

SAN KELLER: EXAMINING SOCIETY THROUGH ART

Whether inviting his audience to dance, work, or simply think a little differently, renowned Swiss conceptual and performance artist San Keller takes a playful – and very human – approach to examining social behaviour in his work.

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“It’s funny the things you remember,” says Swiss conceptual and performance artist San Keller as he explains the inspiration behind his work ‘Until The Last Dance’. “I had this studio on the Pfingstweidstrasse in Zurich when I was at school, and opposite there was a gas station. I often worked nights and although the gas station wasn’t open 24 hours yet, they had music round the clock. At night, when the traffic calmed, you had this gas station and this light and the sound. It fascinated me.”

Combining music, dance, and the image of a specific and unusual situation, ‘Until The Last Dance’ is an ongoing participatory action acquired by the Julius Baer Art Collection in 2016. Like many of Keller’s works, its basis is a simple framework – in this case a contract between the artist and the participant. “I like to take a very simple, reduced instruction or conceptual framing and then create a free space within that where things can happen,” he explains. Here, the contract stipulates that the participant must dance whenever a certain song is played – for the duration of the song, for the duration of the participant’s life.

“It is somehow, anyway part of their lives, so, I mean, why would they then need a contract?” he says, laughing. “That is the funny thing. The same question applies to why people get married. Why do you need official obligations when you can do things more informally? When we started the contracts in 2004, it was more a parody or caricature of a contract, we were playing with the form and idea of a contract.”

FINDING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Keller uses his actions to examine social behaviour, often in a critical but humorous way, to encourage us to look at established conventions from a new perspective. Be it the contract in ‘Until The Last Dance’ or discussing what visitors really take away from a trip to a gallery in the work ‘Digestive Walks’, Keller wants us to think about why we as humans give value to certain things, and what that really means.

It was this space for questioning that drew Keller to art in the first place. “I was brought to art by not really seeing a sense or a value in life. I tried to find it during my adolescence with religion – I went to discussion groups and really questioned things, but I always failed to see the goal of life. I then came to art. Art offers a space to question things and give value. I am very open to this border between what is culture, what is rooted in a life situation, and what goes out and becomes art.”

While examining these fundamental life questions, Keller has journeyed through several different stages of artistic exploration. When he first appeared on the art scene in the mid 1990s, he was looking for a positive way to try new things and encourage others to do so too. At this point, his work was mainly self-initiated, such as sleeping on the floor of a Swiss TV newsroom during a live broadcast for the work ‘San Keller Sleeps At Your Workplace’. But as he became better known, he began to receive invitations from galleries and institutions.

Drawn into a new world of galleries and exhibitions, Keller naturally began to experiment with how his exploration of life’s questions could be framed within the context of these institutions, developing pieces such as ‘San Keller Carries You Up To Art’. He was able to explore not only why – or even why not – others might interact with his participatory actions, but also how he, as an artist, interacts with the world. “A large part of my

practice is questioning the image of the artist in society and examining how he relates to the structures and institutions that are offered to him,” he explains.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE SYSTEM

While working within an institutional framework gave Keller less room for artistic autonomy, it spurred him on to explore questions posed by the system. He started to explore the role of the artist within the system by involving his fellow artists. Works such as ‘At Work – Cuckoo’, where Keller was photographed by his fellow artists in their studios, marked the beginning of a more collaborative phase for him – moving from exploring institutional questions to exploring more cultural questions, as seen in ‘By Meter’ at the recent Klöntal Triennale, a work developed in the LEGS format, where several diverse performers each had a fixed space in which to perform (defined by dividing the overall space by the number of performers).

Keller developed a conceptual interest in the thoughts and methods of other artists, and that thought process is something he also explores through his second professional outlet – teaching. For the past ten years, Keller has been mentoring architecture students at Zurich’s prestigious technical university, ETH, under Karin Sander, Professor of Architecture and Art. In many ways it is the natural development of his curiosity in the artistic process and his collaboration and integration with institutions. “Teaching is now an important part of my practice,” he explains. “I don’t say that teaching is part of my artistic practice, but I bring a lot of my artistic

thinking and acting into the structure of an institution and into my relationships with architecture students.” Here, Keller has the opportunity to be an “outsider”, observing the creative process of a practice different from his own up close but with an enforced critical distance.

A NEW CHAPTER

Now, though, Keller is preparing to leave ETH and take on a new role at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, as Co-Head of Art and Mediation with fellow artist Sebastian Utzni. Here he will be sharing his knowledge with young artists at the very beginning of their practice.

As his teaching draws him further into institutions, his artistic exploration is taking on a more personal form and one that doesn’t require any external input. Keller’s experiments with drawing allow him to leave the conceptual point of view behind and simply create something for himself. It provides an “exciting new space” for him and an altogether different way to further develop the playful relationship he has with society.

Looking around the worn wooden structure of Badi Utoquai, one of Zurich’s lakeside lidos where Keller is taking a few moments to relax before an afternoon of teaching, he says: “This is the ground, the soil that I am working with – daily culture, the life that surrounds me.” His is a very human approach to art, and one that, with such fertile ground for further exploration, can only continue to develop and branch out in exciting new directions in the future.



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