

HYPERALLERGIC

A German Art Space's Inaugural Exhibition Transforms It into a Haunted Haus

The inaugural exhibition at Haus Mödrath Space for Art deals with the tensions shared among the mansion, its history, the landscape, and the home as a display space for art.

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Haus Mödrath (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

KERPEN, Germany — There is a ghost in the German countryside. A new home for contemporary art has been erected here from the mossy ruins of a forgotten history. Haus Mödrath Räume Für Kunst (Haus Mödrath Space for Art) isn't a museum and there's no collection housed here, but it is one of the most alluring new art spaces in Europe. The inaugural exhibition, *Lodgers*, curated by Veit Loers, deals with the tensions shared among the mansion, its history, the landscape, and the home as a display space for art.

The history of Haus Mödrath plays into the curator's vision for this show currently on view. A short drive or train ride from Cologne, the history of the property dates back to 1260, when a grain mill here was first documented. Mödrath mill was modified in the

beginning of the 19th century to extract pigment from the wood in the surrounding forest, and the original house was erected to shelter mill workers. Today, the mansion is all that remains of Mödrath village, which was destroyed by strip coal mining during the 1960s.



Thomas Zipp, "Head Office" (2010)

Before the town was dissolved, the house was a maternity home for pregnant single women, and subsequently, in 1928, legendary composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was born here. Then the Nazis occupied the property until the end of World War II, when it was turned into a children's home for a short time, after which it sat more or less abandoned until the 1980s.

Here the curators have cart blanche, as per the wishes of the anonymous entrepreneur who founded Häus Mödrath. Through curating *Lodgers* to include a group who may be considered outsider artists, such as autistic Berliner Adolf Beutler, Loers echoes the outside status of the art space itself, and heightens the dissonance between the space and the exhibition, veering from fairytale to horror story.



Ajay Kurian, "God's Wisdom" (2016)

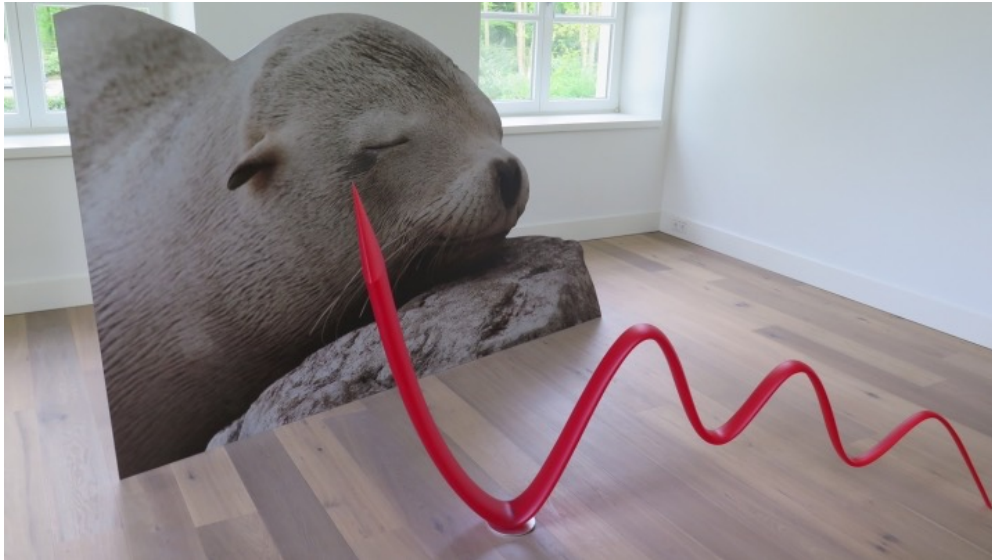
Despite the idyllic setting, the work turns dark before I even enter the building. Two pieces in a run-down tennis court behind the main house create a gloomy mood that carries through the exhibition. A work by Thomas Zipp, "Head Office" (2010), harkens back to wartime, and inside the army tent that frames the piece there's a scene of debauchery: Alcohol and mysterious powders are scattered around the space where the artist created a performance for the exhibition inauguration on April 23. Ajay Kurian's installation, "God's Wisdom" (2016), inside the ball house a few steps away, is even more harrowing than Zipp's nod to the ridiculousness of war. Looking into the small structure from outside through windows tinted pink, a horrible image of a decaying Christ seems to be devoured by a humanoid robot. The apocalyptic scene is somehow humorous and cartoonish even while inviting terror into my heart.



