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Lüthi, Urs, *Global Presence*, 1996, Ilfochrome hinter Plexiglas, Holz, Farbe, 150 x 240 x 12 cm (Objektmass), Zürcher Kantonalbank, Zürich, 2000

#### Documentation level

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#### Name

Lüthi, Urs

#### Dates of birth and death

\* 10.9.1947 Luzern

#### Municipality of origin (CH)

Rüderswil (BE)

#### Nationality

CH

#### Brief biography

Fotograf und Maler. Zeichnung, Plastik, fotografische Selbstinszenierung

#### Fields of activity

Foto Art, Malerei, Zeichnung, Plastik, Performance, Konzeptkunst, Body Art, Happening

#### Lexicon article

Formative friendships with the Glarus painter [Lill Tschudi](#) in his youth and with [Hansjörg Mattmüller](#) at the Zurich School of Art and Design (1963–64), followed by an extended stay in Milan. Urs Lüthi has worked as an independent artist since 1966. In 1977, he spent a year in the United States. Urs Lüthi was married to the artist [Manon](#), to Elke Kilga, and since 1986 to the actress Ulrike Willenbacher. Their daughter Maria was born in 1989. Urs Lüthi has held a professorship at the Art School of the University of Kassel from 1994 to 2013.

The following group exhibitions deserve a special mention: 1970, Kunstmuseum Luzern, *Visualisierte Denkprozesse*; 1974, Kunstmuseum Luzern, *Transformer*; 1977, Kassel, *documenta 6*; 1981, Cologne, *Westkunst*; 1997, Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Beyond Switzerland. Works by Contemporary Swiss Artists*; 1998, Kunsthaus Zürich, *Freie*

*Sicht aufs Mittelmeer*; 2008, Munich, Pinakothek der Moderne, *Female Trouble*. Individual exhibitions (selection): 1970, Bern, Galerie Toni Gerber; 1976, Kunsthalle Bern; 1978, Essen, Museum Folkwang; 1986, Kunsthalle Basel and Kunstmuseum Winterthur; 1993, retrospective at the Bonner Kunstverein and four other destinations in Germany; 1991 Kunsthaus Glarus; 2000, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus; 2005, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou; 2007, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; 2009, Kunstmuseum Luzern. In 2001, Urs Lüthi represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale. Prizes: 1996, Prize of the Canton of Zurich; 1997, Prize of the City of Munich; 2003, Glarus Cultural Prize; 2006, Arnold Bode Prize, Kassel.

«We have the dream of a world [...]», is the first sentence in Urs Lüthi's catalogue essay for the exhibition *KünstlerProfessorInnen* at the Kasseler Kunstverein. He then continues, page after page: «Where art is an intellectual model [...] where there is yearning [...] where the sublime is permitted to be trivial [...] and vice versa [...] where one truth does not exclude the other [...] where reduction is not only a question of form [...] where the individual becomes the general [...] where ambivalence is a basic attitude [...]», to conclude with the slogan, «Art for a better world». This text-photo essay of 1996 reads like a late manifesto. The sentences are at once an alphabet and a creed; they speak of longing and hint at loss; they speak of the whole, but also mean a part; they speak of form, and mean content – and vice versa. Urs Lüthi's entire oeuvre circles around these themes, however formally different individual works may appear.

Lüthi's work can be divided into three acts and one prologue of one and the same play. The prologue consists of large-format paintings in acrylic on hardboard (1966–67). These are akin to conceptual Pop Art pictures, and remained isolated for a long period, but were integrated into the artist's existing oeuvre by the works of the 1990s, and by his use of ornament to symbolise *Universelle Ordnung* (Universal Order) – the title of a series. A photograph of the exhibition held in 1970 at Toni Gerber's gallery in Bern marks the transition to the phase in Urs Lüthi's work that was to make the artist internationally famous. The picture shows a significant scenario: in the background on the wall, the portrait of a young Urs Lüthi entitled *Urs Lüthi weint auch für Sie* (Urs Lüthi also weeps for you); on the floor, a rubber mat on which the sentence «Lüthi is tougher than he appears to be» can be seen in aluminium letters; and a block of iron of the same weight as Lüthi. The artist himself, a youth in dark glasses, presents himself as part of the ensemble to the right, and an ornamental plant to the left completes the symmetrical arrangement. This photograph contains the vocabulary of the works to come and epitomises Lüthi's new attitude: a rejection of the avant-garde principle. This work bears witness, both courageously and hesitantly, seriously

and ironically, to the artist's step towards a more personal artistic approach, and to his step away from distanced objectivity to the embodiment of ideas and relationships. The picture is also a declaration of the principle of ambivalence, exemplified by seriousness and irony.

Until the mid-1970s, the black-and-white photographs show an attractive, frequently androgynous, sexualised youth who becomes a figure onto which ideas can be projected: *I'll be your mirror* (1972). The obviously transvestite character of these works often makes the viewer forget that Lüthi is styling himself here as a proxy, confronted with the desires, stories and problems that we all carry within us. In compositional terms, he dissolves the form of the individual picture, thus introducing the series, the sequence, the diptych, triptych and hence film-like, narrative and discursive modes of presentation. His mainly colour photographs from the mid-1970s forego this narcissistic approach in favour of an ever stronger, sometimes almost simplistic form of irony, tragicomedy, and riotousness.

