



SHOT TO THE HEAD

RAPHAELA VOGEL AND TENZING BARSHEE IN CONVERSATION

Two days before Raphaela Vogel's exhibition *Ultranackt* opens, I met her at Kunsthalle Basel. The institution's heavy doors push open as easily as the memories of the Rhine city wash away with the imaginary rain-storm that I wish upon it. This is the level of perplexed absurdity that layers the artist's work. In this she effectively manages a balance within and between her works—a qualifying effect—leading up to a contrast between the psychedelic and the real.

In Vogel's exhibitions, she construes a narrative that either begins or ends with a bang, but in Basel it bangs all around. The material and formal contrasts, how she combines the tender with the brutal, the quaint with the stuff of tomorrow, the heavy with the cloudlike, establish her own version of cognitive dissonance. The elements of confusion momentarily interrupt the coherent continuum of her narrative, through harsh and complicated images and a language that celebrates German culture as it renders its pathos ludicrous: like a superhuman-size wooden horse pierced by dozens of red speaker cables—"an explosion of blood," in the artist's own words—titled *Kopfschuss* (Shot to the Head, 2018).

Basel offers a fitting scene to host this young artist's multiple talents, given that it is a medieval city, soft-spoken, globally powerful, and provincially self-concerned. Juggling every one of these aspects, this exhibition is pregnant with an epic presence. Nevertheless, nothing is monumentally static. Many of the objects or pieces existed before, and have been updated and shuffled into new work, so in this sense Vogel presents a survey of now-ness. Before the blood explosion she places a large metal sculpture, a half-arrow, with its backside and its cut-off middle part looking like a hypodermic needle, opposing the red speakers, the blood splatters. The artist talks about how different elements in the exhibition tie in and hold the narrative. For her, shapes and materials invisibly transform from piece to piece, from one room to the next. Different sounds coming from different directions: metal music, pitched-down crickets chirping, German football fans bawling.

The exhibition spills around its corners: the varied materials, sizes, and sounds perform Vogel's nonlinear narrative of sculptural intertextuality. Discussing how things work for or against one another, we realize that dependency can be productive. In Basel, many of the exhibition's elements are intense in how they occupy space, or make reference to mythology, or test how we see and decide the power of images. One would be mistaken to regard Vogel's spectacle as nothing but rehashed Beuysian constructions of primal German authenticity. She is way smarter than that. Not for nothing, Raphaela Vogel doesn't shy away from using vegan leather because she likes the way it feels. Her works are not only heavy like metal but heavy like a pool of condensed gravity.



Above - *Isolator*, 2016, *Ultranackt* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel
 Opposite - *Kopfschuss*, 2018, *Ultranackt* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist; BQ, Berlin; Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

TENZING BARSHEE

In the last of the five rooms of *Ultranackt* you installed *Isolator* (2016), a floor-to-ceiling video projection and large sculptural installation; you mentioned that in your concept for the exhibition, this work was a starting point. You've shown *Isolator* before, in your 2016 exhibition *She Shah* at Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster. What made you bring it back?

RAPHAELA VOGEL

It's a complex installation, and not too many people saw it in Münster, and this time I varied the piece; the setup is different. The background of the historic Kunsthalle and its architectural specificity made us adapt its installation, which changed its effect.

TB

The title refers not only to your use of industrially made ceramic insulators, but also to the motif of the video in which we see a figure, played by yourself, wearing a bodysuit with human muscles printed on it. It looks, although not realistically, like you've been stripped of your skin. The figure moves, or maybe travels, away from civilization.

RV

There's a boat ride, you can see my beating hair, whipping to metal music. Then there is something like a shipwreck—

Vogel uses the German word *Unglück*, which translates not only as "wreck" but also "misfortune." The interview is originally held in the artist's mother tongue. Her way of speaking is considerate, at times hesitant, but always to the point. She doesn't stumble over words. If she doesn't find the right way of saying something, she doesn't speak. The conversation is precise like a good metaphor, or how the German language allows anyone to be. It's not the accuracy of an arrow, but more how one can use a color to describe something, allowing for not only a single result but a space of meaning.

RV —and as a consequence, the figure is stranded on an island.

Hence, isolated.

The video is set on Hydra. I had the idea to enact the mythos of Marsyas.

TB Refresh my memory.

RV He's the satyr who had the hubris to challenge Apollo in a musical contest. He loses and gets flayed alive—

There's an interpretation in which Marsyas's penalty is not cruel, assuming that the satyr's animal guise was merely a masquerade.

