

Genera of Intimacies

*intimacy
is becoming*

Galerie Urs Meile proudly presents the exhibition *HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD* by the artist Urs Lüthi showing his latest body of work. Upon entering the gallery space, one instantly meets the artist's dismembered torso, tightly squeezed on a sterile metal table, positioned in front of a green wall. As usual, Urs Lüthi's world presents itself as a familiar yet uneasy encounter. The extended, irritatingly green color and twisted body images prepare one for a journey in a kafkaesque setting, insinuating growing old and telling just another story of disappearing in time. However, the unfolding scene does not pretend to present grand answers; instead Lüthi welcomes you to *feel*. *HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD* is an invitation to get touched and intimate with the protagonist on view.

Over the past decades, Urs Lüthi has developed a diverse morphology of artistic expression incorporating sculptures, photography, video, body art, and happenings. The complexity of his work shows itself in an uncompromising and eclectic manner that always intends to irritate the viewer. There lies an ambiguity in his visual output that one's mind struggles to categorize, leaving wonder why he always departs from a self-portrait.

It all began in the late sixties when Lüthi caused his first stir with series of self-portraits such as *LÜTHI WEINT AUCH FÜR SIE* (1970) or *Just Another Story About Leaving* (1974), depicting his persona in many different appearances and moods. The photograph *I'll be your mirror* (1972) pinpoints the artist's intention: The presentation of his person acts as a proxy for the human figure itself. One quickly detects that the self-portraits have no biographical traits; they rather serve as a vantage point or mirror for a relational encounter. Therefore, the artist also thoroughly conceptualizes the exhibition spaces to allow for a conscious aesthetic experience where a narrative unfolds.

Despite having been intensely inspired by the auto portraits of Rembrandt since his childhood, Lüthi's early works tied in with the photographic tradition of the Roaring Twenties, an era marked by political instability and social upheavals. This precariousness turned into a stage for radical artistic experiments with a transgender subculture and discovering fluid gender identities. Lüthi followed this practice with his photographs and performances like *This is about you* (1970) staging himself as a non-binary individual. The artist's visual vernacular continually changed throughout the decades. However, he has remained faithful to the common denominator of the self-portrait through which he investigates the realm of realities, perception as such, heteronormativity, as well as the ontological side of being in the world.



Detail of *Selfportrait (HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD I)*, 2021-2022, mixed media in 2 parts, 128 x 88 x 65 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne



LÜTHI WEINT AUCH FÜR SIE, 1970, offset lithography, 85,5 x 58,4 cm, Courtesy the artist



Just Another Story About Leaving, 1974, ultrachrome print, each 59 x 42 cm, Courtesy the artist



Man Ray, Rose Selavy (Marcel Duchamp), 1920, Courtesy Man Ray Trust



Images of the Live Performance *This is about you* at Contemporanea, Rome, 1973, Courtesy the artist

Though not aiming to compare our recent social deviations with the Golden Twenties, one cannot get around the fact that our Western bubble of comfort and the entailing global system is growing increasingly unstable. Naturally, questions arise: How comfortably can one live in a world menaced by war, social injustice, and ecological threats? Or above all, what *constitutes* comfort?



Selfportrait (HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD I), 2021-2022, mixed media in 2 parts, 128 x 88 x 65 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

Regardless, Lüthi's oeuvre does not insert answers but provides a playground for experiencing one's sensations and the all-too-human contradictions. His brilliance lies in creating a framework for ambivalences where one finds oneself in oscillation between hope and despair, lust and disgust, reason and desire. We can already feel this commuting in the entry, stumbling across the artist's fragmented torso. One meets an aged Lüthi in the form of a naturalistic silicon sculpture with a super soft, infant-like skin, yearning to be caressed and put at ease. The exclamation *HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD* unravels itself within seconds. This naked, physically old carcass is presented on a steel platter evocative of sterile dissecting tables or industrial countertops. Even though the body appears to lie comfortably on his lower legs and sort of self-hugged by his upper arm, it barely fits on the table. The figure tries to comfort itself, but hand and feet—the extremities to find self-realization in the world—are missing and thus render appeasement difficult.



Selfportrait (HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD No. 3), 2022, ultrachrome print, 62 x 44 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne



Selfportrait (HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD No. 4), 2022, ultrachrome print, 62 x 44 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

Additionally, an aesthetic and content-related tension elaborates into an emotional discomfort: Nowadays, it is fashionable to stay young at all times at whatever price. Everything aging is veiled, dismissed, and tabooed. Yet aging is probably the most natural process of all existence. The understanding that old age equals wisdom has long disappeared. Chasing the ever-new everywhere and nowhere has become the norm. In the back of the head, another deeper sense of unease creeps in whispering a seemingly forgotten theme: to become and pass away is to live, isn't it?