In the second act, Lüthi surprised observers by returning to painting. Photography disappeared, and with it the principle of surrogacy and personification. Irony, yearning and ambivalence remained, as did some iconographic elements and the underlying atmosphere. Lüthi employs every technique and style, from the figurative to the abstract, the comic to the devotional image, from fairground kitsch to roaring romanticism. Lüthi now pursued this idea of «I am many people», the dissolution of a self-contained identity, which he had demonstrated with his own figure in his photographs, in the manner of Francis Picabia by using the history of painting as a self-service palette. These works bear titles such as *Grosse Gefühle* (Great Emotions), *Reine Hingabe* (Pure Devotion), *Grosse Abenteuer* (Great Adventures), *Vertauschte Träume* (Confused Dreams), *Blumenbilder* (Flower Pictures) or *Bilder für eine italienische Bar* (Pictures for an Italian Bar) – and explore the ups and downs of emotions and worlds, the trivial and the sublime – and back again at express speed.

From the end of the 1980s, again in connection with a striking change, the use of cooler media – away from painting to bronze sculptures, photo-engraving, reverse glass painting, and photographs –, the playful, riotous, frequently ironic aspect disappears in Lüthi's work. In the third act of his career, his works become precise, severe and cool, now frequently in the form of an architectural arrangement within a space. At times they seem to be precise, experimental positionings based on the dominant theme of *Universelle Ordnung* (Universal Order). Urs Lüthi's portrait reappears, this time as a bronze bust; drawings and paintings follow geometric patterns and are ornamental; his works are heavily framed, solidly supported. Once again, they explore the tension between the individual and the universal; yet the installations, however clearly structured, betray signs of desperation. The clear structure sometimes seems suddenly to turn into an oppressive void. The predominant mood is the beautiful horror of the melancholic attempting to bear with composure the great distance between the ideal and the commonplace.

The artist's most recent works can be interpreted as an epilogue: having explored the various compensatory activities officially offered in the areas of beauty, sex,

security, health and art, creating cleverly constructed picture objects, in the bright, fluorescent pink picture objects of the *Placebos & Surrogates* (1996–2001) series, self-analysis once again takes centre stage. For example, in 2001 the now older artist could be seen in the Swiss Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* between the picture of a skull (*Skull*, 2000) and the cover page of a soft porn magazine (*Autoritratto*, 2000), jogging on a treadmill (*Run for your Life*, 2000) – and finally as a life-size, hyper-realistic sculpture reminiscent of Tischbein's *Goethe in der Campagna*. From then on, *Art is the Better Life* was the artist's survival strategy; this led to a sense of saturation in his photographic series, in the style of all-over painting, entitled *Thousands or more images* (2002–08). Starting with the *Selbst-Skulpturen* (Self-Sculptures, 2003), miniature white plaster figures, and *I'd like to be a Cubist Sculpture* (2005–06), Lüthi developed the series *ExVoto* (2007) – consisting of small, almost transparent, delicate objects in which self-portraiture and artistic quotation are intermingled beyond recognition.

Urs Lüthi's works all circle around the rupture that characterises the modern consciousness: the loss of the whole feeds our yearning to bridge and heal divisions. Ambivalence thus becomes an attitude that is fundamental to survival, if we are to think in terms of that division, and if we are to live and bear it.

Works: Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau; Geneva, Musée Rath; Kunsthau Glarus; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Kunstmuseum Luzern; Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou; Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne; Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich; Kunsthau Zürich.

Urs Stahel, 1998, updated 2011  
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

### Selected bibliography

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- *A Bigger Splash. Painting after Performance*. London, Tate Modern, 2012-13. [Texts]: Eda Cufer [et al.]. London: Tate Publishing, 2012
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- *Urs Lüthi*. Bonner Kunstverein, 1993; [...]; Kunstverein Freiburg, 1995. [Texte:] Annelie Pohlen. Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1993 [Datum der Ausstellung in Bremen nicht ermittelbar]
- *Urs Lüthi 1990*. Helmhaus Zürich, 1990. [Texte:] Marie-Louise Lienhard, Beat Wyss, Hannes Böhringer. Zürich, 1990

- *Urs Lüthi. Wo der Traum in Liebe endet. Facetten eines Selbstportraits*. Kunstverein München, 1987. [Beiträge:] Zdenek Felix, Christoph Blase. München, 1987  
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#### **Website**

<http://www.ursluethi.com>

[http://www.fotostiftung.ch/de/nc/archive-](http://www.fotostiftung.ch/de/nc/archive-spezialsammlungen/index-der-fotografinnen/fotografin/cumulus/2061/L/show/)

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#### **Last modification**

17.11.2020

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AutorIn: Titel [Datum der Publikation], Quellenangabe, <URL>, Datum des Zugriffs. Beispiel: Oskar Bättschmann: Hodler, Ferdinand [2008, 2011], in: SIKART Lexikon zur Kunst in der Schweiz, <http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000055>, Zugriff vom 13.9.2012.