

SONNENDECK, ROSENGARTEN, WC WELLE-7

Sonnendeck, Rosengarten, WC Welle-7 – a group exhibition and its accompanying public programme – are dedicated to the magic of the city. What is it about the city that produces such alluring encounters? The project traces the intimacy that can emerge in urban contexts and asks how it is connected to specific urban infrastructures.

Take, for example, the three titular sites: they exist concretely in Bern and yet extend beyond the city. They are places of leisure and lingering, but also sites where desire unfolds and sexual encounters take place. However, the significance perhaps doesn't necessarily lie with the sex or that these places are "sexy", as the author Huw Lemmey has it in his text *The Gay Right to the City*, but rather on the fact that "the nature of the contacts they enable is different."

Lemmey supports this argument with a quotation from Samuel R. Delany's essay *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). There, Delany describes the culture of New York's porn cinemas in the 1980s and 90s. Public space, he suggests, enables complex erotic encounters across social boundaries such as class differences. What makes these places special is that very different people encounter one another there and do so in ways that lie outside the everyday rhythms of the city.

Under the guise of urban renewal, New York mayors Ed Koch and later Rudy Giuliani paved the way from the 1980s onwards for the so-called "revitalisation" of Times Square. This led to the closure of porn cinemas and the displacement of a large number of unhoused people to the South Bronx. Prior to this, some of them had occasionally found refuge in these cinemas, which were subsequently replaced by entertainment palaces including of companies such as Disney, catering to a very different kind of pleasure. This example invites reflection on broader processes of neoliberal urban development since the 1980s.

Some of the artistic works in the exhibition appropriate built reality—from so-called "defensive architecture" and prominent tourist sites to the private home and the promises of belonging and upward mobility attached to it. They explore how society is divided into public and private spheres, and who has a right to and place in public space. The displacement of queer, racialised, and economically marginalised communities becomes visible, as do

the regulation and restriction of access to space. At the same time, cunning and wayward strategies emerge, through which people continually create space for themselves.

The sexual architectures described by Delany offered temporary shelter to people for whom society did not provide housing—this can be acknowledged without romanticising these spaces. The project thus brings together practices of social encounter in which sexuality and alternative forms of community and care intersect. It proposes that such practices themselves produce space and the city, are necessary for urban life, and make it more livable.

Sonnendeck, Rosengarten, WC Welle-7 is an invitation to perceive the city as a site of diverse, pleasurable interactions, and to make use of—and protect—its potentials. Two workshops and a picnic in the Rosengarten specifically relate to the city of Bern and invite participants to enter into relation with one another and with the urban space.

Text: Eva-Maria Knüsel & Andrea Popelka

**SONNENDECK, ROSEN-
GARTEN, WC WELLE-7**
*Hélén Alas, Judith Kakon,
Lou Masduraud, Jill Posener,
Sunny Pudert*

The British activist, photographer, and playwright **JILL POSENER** documented socio-political movements in the 1980s, with a particular focus on feminist and lesbian struggles. Her series of black-and-white photographs, *Dirty Girls Guide to London*, shown throughout the exhibition, but especially in the last of the rooms, was first published in 1987 in the magazine *On Our Backs*, which positioned itself—explicitly sex- and BDSM-positive and responding to restrictive attitudes within British feminism as well as the policies of the Thatcher government—in contrast to *Off Our Backs*, from which it derived its name.

As a satirical reworking of a conventional travel guide, the series depicts two kissing lesbians—femme and butch—at sites across the British capital that are typically considered representative and desexualized, including Westminster Bridge, Hyde Park, and the British Museum. In the 1980s, one of the most conservative periods of postwar British politics, these spaces—and the public sphere more broadly—were heavily regulated and normatively structured, a condition the series playfully subverts. Shortly after the initial publication of *Dirty Girls Guide to London*, the so-called “Section 28” was introduced, a law prohibiting local authorities, including schools, from the “promotion of homosexuality.” The law remained in force until 2003 and had a lasting impact on the social and cultural climate of the time.

Posener’s work documents the claiming of space by sexual minorities and renders the streets of London as contested terrain. This is also evident in her photographs of graffiti, which capture interventions into often highly sexist advertising or political struggles playing out in neighbourhoods—for instance around notions of the nuclear family (*Squat Against the Nuclear Family, London, 1982*, in Room Three).

LOU MASDURAUD draws on elements of urban infrastructure in her work, such as fountains, lighting systems, or urinals. Her interest lies in the everyday interactions these structures enable in the city and in their sensory qualities: the coolness of drinking from a fountain, the warmth of a kiss on a park bench, the splashing of a stream of urine on ceramic.