—even though Apollo cheats. The fact that Marsyas dares to challenge a god calls for punishment. That's how I came to choose the muscle-print bodysuit. Although the work isn't really about the myth. I was mainly interested in the state of hubris, the question of megalomania.

TB Pride.

RV It's mirrored in the heaviness of the installation.

TB Is it right to see a humorous approach to the concept of artistic identity? I mean, you've made a few spatially demanding works.

RV Really?

TB I'm thinking of how you suspended two large lion sculptures at Motorenhalle in Dresden, or how you begin the exhibition here in Basel. Generally you don't shy away from creating a dominating presence in the space that your sculptures inhabit.

RV Right.

TB I'm wondering whether there's a pinch of humor in how you address the concept of hubris in a self-reflecting way, and what it ultimately means to make or produce such things, works of art.

RV Sure, I set out to greet the world in excessively framed scenes. Bursting the pain caused by a lack of space, I endeavor to penetrate the widths. I want an open plane for motion that allows me to articulate my agoraphile's desire for expansion. But what's humorous? Perhaps that's what it becomes in the end. For me it's interesting, when I see it as part of my reflection, to notice what kind of effect the work has when you realize it at such a size and accompany it with loud sounds. When I edited the video on my small computer screen and without the installation, it functioned differently. It's something else when I see it in the exhibition space, with the sculpture, with a Kunsthalle as a background and knowing that it'll run through Art Basel and get a lot of attention because of that. At this point, it's interesting that this becomes reflected through such a monumental installation. I have to inflate; otherwise I become a joke myself.

TB That what becomes reflected?

RV That one, as an artist, exhibits something, themselves. The pathetic, the melodrama. I'm quite interested in the pressure behind everything. That's how I see "ultra"—

A part of the exhibition title.

—as something abstract, this power. Being an artist.

TB So, if you're interested in the machinery behind and around art making, the title *Ultranaekt* ("ultra-naked") must be read as a form of stripping oneself, exposing your work, your doings and makings. Playing with these tropes, doesn't the title imply some form of violence? As if something were torn open, to see what's underneath and to be exposed to a large public. Something that, as you said, originally is made on a personal level.

RV Sure, I can see the tension.



Above, top, from left to right - *Heidi*, 2018; *Vreni*, 2018; *Alma*, 2018. *Ultranaekt* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel
Above, bottom - *Uri*, 2018, *Ultranaekt* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

TB How does it influence your decision making?

RV Well, the title for example, which is, of course, intentionally silly. Ultra-naked, as in, I reveal my diary, my most intimate needs or anxieties, which is, of course, ironic. But I had doubts as to whether the twist into something brutal would be lost, even though it's embedded in the choice of language, the exposure of something ultimately personal.

I feel caught here, as if I haven't paid attention. Of course, I didn't expect anything like an authentic expression, but still I took everything way too seriously. Silly me, I blame my blatant fetishization of intimacy for my carelessness. It's not that hard to be aware of all levels between irony and genuineness here. But it's easy to fall for either one, because the artist carefully weaves the two together.



Fruit of the Hoop, 2018, *Ultranaekt* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

TB The twist into the ironic?

RV More the twist into brutal, perhaps.

TB I think the twist happens quite obviously. But not because there is actually the illusion of a depiction of deep, inner goings-on. Walking through the exhibition, I don't experience the representation of an emotion. It's more that you can sense the echo of emotive states that functioned as motivators for certain gestures. Like giving a direction, like signage. To come back to *Isolator*, although you seem to be the main subject of the video, the work doesn't feel in the least like it's directly dealing with your own biography.

RV I'm quite interested in the balance between taking seriously what one does and incorporating the humorous perspective of what it means to make something.

TB That's why I'm curious how this can be related to specific decisions.

Ultranaekt is a well-designed parkour. The single works operate distinctly within the frame of Kunsthalle Basel and the variety of media employed by the artist: installation, sculpture, video, painting, et cetera. The layout of the exhibition echoes a liberty inherent in these works and the constraint of their interconnectivity. They're positioned in relation to the architecture and to themselves.

