

Departures of the Papilones

Interactive art project, 2000-2002
Germany and Switzerland

Vera Staub. Departure of the Papilones. Thank you. For coming. Foreign fellows. Have - arrived. At dawn. And are gone again. At dusk. More than once. But never twice. Always on the road. Nowhere at home. Everywhere. Challenging. Headstrong. Obnoxious. Wild. Irritating. Different. With a lot of time. And patience. They can bare us. Much better than we can bare them. That's making them strong. They are smart. And playful. Tease with all kinds of trumpery. With simple things. Of an everyday's world. Without any particular value. They don't mind. Whatever occurs to them. They are lovely. Funny. And extraordinary. Art. Totally different. The Papilones. Friends.

Text from page one/cover of booklet to accompany envelope with loose cards of images from the 'Papilones' project.

Stephan E. Hauser text and translation

Since 1999 the artist Vera Staub, living in Ebikon near Lucerne (Switzerland), built 15 semi-abstract figures, which she called 'Papilones'. Each of these figures is 2 to 3 meters high and made of found material such as rags, rubber foam, wires, clamps and the like, then made weather resistant by way of coating them with synthetic resin. These figures were presented at various occasions in Switzerland and Germany. At every instance the visitors have been requested to alter the figures and their arrangement – using further found material held available in boxes and on the floor. The alterations have been documented by the artist. A selection of her photographs is now being shown at the Galerie am Buttermarkt.

With the art project 'Departure of the Papilones' Vera Staub is seeking for new impulses from the modern heritage of a sense alienation among the interconnections of the artist, the work, and its public. Its active interventions prevent the public from feeling reduced to a passive onlooker. For the artist it is like a farewell to the idea of the autonomous authority of the single creator.

'Departures of the Papilones' recalls the function of interactive art when it has first been tried in the early 20th century. At the same time, Vera Staub's concept is transgressing conventional limits. For early interactive art made a point of the gap between the art public and the new mass public, by way of claiming that it wanted to close their gap playfully. Later, in the 1960s, interactive modes of expression in art were primarily aimed at getting hold of the public again by way of turning it into an artistic matter of its own. Vera Staub is clearly beyond such contradictions. Her goal is the reconciliation of the artist with her public – by way of locating the artist where the work is being created under direct physical participation of the public.

In their appearance the Papilones remind us of those restless, intimidating, yet also fascinating outsider societies, which do have a long tradition in Swiss art, if we think of the lansquenets in Urs Graf's prints and drawings of the 16th century, or of the mercenaries in Ferdinand Hodler's painting, or of the noisy machinecreatures by Jean Tinguely and Bernhard Luginbühl. The Papilones therefore stand in a tradition which has had its part in the building of a self-awareness of one whole cultural setting.

The special charm of 'Departure of the Papilones' comes with the fact that the artist accomplished a convincing and personal mode of giving form to an arch-Swiss topic. Vera Staub found a truly fresh and original approach to a most common problem: the visualization of that interdependence between the artist and the public without which no work of art were wholly legitimate.

To coincide with the exhibition a portfolio in the size of postcards with loose cards documenting the art project and an inserted text by Stephan E. Hauser will be published by Edition Howeg, Zurich (Switzerland). ISBN 3-85736-221-9.

VERA STAUB

Text from press release to the exhibition of the art project ‚Departure of the Papilones‘ by Vera Staub at the Galerie am Buttermarkt in Cologne/Germany, on occasion of the opening on 23 August 2002.

Stephan E. Hauser, text
Maria Berberich, Berlin, photography

Art on the Roof

Happening, 1992

New York

Profile of the artist Vera Staub

If a painter is also trained as a dancer, as is the case with the Swiss artist Vera Staub, it cannot but affect how she holds and moves her brush, or what her finished canvas holds. Here is no picture window, no landscape, no dreamscape: figuration is almost entirely absent. Think instead of a splash, or of a scar, or of the jumping seismograph needle. Think of a moment that is private yet earthshaking. That movement is what the painter-dancer's canvas will mark.

