



Flowers in Cyberspace

Cologne gallery owner Priska Pasquer acts as an avatar in her virtual showroom.

By Birgit Rieger

Openings always offer something new, but this is a very special premiere. In this case, the setting is an island, and the way to the artwork is across a red carpet. There you will find a cube-like structure made of smooth concrete, and the exhibition of the Berlin-based artist Ornella Fieres.

Cologne-based gallery owner Priska Pasquer has been very active on the Internet during the pandemic. She has been hosting YouTube videos, Instagram live talks and conversations on the auditory platform Club House. Now she has taken it to the next level. Pasquer has created a virtual gallery space on an island in the sea and she is celebrating her first opening there. Although the architectural details are somewhat reminiscent of Rudolf Zwirner's former gallery, which Pasquer occupied for five years, one thing is clear - this is not Cologne! Actually, you are in Mozilla Hubs, a virtual platform.

The unique thing is that the visitors are not alone there. The gallery owner is also present, the curator Tina Sauerländer, the artist Ornella Fieres, as well as about 30 guests. Like at an analog opening, everyone talks at the same time, and you first have to check out the scene and see who you want to mingle with. People can move around Mozilla Hubs as virtual avatars and talk to the other attendees, just like in a video game. Some have their real names hovering over them, others have cryptic codes. Once you've got the hang of it, you can manipulate your own figure by using the arrow keys

on your computer keyboard. It's quite possible that Priska Pasquer will be the first to receive her guests in this type of virtual location.

"For me as a curator, virtual space is brilliant. You can hang anything anywhere, there's no gravity, you can stage things in a completely different way," says Tina Sauerländer, a Berlin-based virtual reality specialist.

As a visitor, you act as you would in real life. See who is there, have a chat, and if there's nothing to do, you head out to the beach. There you will find a video work by Ornella Fieres installed on a screen hovering above the sea. The ideal way to experience it is with VR glasses, but it also works without. Web VR works with any browser.

"One to One" is the title of the four-part exhibition series that Priska Pasquer has conceptualized for her new digital gallery. One curator and one artist create an exhibition together, initially only in the virtual world. Curator Tina Sauerländer and the artist Ornella Fieres kick off this new exhibition format.

Fieres was born in Frankfurt in 1984 and has just had a show dedicated to her work at the Sexauer Gallery in Berlin. She is an ideal candidate for this first experiment. Her work is about the connection between the analog and the digital. Her flower paintings are created by digitizing postcards from the 1960s and 1970s and feeding them into a software program called a Generative Adverbial Network (GAN). Then the algorithm generates its own images based on what it has learned. An image of a plant in blue-beige with slightly curled leaves hangs on the virtual concrete wall. In digital form, the motif fills almost an entire wall, while in reality, the C-prints are one meter by one meter in size (5000-6500 euros).

One of the bouquets with heavily blurred contours is reminiscent of an atomic mushroom cloud. By bringing out the good and bad sides of the spirit of human exploration, the motif forms the bridge to Fieres' video works, explains Tina Sauerländer during a tour of the virtual space. The two-part video "Algorithm for Snowfall" consists of an algorithm-based reconstruction of scientific films that run in extreme slow motion. You see snowfields, glaciers, and images captured under a microscope. One film runs forward, the other backward, and for a moment they run in synchronization. Granted, as an avatar you are so busy trying to get your digital body under control that you hardly have the patience to wait for this exciting moment.

Despite the coordination problems, you do get a good impression of Fieres' work, some of which are floating in space. A big plus of this format is that you can talk about the works directly with the gallery owner, the artist, and the curator. This is unlike most on-line viewing rooms, where you look at the paintings alone. "The future of selling art is digital", Priska Pasquer is certain. Currently, international art fairs are cancelled or are only taking place online, which prevents many contacts. In her virtual gallery, Pasquer can personally guide a prospective customer in New York through the exhibition. Her staff advises customers not via zoom or telephone, but as an avatar in the digital gallery. Pasquer got the motivation to take this approach in 2020 during the Corona pandemic.

After five years, her lease for the 400-square-meter space in Cologne expired this past summer. At that point, she decided to move into a separate office on the banks of the Rhine and to exhibit virtually. "Because of the Corona restrictions, there were fewer visitors to the gallery. I imagined that the situation would last even longer," Pasquer says. The change of location is also accompanied by a new direction in terms of content. "In the future, I want to focus more on individual artistic viewpoints rather than group exhibitions," says the gallery owner. The virtual opening may be followed by an analog exhibition. "Usually the analog comes first, and then we start working on the digital platforms. We are now reversing the process," Pasquer says. This is not a rejection of the real showroom, however. Pasquer is already looking for larger spaces in Cologne, and this time not on an island.

- until March 9, can be visited at any time, the link is on priskapasquer.art