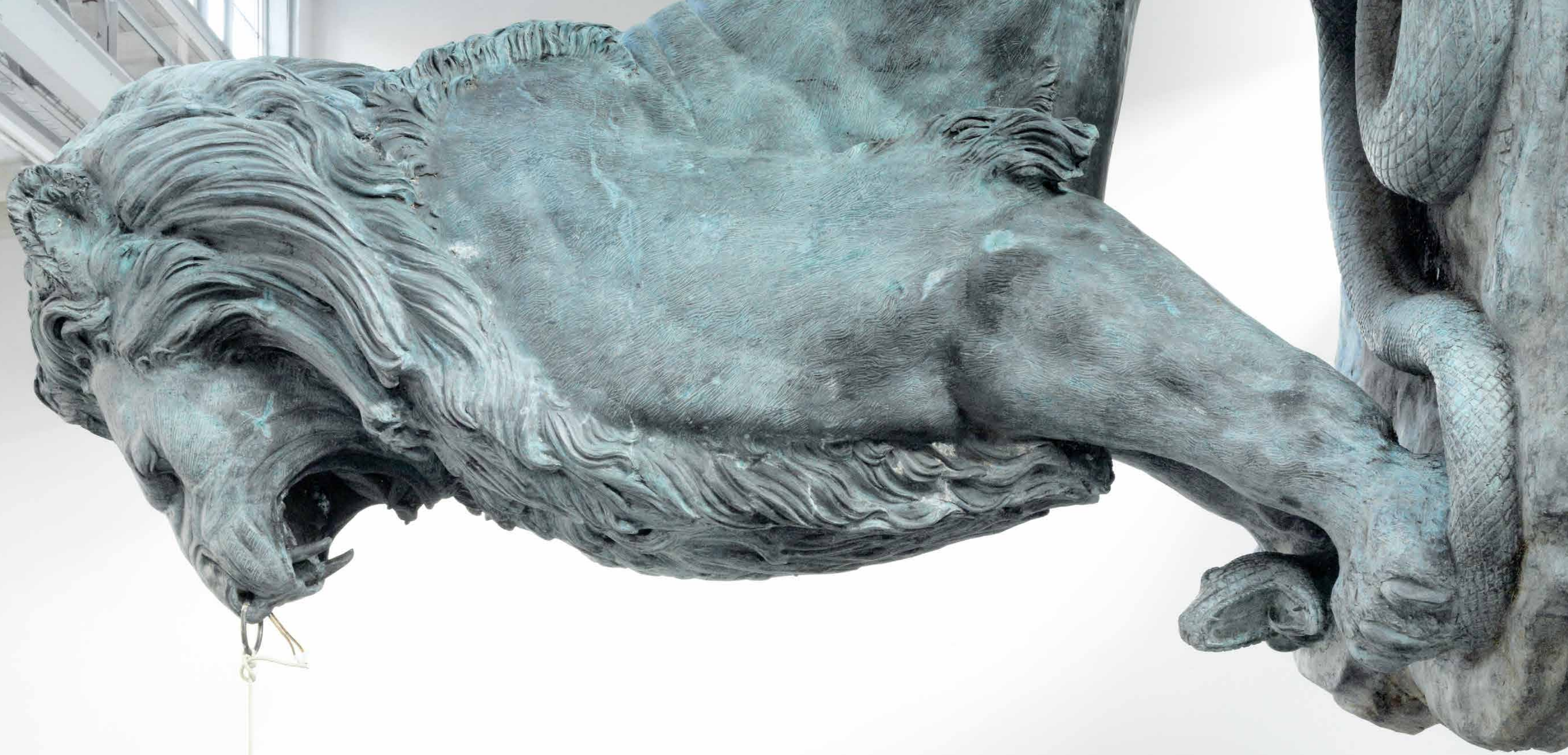
TB The humor doesn't necessarily play on the funny. I see it more as operating by way of contrasts: the different elements that comprise your works have an almost abrasive effect that poses questions toward them. The different qualities—how fresh, new, store-bought, dated, or old-fashioned an element looks and feels—is that something to trace?

RV I suppose that's not intended as such. I suppose it's quite funny when I get kissed by a baby camel in one of the videos in *Fruit of the Hoop* (2018). That's not what you mean, though. But that's the joke that works in the most direct way.

Fruit of the Hoop (still), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin







TB What's the connection between the video and the sculpture?

RV There are a few phallic moments in the exhibition. There's the male horse, the urinal that comes out of the wall like an erection, the Brancusi columns, the insulators. My first thought was a kind of metamorphosis of materials. The wooden horse turns into the wooden Brancusi. The brown insulators continue its shape and color. The horse and the Brancusi are symbols that speak of male dominance, which I appropriate and use. At the same time, I'm showing videos that have a voyeuristic quality. I'm using a drone—the boy's toy—to shoot them. I'm pointing the camera so you can see the drone's design. The machine has eyes, which you can see in some of the shots. The drone becomes a counterpart to the depicted figure: a man? a monster? It's unclear. There is the question of the gaze. I control the drone and how it films me. I expose myself exhibitionistically and address the relationship between the gaze and the control over your own body, the female body. It's a complicated relationship, and at the same time direct and banal. I suggest that, perhaps, I have internalized the male gaze.

