

Laura Kikauka

„Denknieschutz“

Kunstverein Ulm

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The Kunstverein in Ulm is proud to present Laura Kikauka, an artist of international fame. A short biography: born in Canada, or more precisely in Hamilton, she has lived for a long time in New York and in 1992 came to Berlin where she established her studios as *The Funny Farm East*. The rest of the time Laura Kikauka lives in Meaford, Canada at her art farm *The Funny Farm West* in the midst of nature.

Laura Kikauka can definitely be called an established artist and it would be too time consuming to list all her exhibitions and the projects she took part in recent years. Last year, one of the many exhibitions she participated in was „Jugend von heute“ (Youth of Today) at the Schirn in Frankfurt; in 2002 she had a big show at the „Museum für Angewandte Kunst“ (MAK) in Vienna (catalogue); she showed her work at „Aller Anfang ist Merz“ at the „Haus der Kunst“ in Munich 2001 and can be seen with a permanent installation at the collection of the Kunstmuseum in Wolfsburg, Germany. In 1997 the artist designed the stage for Christoph Schlingensief's „Schlacht um Europe I-XVI“ (Battle for Europe I-XVI).

But Laura Kikauka's fixed installed art rooms are as well known as her art shows: these are permanent total room installations which she has created over the years in her apartment by putting together bizarre found objects, then adding to them and modifying the objects and which can be seen at her dwellings in Berlin and Meaford. Whenever she needs something, she takes parts of her temple of collections and includes these parts in the single exhibitions, although she always enriches the installation with objects from the respective surroundings of the exhibition.

Now Lara Kikauka shows us one of these exhibition satellites here at the Kunstverein Ulm under the title „Denknieschutz“ (a play of words on ‘knee protection’ and ‘protection from thinking’). We find ourselves inside an installation, which takes up all of the Schuhhaus room. The artist has decorated the room in a fantastic way, with a fulminant mixture of art and bric-a-brac, curiosities, decorative or useless things, glittery, strange, common, grotesque, abysmal objects from all over the world, from New York, Berlin and Toronto all the way to Ulm. All these items have been taken out of their original context, yet somehow they manage to transport the world they came from into Laura’s installation. Und thus Laura creates an overflowing Pandora’s box of global pop culture. The artist calls herself a „collect-o-holik“ and what we get to see here are items of prey from her hunting sprees for absurd and outlandish excesses of daily life and pop culture. Sometimes she just inserts her foundlings without any comment in her presentation, most of the times she does comment on them, though, making them even stranger and increasing their impact through alterations and modifications, for instance when she puts glitter stone eyes on pictures or over paints writings. On top of that you can see collages of strange objects which the artist has created from the most varied details.

The first impression you get when you enter the exhibition room is that of overwhelming chaos. But the visitor might be even more confused by the room decorations of former installations, which can be seen as pictures in several locations in the exhibition. After a while it dawns on you that everything in Laura Kikauka’s world is perfectly in its place and follows certain structures. Often, she will gather her foundlings in work groups. She introduces us for example to her collection of macramé owls, which she has lined up on long strings between the pillars. At another point she presents her amazing supply of fun slippers (you can even wear them, but only if you put them back exactly where you took them from, so that order is maintained).

It is very interesting to see what repetition of similar items does to things. In no way it makes things more boring, quite to the contrary they start to talk even louder to us, the owl slipper, the tiger slipper, the beer can slipper: each single item contains in itself a whole novel from the world of its former owner. Another criterion in Laura Kikauka’s world is colour. Even at her first Funny Farm, which she started installing as a teenager at her secluded farm in Canada in the 80ies, she had

grouped together objects of the same colour in one single room. At the time she had established the colours pink (flesh), turquoise and beige, all colour tones she herself didn't like very much. She was fascinated by what happens to objects and the way we see them when they are stuffed in such numbers in one room. Here in Ulm the artist has decided to design a white room filled with white objects only. And as an icing on the cake she even has a „white room“ play-list with songs that all have the colour white in the title.

The artist also established recurring themes for her installations, like for instance the „Schmalzwald“ theme (a play on the German Schwarzwald with grease), a refined persiflage on the German Gemütlichkeit à la Black Forest that comes from tourist souvenirs and bric-a-brac, a theme the artist has re-interpreted several times since 1996. Here in Ulm you can find the Schmalzwald in a wooden hut sponsored by a do-it-yourself store.

It is probably clear by now that Laura Kikauka's work is far from being random or even chaotic. Every item, every detail has been chosen specifically and is set in a certain context or corresponds with its surroundings. There is a number of objects which have a direct link to the city of Ulm where the exhibition takes place, for instance the stunningly coloured and translucent ad posters which the artist has placed right opposite the windows, out of which you can see the noble cathedral with its famous glass painted windows. All over the exhibition you can find collages of objects which are mounted on plates from the canteen, which have been created at the HFG School of Design.

