

ULRIKE MÜLLER TALKS ABOUT HERSTORY INVENTORY

Ulrike Müller interviewed by Corrine Fitzpatrick
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Ulrike Müller is an Austrian-born, New York-based artist whose work investigates form as a mode of critical engagement. In 2007, Müller found an inventory list describing a collection of feminist T-shirts at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Park Slope, Brooklyn. She distributed individual image descriptions from this list to 100 artists, inviting them to translate the texts into drawings. The result, *Herstory Inventory: 100 Feminist Drawings by 100 Artists*, is a collaborative rethinking of the queer, feminist archive. The project's debut exhibition is at the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria through June 24; it will return to New York for a reconfiguration at the Brooklyn Museum that opens on June 29.

IN FEBRUARY I went to Bregenz to see the space, and I realized that this show was going to be a challenge architecturally, institutionally, socially, and personally. I had to find my own position vis-à-vis my history of the place, my experience returning there, but also my familiarity with it. I do translation work and this was the biggest translation job I had ever been confronted with: to bring so many people with me, not in person but with their drawings, which are so much a record of a hand—of a mind thinking and a body moving, and one's own subjectivity responding to a past that is a history sought out.

I was thinking about queerness, visibility, and absence. I wanted for the space to be a queer and social space, but at the same time I couldn't assume there would be a presence of queer bodies or a familiarity with queerness as an idea, or an experience. What is a queer space without queer bodies? How could questions of social norms be activated in a space that could also possibly address bodies that don't think of themselves as outside of norms? It was also important to consider language. I think for the whole project, making a claim and then using that to propel

things forward has been an important strategy. The subtitle, “100 Feminist Drawings by 100 Artists,” intends to produce questions, to provoke. In some ways the whole installation, or my work in general, aims to spatialize problems and questions as something that can then be related to or talked about. That question of language, of what adjective to use and what to attach the adjective to, has so much to do with queerness.

I decided to create a more intimate space within the very cool monumentality of the museum, which is built onto a grid. I inscribed into the footprint of the square building a yellow rectangular floor that turned out of the grid and pushed up onto the wall creating a triangle, like a sheet of paper with one corner folded up. I thought of this 1,500-square-foot yellow floor as a painting space that came out of my own formal sensibility and vocabulary. To go really big with that was very exciting. There are four freestanding movable walls covered with 1970s-era wallpaper, playing with certain feminist tropes of domesticity. There are thirty-five drawings on the walls, partly originals and partly facsimiles. There is a table in the space where some are in printed reproduction and all one hundred are on an iPad slide show. There is a slide projector with details that I photographed and a five-channel audio installation of multiple voices calling out the inventory of T-shirt descriptions. The recorded voice is such a particular thing that is of the body without the body being present. It makes me think about the T-shirts in the archive as something that’s intended for a body but that body’s not there. A body trace.

The institution invited me to make a connection to local histories. I did research around the history of homosexuality in the region, but all that produced were records of repression, and I was looking for a more celebratory approach. The result of that investigation was one painting by Maria Lassnig that I found in the collection of the Kunsthau, from 1975. It’s one of her first self-portraits with animals and she made it during her time in New York. That’s the only piece that went directly onto the concrete walls of the institution, facing the temporary walls with the drawings. It seemed a good way to open up conversation about feminism and imagemaking and politics.

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