TB Internalized how?

RV Well, I don't just hint at the idea that I reveal something. That's really my world depicted in these images, which I argue and that I pivot my work on. I don't really question these issues directly in my installation, but rather I orchestrate them in a baroque way. That is perhaps my attempt to internalize this concept of power—I don't point at it, I let it become a part of it.

TB What do you mean?

RV The installation.

TB Does the exhibition installation intentionally play with the representation of masculinity?

The Kunsthalle press officer enters. His presence forces us to take a short break in a weird moment. Perhaps it's good to intermission here. What kind of question is this, anyway?

RV No, the sculptures are used for their quality as signage, as inflated signs. For example I use the animal skins because they're an atavistic form of an image. The questions of heaviness or solidity are principal questions in sculpture, and it's interesting to counter that with the "lightness" of a video. The installations have to be this weighty, exactly because the video is this light.

TB How does the concept of the male gaze play into this?

RV I can think of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-1966), his last major artwork, or the merry-go-round of the bachelor. Maybe. For me, this is addressed in the title (*Ultranackt*) as well. Not only the idea of the ultra as a football fanatic, but that perhaps among us, there are such extremists—or male societies, to describe it in a more general way. Structures that are established and powerful, violent, territorial. In earlier works, I was looking to annex such a space, to occupy it with videos, to claim a presence and create a tension. In a video I made at school, I fly a drone through the classroom and try to capture the pressure in that space, and all I do is scream. I suppose that brings us back to an emotive state that acts as motivator but isn't necessarily translated into the work. I suppose now my work has become generally more narrative, and is intended, like you said, more on a metaphorical plane. Everything gets mixed up more. I think of the "ultras" as an idea of abstract pressure, but that they're also among us. Which I'm dependent on, and celebrate in my work. I'm looking to how these authorities can be incorporated into the work. But I don't want to simply criticize this, but rather point toward how I find this positive. The positive turn of dependence. I like dependencies.

TB Can you elaborate on how your view of dependencies influences the way you work?

RV I suppose that's a question of character, the insecurities one has, a shyness. It's something I myself struggle with. This struggle of being insecure or anxious is paired with my need to expose myself, my exhibitionism, to be in the spotlight. To perform a role and wear a skin that I don't really want to. That influences how I work, in the way I always work on my own. I wonder if the more I question myself and the more I become insecure, the louder the exhibitions have to be.

TB I'm curious about your view of the positive aspect of dependencies, how they can be generative. That's something you trace in how your character can be opposed to the nature of your work. For example in the dichotomy of shyness versus loudness.



Above - *Isolator* (stills), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin
Previous two spreads - *In festen Händen*, 2016, installation view at riesa efau, Motorenhalle, Dresden, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Werner Lieberknecht

TB Let's go back to *Isolator*, the starting point of *Ultranackt*.

This is the moment when it catches up with me: the interview is all over the place. I suppose that's the meandering way of conducting a conversation IRL. Nothing special. Even though, I must say, the artist's work particularly offers itself to jumping from one association to the next.

TB Exactly, the subject of hubris, the video. Before I started to ramble.

RV Yes, we talked about hubris and megalomania, which you related to art making and being an artist. I see that all included. The hubris, the pretentiousness—

The German word *Anmassung*, which Raphaella uses repeatedly, really hits the spot and addresses that whole range, which makes sense here.



She Shah installation view at Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, 2016-2017. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Thorsten Arendt, Münster

RV I suppose my works relay an emancipatory impression, an outburst, also in the tradition of female artists' self-representation. I think it's interesting to put my image behind the drainage of a urinal, or to lie naked in front of a tree. In a way, there's the dependency on the machine, the drone. I'm dependent on the technology and the self-awareness of the media. The drone becomes part of the mise-en-scène and takes over the active part, while it takes me a lot of effort to activate my body. I don't know whether it's because of my considerable rottenness or the size of my heart that I'm able to love everything.

TB Your videos are usually set in monumental or scenic nature.

