

The homeless speak «through the flowers»: Migration in the Kunsthalle Wil

The Kunsthalle Wil has taken on the topic of refugees and migration and invited the Basel artist Eva Borner to show her work. The four pieces in the exhibition «Realities» are convincing in their subtle, poetic appeal: Do not look away!

Martin Preisser



For some time, the EU has no longer been ideal, having degenerated into a deal. Any ideals in EU refugee policy have likewise perished: between deal and ideal a light box in front of the Kunsthalle calls attention to a dilemma.

The artist Eva Borner from Basel, whose atelier is in a hayrick on the Hauenstein and who often also makes an international appearance, shows her work about refugees and the homeless in the space of the Kunsthalle, giving those who have lost everything a voice. She does this without intellectual distance and above all without any sense of voyeurism, but with empathy, respect, sensitivity and caution.

She not only knows the issue from hearsay. Time and again Eva Borner visited refugee camps in Greece, lent a hand and experienced the great hospitality of those who have lost everything. She also spoke to homeless people in Switzerland, those who have slipped through the social net.

«They gave me a wish»

The big room in the Kunsthalle is completely draped in black fabric. On the ground, calyxes made of handmade cardboard. In the darkness, only slightly illuminated by blue light, one is almost jolted time and again by the sound of a voice coming from one of the flowers. «Migrants and displaced persons gave me their wishes», is how Eva Borner formulates it. These wishes form the creative starting point. The artist gives them a form and a frame in which they can be heard. They are now expressed «through the flowers» («durch die Blume»), a German saying meaning «dropping a hint».

There are fifteen sound sources in the space, arranged by the sound designer Hans Peter Gutjahr. He has united the various human voices (that time and again express the wish for peace) into a soundscape; a symbol for how we are all connected. «Everyone I met had a story to tell», says Eva Borner, who has managed to create a quiet, almost meditative, yet intense effect in her work.

With «Blackbox» she shakes us up gently without being blatant or engaging in sensationalism. Despite the difficult topic, the white flowers radiate poetry; every individual fate is given back a bit of beauty. Art also has the task of mirroring realities (as in the title of the exhibition), says Eva Borner. In «Blackbox» she gives back a clear voice to individual fates, who in the information and media flood otherwise frequently remain unheard.

Art without provocation

A piece on the upper floor shows how we have lost the art of creative, empathic dialog in politics and society. Eva Borner has staged a chamber piece for a man and a woman by Dmitrij Gawrisch. She accentuates the increasingly surreal phrases and sentences full of alienation and characterized by the protagonists speaking at cross-purposes with a video of approaching and retreating ocean waves. In the context of the audio piece the seeming calm and regularity of the ocean tableau acquires an oppressive touch.

Some hundred olive soaps, laid out by Eva Borner in the form of two triangles touching at the tips, are the raw material for a further piece. Olive soap, a popular souvenir from Greece, or soap with which we wash our hands of the matter?

The soap blocks, given to the artist for free by a Greek company, could also remind us of the coffins we are familiar with from the gymnasiums of Lampedusa. Engraved in the soaps are the currently most disregarded human rights. Again, Eva Borner succeeds in presenting a powerful piece in a calm, subtle and nonprovocative way.

Until 16/12, Kunsthalle Wil (Grabenstr. 33); Thu–Sun, 2–5pm; artist talk: Wed, 21/11, 7pm

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