

Introduction by the author

When you find yourself walking within Michaela Schweighofers' exhibition, think of the time she spent trying to reconstruct entire systems of relations. Some of which seem, now that the doors of the exhibition space have opened, far away, as blurry childhood memories or the intricate thoughts that populate vertiginous sleepless nights, or something that had just barely happened, as a slow-paced walk on the crowded city sidewalks, or the time spent scrolling through a busy web page dedicated to the endless accumulation of second-hand commodities. Consider the dust that slowly settles on the textiles' surfaces and the museum glass, the grey corners of a snowless winter forest, the welcoming darkness of an entrance hall.

Think of Michaela Schweighofer as a paradoxical detective. One that carefully follows the traces, clues, of a collectively produced event (the present). Something that, through a slow pulsation, appears and disappears in front of our tired eyes.

The text that follows was written after various phone calls during which Michaela has described the way her production unfolds from the relationship she has with the materials that played, and play, a role in her life and in the cultural and social foundations of the cities she inhabits, the language spoken by the characters that she encounters in literature and TV shows.

As you will soon realise, the following text functions as a precarious and unfinished accumulation of fragments. My hope is that this series of annotations will not be perceived as something exhaustive. It shouldn't satisfy any need for aboutness. Rather, it could feel like a confusing rumour, the found scribbles of a caricatural academic figure, clues for a mystery that has to remain unsolved, the feverish memories of a baffled egghead.

PRACTICES

"... love and fear increase together with a precision almost mathematical: the greater the love is then the greater the fear is."¹

A practice could be considered as some kind of routine: an event repeated in time that slowly produces a behaviour or a form –something that has spatial and temporal shapes, of specific dimensions and durations.

1

Michaela Schweighofers employs, in part of a newly acquired sculptural skill, steam-bent Tohiti-Manila, a material and technique used in the 19th century for the construction of newspaper holders (Zeitungshalter), sinuous and somehow goofy objects that can still be found in Viennese cafes. Tohiti-Manila is a kind of rattan which is an Americanised name for "rotang" (rotang calamus). In Latin "rotang" means something like "walking stick".

Some images come to mind: the flaneuse, the hallucinated character crossing the 19th century city with her handy walking stick that punctuates the silent night with a precise rhythm, and the busy morning news, fresh ink memories of the day before. Or the wooden hair pin en vogue in the 19th century bourgeois woman wardrobe, a practical accessory that could, in an emergency, transform in a pointed weapon, ready to sting an eventual attacker. Long and sharp sticks that gently hold some pimento stuffed olives, or pickled onions, in an ice cold martini.

¹ Josephine Winslow Johnson, *Now in November*, 1934

2

The German word “willhaben” literally translates to “I want to have”. Willhaben is an Austrian search engine dedicated to second-hand commodities, jobs and homes. What does Schweighofer want, what is she relentlessly searching for? She screengrabs some images, the ones that are now, in these rooms, framed, brought into a different materiality and relative field of value. Discarded pieces of furniture become the melancholic protagonists of a play about the joys of consumerism and the suffocating life of the European middle class. One of the objects, a bile green shell, probably a washbowl, could also be the cover of the soufflé, the prompter, the person hiding in an empty clam on stage, ready to suggest the first words of lines to forgetful actors.

3

A Rococo painting can be distinguished from a Baroque one thanks to the presence of pastel colours. Simply put, the baroque painting was usually dark and heavy: a stormy sea or an intricate forest. Later on, in the Rococo painting hung at Versailles, the sun shines through the trees, the court's clothes get lighter and fluffier, the flowers blossom, the libertines have endless romantic walks. It is the desire for an eternal spring. One of an established order of things. An order of things that, as we know now, awaits to be overthrown by the French revolution. Today pastel colours seem to be cringe reminders of the fallacies and horrors of the slowly fading western modernity. They carry an eerie feeling of quietness. A still world, one in which privileged humanity can enjoy the comforting cloud of what they used to hypocritically call “the end of history”.

4

Patches are elements of care, of maintenance, and historically defined women's labour. But Schweighofer is not properly fixing anything, quite the opposite, she critically employs care as a sculptural practice. Her works exist as an addition of moments of care. She adjusts something that isn't broken. She carefully stitches a silk patch –sometimes silk, sometimes faux silk– and then another, and another, blurring the socially defined hierarchies that exist in between her materials. Reconstructing, in her studio, the time she spent working on silk scarves with the women in her family, inhabiting domestic moments of collective emancipation.