Michael E. Smith, "Untitled" (2017)

Passing through the main entrance the strangeness continues. On the ground floor Andreas Slominski mixes pieces of coffins and cribs with quotidian Bauhaus furniture. Ed Atkins's video, "Hisser" (2015), a surreal narrative film shot in the style of David

Lynch, is projected onto a double screen. Katja Novitskova's installation, "Pattern of Activation (sea lion)" (2015), surprises with a touch of cuteness: a large sandwich-board print of a napping sea lion, seeming to smile while he rests. But the tenderness is quickly lost in the realization that the animal sleeps beside an ominous red, fiberglass graph line rendered in 3D, and pointing toward an unknown exponential increase which seems related to humanity's destructive impact on the natural world.



Katja Novitskova, "Pattern of Activation (sea lion)" (2015)

The cuteness has certainly fled, as I notice, before heading upstairs, an entire room off the entrance, containing an elegant marble swimming pool. (Whose ridiculous idea was it to build a swimming pool attached to the foyer?) In an installation by Neïl Beloufa, "The analysts, the researcher, the screenwriter, the CGI tech and the lawyer in a swimming pool" (2017), the pool has been converted into a sort of passageway where projections and disembodied audio bathe the space in colored light. One of my favorite works in the show hangs here: a large painting by Ali Altin, "Mission Blue" (2016), mounted on the grey marble wall and illuminated by a single spotlight. In the darkness of the room the fantastic image seems to float in space and the cartoonish characters come to life — with killer Smurfs.



Ali Altin, "Mission Blue" (2016)

Upstairs is also infested with Frankensteinian animals: Stefano Cagol's video, "Stars & Stripes. Redouble" (2013), mimics the flapping wings of an eagle with the mirrored image of an American flag fluttering in the breeze, creating an ever changing Rorschach inkblot. In a small room off to the side, the windows are flung open, but a brick wall blocks the view of the green park below. The bricks are made out of baked birdseed and sugar grouting, and little beaks peck at the untitled artwork by Björn Braun from outside, eating their way into the exhibition. This whimsical performance by birds also embodies the struggle between humans and the natural world that the curator built into the show.



Björn Braun, "Untitled" 2017

Then the exhibition takes a turn toward the obsessive in a little nook taken up by the desk of Beutler — the autistic 80-year-old Berliner mentioned above. Everything is covered with relentless hatch marking, conveying a sense of paranoia and desperation

within the enclosed space. Beutler's marks are echoed in large paintings by André Butzer and Günther Förg, also containing their own hash mark gestures.



Günther Förg, "Untitled" (1996)

The curatorial vision of Loers, along with the work of many of the artists he selected, veers toward the dystopian and highlights the contrast between the works in the show and the pristine grounds of the mansion. But the tension created here also provokes a deeply introspective experience where the history of the building and the conceptual function of each work is heightened by uncertainty — things are not necessarily as they seem and I can't look away.



Adolf Beutler, "Untitled" (works from 1999-2017)



Franz West, "Kain naht Abel" (2009)

Ascending toward the attic, with the mood set by the second floor, I was almost apprehensive to see what came next. Whatever was hiding in the attic, I had the sense that it wouldn't be friendly. Here, in the loftiest space in the house, a cage by Eva Kot'átková, "Work of Nature" (2013), is at once a stage for performance and a torture chamber for naughty children. It's unclear whether the objects inside the human-sized metal enclosure are playthings or weapons. But nothing is straightforward here. The cage is full of mystery, as are most of other works in *Lodgers*.



Eva Kot'átková, "Work of Nature" (2013)



Eva Kotátková, "Work of Nature" (2013) (detail)



Eva Kotátková, "Work of Nature" (2013) (detail)

Exiting through the basement, through a door cut into the swimming pool and down a corridor which leads to the kitchen where visitors are offered refreshments, a video work by James Richards, "Radio at Night" (2015), composed of found footage, closes the show out with a sensual and emotional illustration of the highlights and pitfalls of humanity — disease, pollution and destruction are woven into images of ecstatic ceremony and intimacy. All of the themes in the show are referenced again in Richards's work, deep within the bowels of the Haus Mödrath.



Michael E. Smith, "Untitled" (2017)

Lodgers *continues* at Haus Mödrath (An Burg Mödrath 1, Kerpen) until November 15, 2018.