However, one is not left standing alone in melancholy. The tension is overturned by the two contrasting images *Selfportrait (HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD No. 3)* and *No. 4*, (2022). Elegant hands with red nail polish strike the back of a naked male. This embrace seems to soothe the vulnerability of the figure, and it confesses a sensual grace attuning with one's own mixed feelings of susceptibility and lust. Here too, another taboo is revealed: sensuality, desire, and transience—maturity as eroticism? An almost devouring ambivalence is reflected in an aesthetic intensity and indicates that the story that Lüthi always tells is nothing other than the very story of *you and me*.

In humanistic psychology and philosophy, the mirror analogy is a widely known theory, explaining that it needs an opposite or other to render the self aware of its external and inner world. This often referred to as I-object relationship allows for experiencing the self in relation to the world as such.

By stimulating emotional movement, the I grows touched and compassionate with the opposite and becomes involved. Involvement allows for accessibility and is the central aspiration of the human essence to meet the world and bring it within reach. Lüthi's creations bring the world in and put them into resonance with the viewer and perpetrate an omnipresence that elevates feelings to the highest resonance because it vibrates as connections to our world. Emotions serve as the foundation to enter as a conscious self into relation to being here in time. This is a being that is aware of and, in order to actualize itself, must confront issues such as emotional paradox, mortality, or the dilemma of relationships with other humans while ultimately facing loneliness. As many philosophers have extensively analyzed the other is necessary for becoming a determined being.

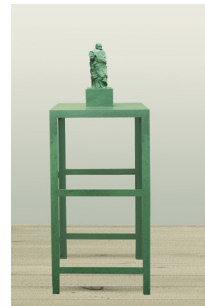
It is precisely this ontological scope that Urs Lüthi adopted early on because he realized that there is no truth a priori and that being in the world is always a subjective experience. The pivot in his artistic practice was the understanding that objectivity does not exist. This experience made him wonder what is all this about? Lüthi mentioned that he continues to be inspired by the cosmologist Stephen Hawking and that his theories made him understand that the world can only be grasped through one's own consciousness, if at all. Yet what may sound complicated is ultimately quite simple: Being-in-the-world happens by projection into and engaging with the external world, translating the general into the private. This is a never-ending process of involvement with signs deriving from the materialistic world mediated through the projection of the self. Lüthi's mastery lies in expressing himself formally as simply as possible to create such a space of experience accessible to all. Here again, the circle closes. Urs Lüthi continuously changes his medium of exploration while his artistic concept remains unchanged.

The paradox derives from the need for the individual experience, connected with another individual experience, to catch and access the infinite abstraction. Through this omnipresent action, self-realization grows conscious and chosen. This is the abiding subtlety that enables multiple, fluid, and ambiguous intimacies. Undoubtedly social norms define the intimate sphere, but due to multilayered inner lives there remains an irreducible, interpersonal dimension to genera of intimacies.

This self-contemplation becomes easily tangible in the dialog opened between *Selfportrait (Small Monument for Old Men No. 5)* (2012/2019) and *Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III/No. 7)* (2022). First, one encounters a lacquered bronze sculpture with a little figure set on a proportionally massive metal base. The series "Selfportrait (Small Monument For Old Men)" derives from an earlier bronze initially intended to be exhibited as an outside sculpture in a park. The color choice was of great importance because Lüthi did not want to please the eye by using a natural green shade.



Exhibition View of Urs Lüthi: *HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD* at Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, 2022, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne



Selfportrait (Small Monument For Important Old Men No. 5), 2012/2019, painted bronze, 150 x 50 x 50 cm, Courtesy the artist



Detail of *Selfportrait (Small Monument For Important Old Men No. 5)*, 2012/2019, painted bronze, 150 x 50 x 50 cm, Courtesy the artist



CAPTIONS?



Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III/No. 7), 2022, ultrachrome print with plexiglass and aluminum, 159 x 299 x 5 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

He instead chose an odd yet slightly repulsive green, which—remotely reminiscent of the bright colors of lichen—is at the same time more associated with governmental offices or hospital infrastructures.