Sometimes, patches come to life. *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, is a novel written by Frank Baum in 1913. The children's book features one of the characters from the Wizard of Oz. The genealogy of the Patchwork girl is similar to that of Mary Shelley Frankenstein's monster: made of rags sewn and created by Dr. Pipt's wife Margolotte, she too is misunderstood and abandoned. Only in a later story does she have a relationship with the better-known Scarecrow, a character who, like the Patchwork Girl, has been put together with wood and straw and scraps of cloth.

5

Michaela Schweighofer lives in between Brussels and Vienna. When in Brussels, she walks its streets. She can see the traces of the faraway colonial landscapes that made it the city it is. The vines of the Congo are immobilised in art-nouveau decorations. The ageing yellow ivory knick-knacks are protected from dust by the glass panes of cabinets. She enters a wooden doorway, continues, climbs the stairs, finds a window, and looks out at the former royal palaces, architectural manifestations of the nightmare of the educated white bourgeois class that travelled, and still travel “South”. Dangerous journeys towards the lands of plenty in which rules and normativity, and sculptural lines, can be bent. Mosquitos, at night, suck the rationality out of the travellers' bodies.

“To pretend that there is no person writing the story is its own kind of dishonesty.”²

In a correct investigation, one should never exclude anybody. That’s why a good detective, especially at the beginning of the inquiries, doesn’t exclude herself from the possible pool of suspects. The detective always investigates her own self. Michaela Schweighofer knows that and brings parts of her biographical history into her work. The memories of her family in the Austrian province, the train travels that brought her in front of Viennese baroque buildings, the biological gardens and their tall palm trees, the wandering through flea markets, the hours spent in the cold artist studio, bent over, in front of a faded silk scarf, or reading a PDF on the bright screen of her laptop.

Conclusion

In the exhibition materials, things, and fragments, retain different kinds of energies and when assembled, bent, rolled up, patched up, piled up, framed, scattered, assembled, maintained, compared, fixed, sanded, burnt, aligned, juxtaposed, sewn, staged, etc. acquire unexpected agencies. This is a precise moment, a brief and bounded existence of a portion of reality. A corner of the world temporarily defined by a series of choices Michaela Schweighofer has made through her years as a sculptor, and as a careful observer of interiors and urban landscapes. In the exhibition, if one looks carefully, it is possible to witness a crystal-clear glimpse of some of the forces that took us all there.

This moment, contrary to what usually comes to mind, is a rather fragile one. Its fragility derives, paradoxically, from the strength of the materials that are employed to constitute the exhibition. The stronger the materials are, the more fragile their materialisation will be. This might seem like a contradiction, but “... love and fear increase together with an almost mathematical precision: the greater the love is then the greater the fear is.”

- written by Stefano Faoro

Michaela Schweighofer (1983) is a visual artist from Austria, based in Brussels and Vienna. She has an inquisitive approach to sculpture that often leads to immersing herself in handicrafts and new techniques. Michaela is interested in sociopolitical and feminist questions, which she explores within her practice and in various collaborative formations. Her work takes shape in texts, lectures, sculptures, and sculptural installations. In 2020, Forum Stadtpark published her book *FROM THE PROP TO THE INSIDE*, a theoretical-subjective anthology in which she interrogates her own practice by writing and gathering texts on the concept of the sculpture as prop and the stage as installation.

She studied English, Psychology and Philosophy at the Karl-Franzens-University in Graz and the Université VII in Paris, as well as Video and Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and the University of Fine Arts (HFBK) in Hamburg. She has exhibited work and realised projects at *Neue Galerie*, Graz (AT), *Kunstverein Eisenstadt* (AT), *Pogo Bar*, KW Institute of Art, Berlin (DE), *foundation*, Vienna (AT), *Skulpturinstitut*, Vienna (AT), *brut*, Vienna (AT), *Forum Stadtpark*, Graz (AT) *Gipsmuseum*, Graz (AT), *Galerie der HFBK*, Hamburg (DE) and *MUMOK*, Vienna (AT).

Stefano Faoro (1984) is an artist living in Germany and Italy.

² Taffy Brodesser-Akner on *Fresh Air*, 2023