The series *Kisses*, developed specifically for the exhibition, spans all rooms. It is inspired by observations of Roman fountains, whose spouts, like those elsewhere, are often shaped like mouths.

Masduraud stages her oversized ceramic mouths as thresholds between the body’s inner life and the surrounding environment. The mouth is the site where we relate to the world—or incorporate it—through speech, eating, kissing, or sticking out the tongue.

The artist adorns the objects with teeth made of rhinestones, glass, and pearls, or gives them a bodily appearance through the application of lipstick. Through these materials, she refers to the mouth’s diverse bacterial flora, but also to teeth as symbols of status and as part of fashion and people’s self-expression.

Beyond the mouth as an erotic-sensory body part, the associations extend to drains, as in *Kiss (with a drain)*, or glory holes (*KISS (with a salivating lover)*), pointing to anonymized, non-normative forms of sexuality in public space. On closer inspection, *KISS (with a molar as a spy camera to get a proof for a trial)* also reveals a surveillance camera between the teeth—the mouth becomes a spy, alluding to control and surveillance.

In the first room, a research archive that we have developed over the course of preparing the exhibition is gathered inside a wall cabinet. The small library with a reading and seating area alongside it, as well as an accompanying bibliography, may be freely used. It is also growing. We warmly welcome your additions to the archive—books, stories, and memories or whatever else you’d like to bring in.

In the second room, the sculptures by *SUNNY PUDERT* obstruct the space. The work *SITTING IS PLEASURE* takes as its starting point so-called “defensive architecture,” which was installed on the grounds of Berlin Ostbahnhof. The aim was to deprive people who used this site as a meeting point of the possibility to sit.

Pudert replaces the metal spikes of the original objects with silicone. This soft and yielding material gives the blocks new formal and haptic qualities. With *SITTING IS PLEASURE*, Pudert addresses the ambivalent pleasure that both the sculpture and the deterrent object to which it responds can trigger.

In this and other works, the artist raises questions about the right to the city and the power structures that become visible in urban contexts—for example, in the distribution of public space along lines of class. Pudert is interested in urban planning failures that exclude certain populations, as well as in the ways such spaces are repeatedly reappropriated. What here turns cold, metallic, and aggressively against the body is simultaneously appropriated and disarmed in an appealing way. The title *SITTING IS PLEASURE* points to the qualities of lingering in public space and suggests the question of whether the right to the city should also include a right to pleasure.

Also *JUDITH KAKON* engages with “hostile architecture” in the second room through her work *Commons*. The form of the bronze sculpture is based on a fan-shaped steel structure the artist encountered in Lyon. Installed at hip height on building corners, the device is used to prevent public urination.

The title *Commons* refers to resources that are collectively produced, maintained, and used by a community. These stand in contrast to the privatisation, gentrification, and commodification of public space. Kakon asks how and for whom public space is designed and regulated—and ultimately to whom it belongs: Why was investment made in deterrent devices rather than public toilets in these locations? What subtle forms of violence are inscribed in this object? And what does it do to our bodies and basic needs in public space?

By casting the work in black-patinated bronze, Kakon transforms the original object and deliberately elevates it. Its form recalls a fan or a stylised palm frond. Such “palmettes” have been used since antiquity as ornamental motifs in architecture and decorative design—here, the deterrent device is

turned into a sculpture and bedecks the corner of the room.

HËLÏN ALAS’ series *Traumhäuser* [*Dream Houses*] negotiates the promise of social mobility and belonging attached to home ownership. In the sculptures, largely modeled or cast in caramel, the house appears as a space that distinguishes between inside and outside, between the self and the other. The longing for a home and a protective space reveals its restrictions in Alas’ works.

The artist uses sugar as a material because it is quickly and cheaply available to her. At the same time, sugar is closely tied to the realm of food and the kitchen, where she rapidly heats and processes it for the *Traumhäuser*. The production of the works can thus take place within the domestic sphere of the kitchen and is not bound to the studio—access to which is impeded for many artists.

The enjoyment of sugar is associated with sticky sweetness and desire. Yet it remains inseparable from the conditions of its production, which are historically rooted in racist exploitation and continue into the present in many production contexts.

The newest work in the series was created for the exhibition and is titled *Traumhaus (adulter)*. The horizontally wall-mounted object made of birch plywood resembles an architectural model of an apartment. Through an opening on the front left side, an ensemble of rooms is revealed, with walls and floors entirely lined with caramel in different shades of brown. This material changes and shifts over the course of the exhibition. While houses are typically associated with stability and permanence, the *Traumhäuser* begin to melt once they are installed.

Text & Curation: Andrea Popelka & Eva-Maria Knüsel