RV They're often holiday destinations. Or generally places where you don't know what to do there, so you walk in circles. The melodramatic places, touristic highlights, are contrasted with the lax plots, like sliding down somewhere, lying somewhere, hiding from the drone behind the tree. In a way, it's about *not* satisfying the expectations of these places, *not* knowing what to do with them. A form of cluelessness, to be stranded.

TB Can you talk about the leather works?

RV This time I used vegan leather! There were leftover Alcantara pieces available, and with this project it made sense to use the synthetic material. It made sense with the bone elements that are made of plastic, too. I used to paint on canvas, but I've never exhibited it. The leather works are more or less painted, too. They're triangles turned upside down. This highlights their effect as signage. A triangle is the strongest sign you can put on a wall. That's why in traffic the "Give Way" sign is a triangle on its head. I used to work with shaped canvases a lot. I don't like to touch dry fabrics. Leather was a good alternative, and Alcantara works, too. In *Ultrnacht* the pieces have a cast from a dinosaur tail that looks like a spine or a sea-horse, which ties the works in with the videos.



Uterusland, 2018, *Ultrnacht* installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

I trace an implicit motivation to question art making itself, and to critique the media she uses, for example by turning a trashy urinal (*Uterusland* [2018]) into a wall sculpture. The work continues the tradition of glorifying shit and piss, elevating the functional object into both, an abject and an aestheticized thing. I see it as something that is crystallized, as something hyper-contemporary. I wonder how many people actually will put their noses up close to see the video behind.



Albrecht Dürer, *Der Zeichner des liegenden Weibes*, 1512-1525. Photo: User: Mattes / Wikimedia Commons / CC-0

TB Let's discuss the urinal.

RV It comes out of the wall as if it's a prolongation of the cut-off arrow in the first room, proposing a multiplicity of sculpture. There is a drawing by Albrecht Dürer (*Der Zeichner des liegenden Weibes* [1512-1525]) that shows a guy drawing a woman through a perspective machine. The woman lies on a table. The voyeuristic moment contains everything—it's a representation of the act of observing, not of the observed itself. In the exhibition, the blood spills (*Kopfschuss*) function like a grid in the room, like points of perspective. I'm interested in combining structural questions with a narrative.

TB In the video you installed behind the urinal, we see you going down a waterslide. In the first shot, you carry a baby doll. Later, the baby is gone, and the figure, which you're playing, looks shocked. Are you pointing at a relationship between birth and trauma?

RV I've read that every human emotion one goes through in life is already experienced while being born. The baby goes through bodily and sexual sensations, fear, joy. Everything is already inscribed in that moment.

Which can be looked at from the other side: every human emotion relates back to the moment of origin of becoming a human being in this world.

RV I thought about production and reproduction in artistic terms, but I also filmed in the swimming pool in Nürnberg, the city where I was born. I was curious about this encapsulating small space. I made a few works in toilets or cinemas. I like movies from the 1970s in which people travel through someone's body, like in a little boat through the veins, a biology film. The swimming pool is like a big organism: you enter it and slide from one pool to the next. Institutions are like organisms that you move through.

TB You've shown the video before in a different installation. In Basel you decided to conceal it behind a used urinal. The viewer has to walk up close and basically put their nose in front of the drain to make sense of the image. The drain where men let go—

RV —men piss in it and walk away—

TB —then leads into the image of your birth tube, which is obstructed by the architecture of the urinal. Additionally, you made white plastic casts of the urinal and placed them like marching figures that lead out of the room, walking away.

RV It's important that you don't really recognize the casts as the negative shapes from the urinal. I wanted to make male stereotypes, the same but each a little different. There's a melancholy to these pathetic little figures. They're reduced to their own sperm, an element of production.

Raphaela Vogel was born in Nuremberg in 1988, and lives and works in Berlin. She is primarily known for her video-sculptures, which feature her short performance-based films, which entangle the viewer in a voyeuristic story that deploys notions of surveillance, control and physical trespass. Her work has been exhibited in a number of international group exhibitions: *Hybrids*, Lustwarande, Platform for Contemporary Sculpture, Tilburg (2018), *PRODUKTION. Made in Germany Drei*, Kunstverein Hannover (2017), *Radicaler Sociale Animale Talen*, Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amsterdam (2017), *Hütli*, Goethe-Institut, Ludlow 38, New York (2017). Solo exhibitions include *Ultrnacht*, Kunsthalle Basel (2018), *Gipsy King Kong*, Kunstpalais, Erlangen (2018), *She Shah*, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (2016), *Ich gebe euch eine Verfassung*, BQ, Berlin (2016) and *Raphaela und der große Kunstverein*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (2015).

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