

**JUST ANOTHER
TRAVEL FOR LÜTHI**
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"Anyone who has followed Urs Lüthi's career so far has suffered successive hot and cold douches of confusion, disorientation and doubt. Not that this highly personal artistic cosmos has ever lost his fascination; but at times Lüthi's sheer mental agility and freedom from pre-conceptions have been breathtaking. He has always kept at least one step ahead; no sooner have you familiarized yourself with one phase of his work than he is off finding new ways to formulate his concerns, and introducing new emphases that then have to be correlated with previous experience."

Here, Max Wechsler was talking of Lüthi in his essay for the Venice Biennale of 2001, and we feel he has captured the spirit of the radicalism which has made him a key figure for the generations that have followed his developments ever since the 1970s. And this spirit is one of the reasons that led us to decide to put on this exhibition and to find a way for it to be taken to even greater heights in a project specially created for MACRO. The decision came spontaneously, partly as a result of the enthusiastic response of the public, and especially of young people, to *Just another Story about leaving*, the work which was shown in July. Though almost superfluous, this gave yet greater confirmation of Lüthi's contemporariness in terms of the contemporary itself, and it reaffirms MACRO's policy of restoring the values of the present to the younger generations. Lüthi's journey thus reaches Rome in the wake of the work that was shown, and it is in true harmony with the museum's vocation as a producer of images. The artist has chosen to place the city – of which MACRO embodies the idiosyncrasies – at the heart of his work. After all, in these terms, Lüthi's work fits in perfectly for, as he himself says, bringing another sculpture to Rome is like "bringing owls to Athens."² Or, as Cocteau would have said, it is like "casting perfume on a rose." This seems curiously relevant by itself, and it makes *Just another Story about leaving* a radical experience for the city too. This is because Lüthi makes an analysis of different historical ages, languages, and approaches, applying the indices of his research to a more sweeping revision of the places of experience. This process is even more disorienting when we consider that the tale is carried forward by the artist himself – reduced to an icon of art, he offers the city an account of a journey through space and time.

"... I can look into a mirror and see nothing..."

Andy Warhol

Wechsler's image is indeed appropriate, because the radicalism that inspires the younger gen-

erations certainly arises from the fact that Lüthi conducts his discourse in the mirror. He looks at his own self as it acts in universal terms, absorbing experiences and differentiating between himself and his image. This makes him credible in the eyes of the beholder, who does indeed ask the artist to work in his place. On the subject of his self portrait and his inevitable participation in the work, he tells Lichtin that his works are "also a very general image of one life – of how a person can situate or represent himself. It became increasingly clear to me that only by situating myself within art I could lead a good life, that this is really the reason why my life is good – my life, not life as such. Life as such is actually rather tedious, boring and banal. And through art I can articulate and express myself in a way that is not possible in life."³

This has become even more delightfully intriguing for in recent years Lüthi has intentionally decided not to shirk from anything, showing himself as an icon of a humanity that can recognise itself in its own stories, since it is also its own spectator.

One might naturally wonder how all this is possible, and how an artist can interpret this role for forty years without the slightest let-up or loss of tension, but Lüthi has always approached his own motives by justifying them to the public. And, ever since the 1970s, the public have seen him in the most diverse situations and have always looked forward to his next work as an unmissable chance to be disoriented once again. Lüthi has created a separation between himself as an artist and as a normal citizen, choosing an extreme form of otherness with which to seek what is left of clarity (*The Remains of Clarity*, pp. 58–59, 96–97), and to embark on a relentless journey into the beating heart of art (*Art is the better life* and *Art for a better life*, pp. 108–109, 111, 113) seeking out its most unusual capacities in order to improve life. Right from the outset, this determination was a real and explicit necessity (even though it was not made manifest), and the artist expressed it by revealing⁴ his own strengths and weaknesses (*Urs Lüthi weint auch für sie*, p. 149, and *Lüthi is tougher than he appears to be*, p. 24), portraying himself as a pliant and ephemeral being (*Labiles objekt*, p. 25), and ironically psycho-analysing his own obsessions on the couch of art (*Selfportrait*, 1970, pp. 22–23). He later burnt the bridges to himself, entering into a collision with the iconic expressiveness that had characterised his debut, and that in the 1980s accompanied him in his revision of the pictorial nature of the image (pp. 65, 101, 121). This had aroused fairly strong reactions among the critics and Lüthi explains it by analysing those years and saying that as the "revival of painting was going on (at least from the point of view of expression, thanks to the so-called "Junge Wilden"), my own work was judged – and this is always the case when it comes to Zeitgeist phenomena – in these same terms, and no one wondered whether my intention might have been a different one."⁵

The intentions he refers to actually lead to works in which he appears mysteriously wrapped up in the fullness of a stark and yet concrete painting. It is almost sculptural and tactile in its linearity, and identities of another nature can be seen within it. Images play a decisive role in these works too and, even in the diversity of a language that appears to be radically transformed, Lüthi remains very much himself, as always. We find the action, irony, and the unmistakable verve of his which transforms ironic absurdity into a value worth meditating on. Lüthi's life as an artist is full of such moments of connection, because he is basically quite certain that he needs to know and understand the various stages of change in order to continue on his journey. For this reason, he cyclically feels the need to pull the strings of his own creative discourse in order to start off anew, and this is why his work appears to be different each time. After all, he himself says "in order to show emotions, the first thing you need to do is to give them form." Indeed, it is from this angle that the themes that run through his research have their uniformity and he has managed to combine this with the dynamics of time and with the exploration of new languages. This has led to an unmistakable mix of continuity and rupture. It can also be seen in the title of this exhibition for Rome, *Just another Story about leaving*, which was already the name of a work he made in the 1970s and which he reworked more recently. It has been the conceptual atom of his studies ever since *I'll be your mirror* (p. 15), when he embarked upon a symbolic journey in the form of an image embodied within the world. His alterity can thus also be seen in this constructing and deconstructing of himself through action and image, ensuring the uniformity that is to be found in the growth of feelings and in the development of ideas. And here we once again find the matter of his consistency and of how it cannot do without his reaffirmation and prediction of his own works, without ever really monumentalising himself (*Autoritratto a mani vuote - Selfportrait with empty hands*, p. 189). His exhibitions are built up in exactly the same way as his works, which are however arranged within the display in such a way that they can interact, depending on the particular conditions, and generating a form of diversity that comes to life in a transversal manner. Lüthi is the actor, the subject, the body, and the idea of these explorations and, by gradually recognising himself in different forms and situations, what emerges is a portrait of a man who is stronger than one might think (*Lüthi is tougher than he appears to be*), but a man who is also able to abandon himself to worry (*The Remains of Clarity*, pp. 58–59), not to show himself as a "cool" man capable of bewildering through disorder and refusal (pp. 62–63), and who, empty-handed, reminds the onlooker that he is not the only one who is lonely (*You are not the only who is lonely*, p. 77).

"... a crossing that no one else can do for us..."

Albert Camus

There is an installation in *The Remains of Clarity* series, in which Lüthi portrays himself from behind as he looks into a mirror. He is surrounded by photos of explorations with old sailing ships navigating unknown seas in search of riches. This little-known work does I think bring together what we have been saying so far in a single discourse that reflects what the artist has been working on for some time, and which is more of a journey than a distancing or escape from himself. This necessary and inevitable discovery is always carried out in the first person, and ever since his first exhibition it has brought together organisation, pragmatism, and ironic confusion. Lüthi unifies and multiplies, but he also seeks levity and amusement by introducing a vital stigmatisation of himself. By doing so, he forces himself to live in order to declare, unravel, and give reality to ambiguity.

The artist has thus also dealt with history – both of time and of art – and this has recurred as yet another guiding thread ever since he first started portraying himself half-length in *Numbergirl* (pp. 94–95). This is an aesthetic icon with a mixing up of genres, a timeless portrait with an individuality that returns in the elements we see in every display, and it is an image of erotic appeal. It is indeed an extraordinary work, and not just because it justifies his introduction of bronze sculpture or because it is one of the first examples of his anti-monumental protagonism, but also because, on closer examination, each subject was taken up in the following forty years. This shows a level of lucidity that goes on to become absolute coherence.

The sculptures may respond to two types of reasoning and to two types of approach, because the classicist seriousness of the material emanates an awareness of history as well as the entertaining fragmentation we also find in other works. It even touches on a series of exercises and activities that Lüthi teaches us to perform. Actually, it appears that he is telling us that we need to absorb the language and make it our own, making reference to a new understanding and holding it out as a premise for our journey through the present. The levels are confused, mixed up, and traversed, and this makes it essential to build up an experience which can turn into a form of wisdom that cannot be delegated to others, just as Camus told us. After all, "when one creates art, one has many forebears, especially when one makes art today. I constantly noticed that many people who take in art – in other words, critics and museum people – certainly do not have this clearly in mind. They keep on looking for twentieth-century avant-garde: who invented what, and where? They don't realize at all we're the first generation after

the art of handicrafts, after the twentieth century, that cannot meet the prerequisites for this sort of avant-garde, that ought not and is not capable of doing so. I think it is anachronistic to think in terms of avant-garde art today. We should see things in the right light! And we should tell stories of our own with the vocabulary that has already been invented. Stories that are really ours – we shouldn't chase after this or that -ism or an idea of originality or the representation of a linear development."⁴

I'd like to be a Cubist sculpture (p. 117) shows this separation and association of levels, and it is basically one of the end results of this wandering, as though on a flying carpet, between different registers (*Selfportrait*, 1976, p. 85), and in carrying out a programme of activities that allows for greater permanency in the real world. With his *Exercises* (pp. 31, 41, 53) Lüthi teaches us that people have similar feelings, tensions, and attitudes but that, in the end, we can all find ways of escape from being accustomed to things (*Therapies*, pp. 61, 75, 83). Objects too have a controversial side to them, just as man has, so it is worthwhile recreating a life based on great issues such as success, love, or freedom, dedicating ourselves to them as though they were part of our therapy.

Lüthi has experimented with a confusion of genres, old age, tranquillity, and success (pp. 101, 107), with the end, and with an overall vision of things, their losses and their changes and permanence over time. In the case of Rome, he has decided to create a relationship between all these elements, from which the feeling of a wandering through the values of a universally human classicality emerges.

"Nothing of my ego will survive"

Bertrand Russel

The traces of history are immortal and, in this wandering through the individual in time and space, Lüthi is telling us of absence and presence. As always, he does so with irony, breaking down and even smashing (pp. 62–63). He does not stop in front of himself, and where necessary his reasoning now concerns an overall vision of things, as though taking a bird's eye view of the present. The fact of verifying his own absence by interpreting the identity of objects is something that comes from the past. Even his first exhibition was decomposable, and in 1970 he created an installation with all his personal belongings: clothes, fragrance, sunglasses, documents (pp. 26–27). For once, what was put aside was his image, which nevertheless can be

sensed in the atmosphere, as in his *Still Lives* (pp. 182–183), a work on show that reveals not some momentary absence but a definitive departure, and that necessarily introduces the themes of the inheritance of the present with regard to the historical journey he has tackled in his research.

This is his way of approaching abandonment, failure, and the end. It is his way of seeking ambiguity in order (possibly) to reach eternity.

¹ From Max Wechsler, "Urs Lüthi: life as an ambivalent art figure between eccentricity and normality," in *Art for a better life – from Placebos and Surrogates*, catalogue, Periferia, Luzern/Poschiavo, 2001.

² From the conversation between Urs Lüthi and Christoph Lichtin in the catalogue, p. 123.

³ From the conversation between Urs Lüthi and Christoph Lichtin in the catalogue, p. 118.

⁴ Even in a metaphorical manner: in the installation for the 1970 show "Visuelle Denkprozesse" at Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lüthi, as can be seen at pp. 26–27, undresses from his properties to put them on show.

⁵ From the conversation between Urs Lüthi and Christoph Lichtin in the catalogue, p. 120.

⁶ From the conversation between Urs Lüthi and Christoph Lichtin in the catalogue, p. 122.