli's writing for the "feast" is in black and "Yoshi's birthday" on 31 January 2012 resembled a grotesque baptism in the form of a "massive attack" with black colours. "Massive attack", "carpet bombing" in military jargon, and meaning audience attack when understood as the same name as the British band, becomes a descriptive title with many meanings. It is also attacking the audience member who feels a desire to either intervene to protect or to see the peaceful birthday boy act with more resistant aggression.

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