Laura Kikauka's cosmos: all the above mentioned principles of order have definitely more to do with associative composition than with a strict system. The artist follows an order of a different kind, which is neither rational nor pragmatic, but rather aesthetic and emotional.

At this point in the speech of an art historian who thinks highly of himself and who would like his listeners in turn to think highly of him, there should be an excursion which tries in a rather verbose way to put Laura Kikauka's mobile and/or private system of order into context to the standard works of philosophy like Michel Foucault's „The Order of Things“ or Nelson Goodman's „Ways of Creating the World“ or even Claude Lévi-Strauss „The Wild Thinking“. There should be terms like

“archaeology of knowledge”, multi rationality, semantic and syntactic density, post modernism, heterogeneity and finiteness. You would probably be bored to tears and it would most likely say much less about the oeuvre of Laura Kikauka than the ordinary critic would like to believe.

During our preliminary talks I asked Laura which were the criteria that made her collect certain objects. Her answer was refreshingly practical:

1. they must immediately appeal to her emotionally
2. they have to be amusing
3. they have to be affordable
4. they must be easy to transport

So it's really that easy.

I asked her further how terms like „trash“, kitsch, punk which are used quite a lot in the discourse about the present art lifestyle (Martin Kippenberger), apply to her oeuvre. But Laura Kikauka is not very much at ease with these expressions, even if they are often being brought into connection with her works. Trash for her is really rubbish, things that can only be thrown away. According to her, this kind of trash includes all the little expensive things bought in chic boutiques, where bored people with too much money go to in order to fill up the black holes of senselessness they call their lives. For her, it is definitely impossible to develop any kind of interest or even respect for these items. She feels much closer to all those things of daily life which have a sense of humour and are easy going and which she usually finds in second hand markets and thrift shops.

She is far happier when the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the synthesis of the arts, is used to describe her work. Because Laura Kikauka doesn't limit herself to installations, her art comprises also musical events, often with her husband Gordon Monahan, who the visitors in Ulm had the pleasure of witnessing not long ago or even cooking performances by chef and artist Gordon W. honorary professor of the 'Institute of Sharfness', which he has founded himself. Her art rooms in

Berlin, where live music is played, where there is food and drinks, usually turn themselves in no time into the most fashionable places where the local art scene gathers. Art=Life=Fun. The concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk is very fitting in so far as none of her artistic actions are ever solitary. Each of her works is connected to her former installations, for instance when the artist takes up again and again the Schmalzwald theme or, as we can see in this exhibition here in Ulm, where photos of former installations are included. These photos are windows in the art rooms of different times or different places, yet they are not only pictures of memory. The artist takes the installations on the photos right into the current situation by including separate details of the photos directly into the exhibition. And so every artistic action is being set into the frame of the great, overall art project, which, in the end is nothing less than the life of Laura Kikauka. „ONGOING, ONGROWING“, to quote her phrase.

It is obvious that Lara Kikauka creates her works of art with great passion and without accepting any compromises. I hardly know of any other artists who manage to mix their creative drive and their life in a way Laura does. From the beginning she has lived right in the middle of her installations without any regard to what one might call middle-class needs. At the moment she is moving her dwellings to a new, rather improbable location in Berlin, which for most people might seem uninhabitable: a former restaurant, which is ideally suited for the spreading out of her world of Pandora's boxes. By the way, her bathtub is situated on a balcony over a beer garden. Yet, nevertheless the dissolution of the boundaries of her artist's existence, she does not see herself as a continuation of an "avant-garde artist", but rather as a "professional amateur". For her art is not a battle over the ideologies of art, but rather an experiment free of any ideology. In an article on Laura the journalist Bodo Mrozek calls this a "de-mystification of high culture".

Before this anti-elitist background, Laura Kikauka's oeuvre could easily be called pop art. Equipped with her infallible sense for limitations and abysses of the taste, she draws on the overflow of a colourful, shrill world of modern mass culture. The artist has great pleasure in surprising the spectator again and again with amazing, outlandish objects which our fun and consume oriented society produces. She lets us see in the junk room of the globalised collective consciousness

without raising the warning finger that criticizes consumption and has a pessimistic feeling about any culture. Quite on the contrary, obviously this brilliant world of useless things is a great fountain of joy for her. She loves playing with the superficial things without being superficial herself, she juggles with banal, but she juggles in a very intelligent and subtle way.

I cannot tell you how much I enjoy this exhibition of Laura Kikauka. Maybe someone of you has also visited some of the events of this rather overloaded summer of art. The Documenta, for instance. Bitter, strained faces wherever you look, upset about this, upset about that. This is not my idea of fun.

I plead for more exhibitions you step out of with a smile on your face, even though they are good. And such an exhibition is what Laura Kikauka has given us.

Thank you very much for that.

Tobias Wall