Staub's paintings flaunt a Dionysiac intensity, yet contain (and withhold) a mysterious knowledge. Her kinetic energy has an inscrutable motivation, one the artist herself does not wish to analyze. 'I can only wait until a painting emerges from me', she says, and when it does emerge, she thinks of it as an uncensored translation of her innermost feelings. These feelings are basic, even primal: a zest for life backgrounded by an awareness of death. This radiant source produces the physical and psychical tension that makes her work most interesting. She has been refined by years spent in intellectually, mentally, and geographically exotic environments: studying and performing Spanish and Afro-american dance, teaching retarded children in her native Switzerland, and also teaching for several years in the forest of Peru. Her current residence in New York City will alter her in ways yet unknown.*

Already during the past few years, her paintings have grown spare and lean in gesture, even as they have grown larger, almost monumental. Since 1988, Staub has shown in Switzerland, Boston, and in New York at the Vera Engelhorn Gallery, which hosted her first local one-woman show in October 1991.

A detailed description of one painting from that show is the best way to (verbally) illustrate the painter's method. The large, untitled work in acrylic on paper opens with an intensely red vertical brush stroke about one foot wide, set three feet away from the painting's left edge. The vigor and violence of the gesture shows in the way the paint applies to the paper, its pastiness and small gaps of unpainted space – there was no time for a continuous coat. The resulting osmotic interplay of paper and paint form a pictorial element as strong as the color itself.

Like a second note plucked from invisible strings, another beam of color is set to the right of the first, but far more lightly, and with thinner paint. It seems diaphanous, especially in contrast to the first stroke's earthy thickness. It also has a slight swing. As it moves rightward, it spatters some of its form, jumping and dancing into what culminates as the painting's center. The red whirls like a dervish and casts out black shapes which burst over an entire third of the space. But then the black rockets over to the right side in a horizontal zoom totally abandoning the red and seizing the area for itself: the last two fifths of this very horizontal painting belong exclusively to black and to the bare paper. One imagines that the silence of the color environment has to do with the shade of black that is without vigor, even van.

In this painting the right edge is simply the end of the paper roll, and the oblique-angled border is simply how the manufacturer cut it. The border perfectly suits the painting's arrowlike shape, and also suggests the end of the kinetic narrative (even though the work is non-representational). The way though the artist imparts meaning to this ordinary paper border, the way she grabs its shape and makes it part of her larger scheme, is like a tiny flash of the luminous process of art-making. Characteristically, her paintings always seem set in a particular moment. These are not timeless icons, but rather sudden and dense outbursts of their own, or the artist's own, state of being, out of which they are thrown into the visible world.

The tension between the private act of making the public act of display has even affected where Staub paints. The enclosed room of the studio lacks the immediacy she wants, so one day she moved up to the roof, which lay invitingly open and flat at her apartment house. From here, in upper Manhattan, she could even see the Hudson, and it was here that she created her most recent series of large paintings. As she says, 'When my paintings emerge, sunlight, wind, and weather matter as much as my imagination.'

Her working tools are simple and few: a roll of paper, a water bowl, acrylics red and black, broad

VERA STAUB

brushes, and a scalpel to cut away the finished work. When she has readied her materials, she begins to move – it's sort of ritual dancing, which metamorphoses into true 'action painting'. The paper is pinned down flat. Beside it, around it, all the time surveying it, she moves rhythmically and repeatedly, pacing up and down. This may last minutes, or only seconds, as she listens for a voice deep inside her, and hearing it, her brush-arm seems to speak. With wide, swinging strokes, precise control, and lightening speed, she commits her intimate act of painting in the wide-open space. She thus exposes herself in the making just as much as in the finished work.

Most people viewing Staubs paintings are, of course, entirely unaware of how they were made. They may seem without reason, and they may seem sensual, but no one can ever know what the artist was thinking. This pleases her. 'I don't want the viewer to focus on my feelings; this is one reason I don't give my paintings titles. I want the viewer to develop a personal relationship to them.'

*When this text was ready for publication, the artist had already returned to Switzerland, where she is continuing her work today.

I would like to thank Aaron Schloff for his careful editing.

Stephan E. Hauser

New York 1992