Again, the figure is missing its limbs, and the pasty color application creates the impression of immobility and almost oppressive confinement. In opposition, *Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III No. 7)* opens into a green surface as vast indefinite greenery. The shot clips a closeup of branches slowly letting fall their leaves. The autumnal scene sets a poetic mood making the mind linger on the value of fleeting moments. At a second glance, the eye catches hold of the sculpture's shadow reflected in the near distance. The artist touches on the story of the vanishing self in time. Not only does he illustrate the relationship of a human being to the world as such, but he also continuously delves into the shifting of appearing and disappearing.



Exhibition View CAPTIONS

The steady rhythm of evanescent experience also echoes in his older series "Remains of Clarity", which was created between 2003 to 2006 and is reprocessed up to this day. In the large-scale prints from 2003 to 2006, Lüthi overlaid a thousand or more tiny images to create one complete image leading into a dark yet highly colorful and vast hollow. Herein, the artist touches on a principle that cuts both ways: the compilation of realities.



Exhibition View of URS LÜTHI. MORE OR LESS at Aural Madrid, 2022, Courtesy the artist and Aural Madrid

The same topic—though formally different—is investigated in the recent photographs *Remains of Clarity* from 2020 that show the artist's figure as a disappearing self in landscape environments. With the medium of photography, the artist frames himself in the tradition of romanticism at the end of the 18th century. The landscape swallows the person up and makes him disappear in the infinite cycle of becoming and passing away. The ambiguity of Lüthi's art becomes inherent: nature opposes virtual realities; even so, the monoculture of globalization devalues human beings into fungible goods. The chase for individualization where the self is heightened to a fetish turns out to be delusional, and one must reflect on the dying self and futility while remembering that it is all personal experience that weaves the story we live by.

Though both episodes of the series "Remains of Clarity" certainly draw reference to a sensory overload that one experiences every day, it far more notes the movement of post-humanism. This branch of ontology claims that human nature is a universal state from which the human being emerges. This critical theory recognizes that a human being is imperfect and disunited with oneself, understanding the world through shifting perspectives and continuously reinventing the individual self on the go.



Exhibition View of Urs Lüthi: HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD at Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, 2022, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

An equally complex environment is presented in Lüthi's latest series of embodied images "Selfportrait (Transmission Error III)" (2022), which follows on from "Remains of Clarity". It is not easy to detect a human figure in the black and white prints, but the original motif was a bust of the artist.

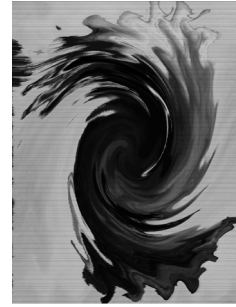
The photograph of the statue was later digitally reworked to create the effect of the figure being pulled through a bottomless abyss or twister. Then the image is layered with grid lines evocative of transmission images of surveillance cameras. Lüthi states that this is an intentional means of breaking the complacency and aura of black-and-white photography.

The large size of 200 x 150 cm is a deliberately chosen and frequently used format in Lüthi's oeuvre. The size enables a merging of the viewer with the artwork and pulls one into a black hole raising post-human questions about man in the cosmos. Maybe the concept of imaginary time by Stephen Hawking served as inspiration as well. Hawking's theory claims that there is neither a beginning nor an ending. Consequently, there is neither a forward nor backward movement, and thus, space and time do not exist. This concept is intriguing and finds reference in Lüthi's conceptual work, which follows the question: How can one bring together the very smallest with the very largest? Moreover, "Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III" (2022) elaborates on the fact that being human is increasingly reduced to algorithms, and the scope of feelings weakened to basics.

Possibly, "Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III" (2022) records that decisive moment when the thinking being discovers that one is not lonely or lost in the infinite lands of the universe but that there reigns universal energy. One could dare say that man is not the world's fixed center, as he has believed for too long, but the apex of creation. The general theme of these self-portraits shows that it is always a single person experiencing feelings, and while we may dismiss them as a personal affair, it is and always will be a general experience too. Whether or not time exists, it remains a subjective experience and undeniably transfers one into a continuum.

With *HOW TO GET COMFORTABLE IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE WORLD* Urs Lüthi offers a changing landscape of intimacies—something in translation. The artist has realized a taut, affectionate exhibition with artworks that function as suggestions. They are thoughts of reflection, offensive enough for a possible conversation on a festive evening. They remind me of Nabokov's saying that one should learn a language well enough to understand the whisper behind one's back.

Text by Samantha Grob



Selfportrait (TRANSMISSION ERROR III/No. 1), 2022, ultrachrome print with plexiglass and aluminum, 200 x 149 x 5 cm, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne