

O Stranger

**"EUROPE: ANCIENT FUTURE"
HALLE FÜR KUNST STEIERMARK
23 APR – 15 AUG 2021**

The front of the Halle für Kunst building is hidden behind a fake ancient Greek temple front. Outside, on the right of the building, other Doric columns lie collapsed, a telling counterpoint to the otherwise stable ersatz exterior. Are we to conclude that this gesture references the

potential downfall or end of the emancipatory and democratic idea of Europe? Is it in danger, falling to pieces under a myriad of political demands and nationalist identity politics? With a group show at the recently renamed Halle für Kunst Steiermark, Documenta 12's former guiding question "Is modernity our antiquity?" is rephrased as: "Europe: Ancient Future". This exhibition jumps into ancient history and celebrates the aesthetics of classical Athens to find inspiration for a concept of Europe defined by "equality in difference".

Excited by Greek antiquity's immodest aspiration to strive for democracy and universal freedom, this new idea of Europe tries to imagine a future perfect, one conscious of its past.

The white cube, temporarily turned into a temple, hosts works by thirteen artists. The more dystopian visions of Europe are in the basement, whereas the main space – the equivalent of the temple "cella" – presents contemporary reflections on Greek architecture, mythology, and thought. Oliver Laric's (*1981) sculptures appropriate



Franz Kapfer, *Im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa*, 2019–21, Wooden signs, rusted chains, dimensions variable



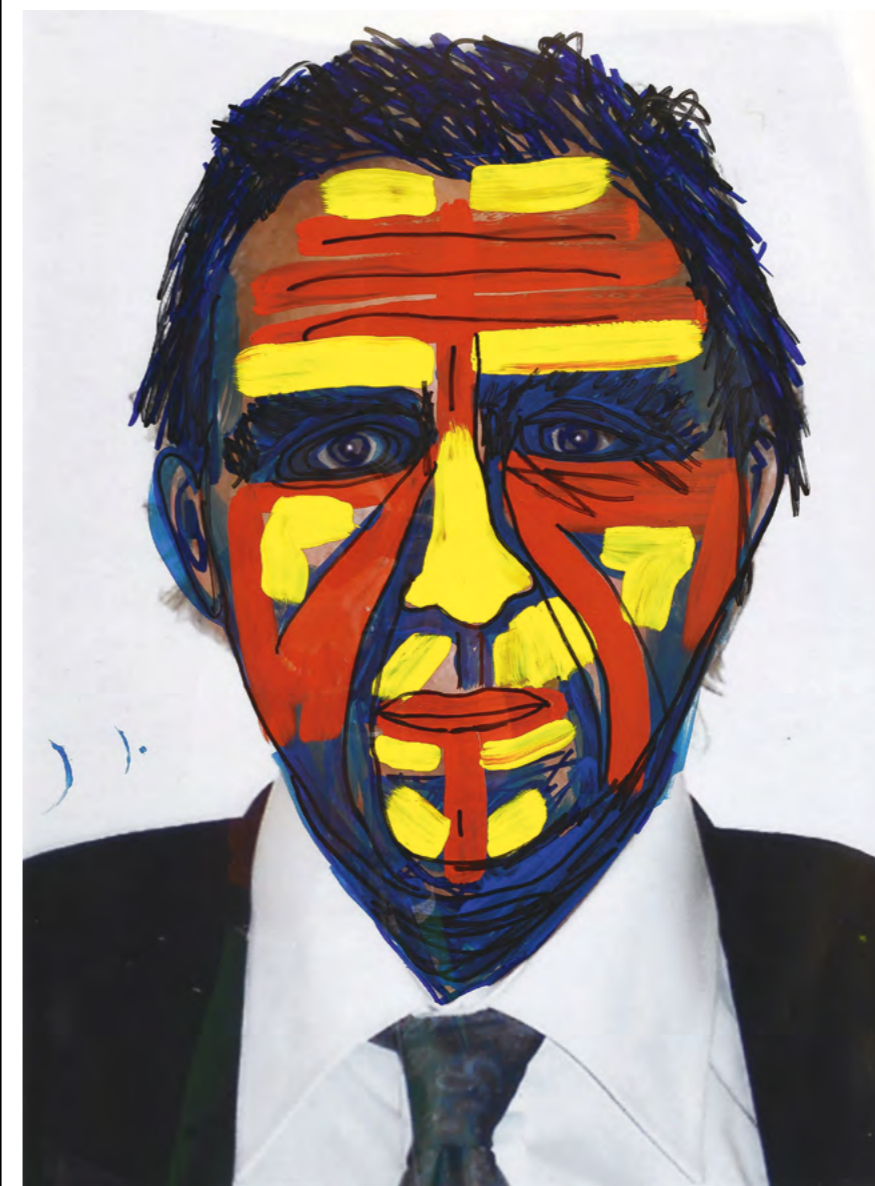
View of "Europe: Ancient Future" Halle für Kunst Steiermark, 2021



Temple of Europa
Exhibition architecture, Halle für Kunst Steiermark, 2021

Courtesy the artist Foto: © kunst-dokumentation.com

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Jimmie Durham, *Painted Self-Portrait*, 2007, C-Print, paint, 83.5 x 61 cm

Courtesy Christine König Galerie, Wien

the formal language of antiquity by copying Italian Renaissance copies of ancient works in 3D printing. *Reclining Pan* (2021), a hybrid creature, renders the process of its own making visible by imitating both the materiality of the original marble and its modern, glassy veneer. James Welling's (*1951) photographs feature a caryatid from the Acropolis Museum – the torso of an unknown youth – and the Ionic columns of a temple on Athens's Acropolis. As if following Johann Joachim Winckelmann's traces, Welling uses the first

photographic representation of his subjects by archaeologists in the late nineteenth century. These works are beautiful to look at, but they cannot escape the logic that antiquity has always been a projection based on conflicting ideas about how objects are used to symbolise a range of political and cultural aims. The resulting images do not so much speak for themselves as they are spoken for, by others, highlighting their instrumentalisation as embodied history.

Seen within this context, Shahryar Nashat's (*1975) sculptures

are fragments of Ionic and Doric columns that now form the base of a pedestal instead of its zenith. Haris Epaminonda's (*1980) mesmerising film *Chapters* (2013), which features archaeological sites in Cyprus and a series of tableaux vivants-like scenes unfolding inside the frame, whose dramaturgy is staged in monotone, the colour white. These images evoke both a past of mythological identities, and a longing for a past that never existed.

The works in the basement are closer to the here and now, and more explicit in their diagnosis of the present. Franz Kapfer's (*1971) *Im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa* (At my Back, the Ruins of Europe) (2019–21) is a giant installation of suspended black chains, each bearing an emblem of far-right extremist movements. The Identitarian movement (banned in France but still permitted in Austria) appropriated the lambda symbol, whereas other neo-fascist groups refer to Spartacus and his ilk. Ira Goryainova's (*1984) docufiction *The Ruins of Europe* (2017) portrays a democracy under attack: a rough collage of media images, quotes from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine* (1977), and politicians in slow motion are framed by a fictitious story of a young woman on drugs who resembles both Ophelia from Müller's play and the vengeful Elektra. The film has an immediate rhetoric of inclusion/exclusion, and points to the existing threats that are currently tearing European societies apart.

In the end, it might be Barbara Kapusta's (*1983) amputated hands, emerging from the floor of the gallery, that come closest to picturing the elusive "equality in difference". Speaking both before and after language as gesture, these fragments point to the ambivalences of both hope and despair, and closeness and vulnerability. Not yet fully-determined, they offer a glimpse of the unity of difference yet to come.

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