

Art Basel WATCH WHERE YOU STEP by Emily Nathan

Throughout the rainy evening of June 13, 2012, a clown tormented passers-by on the banks of the Rhine in Basel, Switzerland. He snuck up behind them and stole their hats, he lurched at them with eyes wide, he kissed their cheeks and smeared their faces with his white makeup. Behind him, two men in striped suits and top hats strode around on stilts, talking to members of the public, while to the side dancers traced arcs in the air with large silver tubes of aluminum foil that they wore around their torsos, like living Slinkies.

Despite appearances, this was no ordinary street performance -- though the players were all professionals, hired right off the street. It was, rather, an artwork by Los Angeles-based artist Kathryn Andrews (b. 1973), who arranged this soiree of circus acts to kick off Art Parcours, the free public art sector of Art Basel 43.

The crossover from art to entertainment in *Voix de Ville* (Voice of the City) was one of her goals, Andrews revealed on a panel the following day, sitting with fellow sculptor [Abraham Cruzvillegas](#) and Parcours curator Jens Hoffman. And despite the limitations of "official" public art, which must consider issues of accessibility, scale and "experientiality," not to mention the bureaucracy of city safety regulations (leaving 11 feet of the 18-foot-wide site clear and open, in her case), she said the experience was liberating.

"Performance art has become an entertainment that is expected to be attached to art fairs," Andrews said, "a little something extra -- a fun-filled spectacle. And I wanted to spotlight that expectation, to make people question what it is they are here to consume."

Large photo backdrops placed along the bank depicted just such comestibles -- a drunk with beer and chocolate, framed against snow-capped Swiss Alps, a scenic view (of Florence, as it happened) -- providing a Picture Theory set for the circus acts. The crowd strolled along from one performer to the next in what Andrews described as a "self-willed dance" and although the acts were impressive, most people didn't linger.

Other works in the Parcours program, by artists including [Pedro Reyes](#), [Maria Nordman](#) and [Aleksandra Mir](#), cropped up on corners or inside

historic buildings along a five-block section of the city's St. Johann district just up from the Rhine, each marked by a neon green flag. For a recreation of the late German artist [Dieter Roth](#)'s original atelier, photos of the place the way it used to be lined the walls, while the room was enlivened with simulations of recent activity -- cigarette butts left here and there, half-eaten cake nested sloppily under plastic wrap -- as if the artist were still with us.

Two doors down in the creaking upstairs banquet hall of Zur Mägd, a landmark restaurant that once belonged to the Bishop of Basel, Los Angeles-based artist Mateo Tannatt (b. 1979) re-staged [Allan Kaprow](#)'s seminal 1963 "happening" *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hoffmann*, in which the public is invited to constantly rearrange a room full of furniture. *Push and Pull* has been revived a number of times over the years, always according to Kaprow's instructions, but Tannatt's iteration in Basel incorporated cheap, hotel-quality furnishings whose provisional presence supposedly echoed the "temporary nature of the art fair, and the spirit of play and fantasy that it momentarily creates for the viewer."

In Zur Mägd's actual restaurant on the ground floor, several small painted abstractions by Canadian artist [Rodney Graham](#) (b. 1949) were hung around the dining room. Saucily described as "amateur paintings" by the artist, they use motifs that are familiar enough from the likes of [Pablo Picasso](#) and [Wassily Kandinsky](#). Their installation in the space is so without fanfare that they go unremarked by most restaurant patrons, arguably suggesting a more mundane perspective on public art.

Which brings us to Zurich, where another public art festival, Art and the City, June 9-Sept. 23, 2012, offered a strange counterpoint to the experience in Basel. Initiated by the city's Public Art Task Force and put together by curator Christoph Doswald, it features some 40 works by an impressive roster of international artists -- [Doug Aitken](#), [Ai Weiwei](#), [Maurizio Cattelan](#), [Christian Jankowski](#), [Paul McCarthy](#), [Yona Friedman](#), [Martin Creed](#) and [Heimo Zobernig](#) among them -- all of which are installed at various locations in Zurich West, an industrial section of town bordered by the railways and overrun by endless construction zones.

It's a nice idea in theory -- animating the less appealing side of Zurich with art by artists who engage issues of urban development in their work. In practice, however, it's more like a nightmare. It doesn't help that the only "map," downloadable with significant glitches from the website, is itself an artwork by [Matt Mullican](#). This colorful guide, which seems to be a Xerox of a Xerox of an aerial city view without street names, is all but useless. One random Zurich gallery employee consulted for guidance about the program's route looked dumbfounded, and replied that she had no idea what this "Art and the City" business even was, let alone where on the map we were located.

Ejected -- dejected -- back out into the unshaded streets, those who persevered could

finally find their way, trudging slowly through the sun, making laps around blocks before realizing that the sculpture by Swiss artist [Franziska Furter](#) (b. 1972), a chandelier of 100 wind chimes purchased at flea markets all over the world, was actually installed above their heads, literally hanging from an elevated bridge. Unfortunately for Zurich, and for those of us who made the trip, three hours wandering along busy thoroughfares ceded only five of the 40 works on view, and these were mostly unremarkable.

One exception is [Oscar Tuazon's](#) *A Lamp*, an assemblage made from the found fragments of a shipwreck and installed near a highway onramp in a small commercial plaza. Backed up against the Prime Tower, a looming office building of green-glass windows, the white wood hull of the boat is constantly bathed in a shifting sheath of watery light, and the effect is disarmingly peaceful and hypnotic.

Also notable is Paul McCarthy's 18-foot-tall, dripping gray-plaster sculpture *Apple Tree Boy* *Apple Tree Girl* (2010), the latest in a series inspired by mid-century Germanic figurines of disturbingly rosy-cheeked children. Located off a terrifying stretch of highway on a construction site in front of a woodsy community of trailers, the work offers a haunting vision that wavers between the purity of youth and the Garden of Eden gone awry -- a dynamic that seems all too appropriate.

Ultimately, Zurich's public art festival isn't much of a festival. Inconvenient and without a working website or knowledgeable guides, it seems designed to provide only subtle interventions into the city's daily life. If the art does somehow invigorate the local quotidian under these straitened circumstances, then that might at least give some meaning to the ever-elusive notion of public art.

Art Parcours in Art Basel 43, June 14-17, 2012, locations around Basel, Switzerland.

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