

Laure Prouvost, We would be floating away from the dirty past, Haus der Kunst, Munich

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Laure Prouvost

← *If It Was*, 2015, video still.

Photo : Courtesy of the artist, MOT International, Galerie Nathalie Obadia and carlier | gebauer

We would be floating away from the dirty past, installation views, DER ÖFFENTLICHKEIT - Von den Freunden Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2016.

↑ Photo : Jens Weber

→ Photo : Wilfried Petzi

Laure Prouvost

We would be floating away from the dirty past

Upon entering Haus der Kunst, one is confronted by a vast trapezoidal form that emerges from the marble floor of the grandiose Middle Hall. The floor has been peeled off the ground and lifted upward, or so it seems. Closer inspection reveals the secret of this architectural enigma as the floor yields to the wrinkles of fabric: the lifted floor is in fact a carpet printed to the likeness of its marble patterning, propped upward to form a tent-like structure. The doubling gesture of this architectural performance, in which the museum's ground is at once physically and symbolically uprooted and supplanted, is the first of Laure Prouvost's many playful contestations in her immersive installation *We would be floating away from the dirty past*, on view at Haus der Kunst, Munich. Through a genre-defying assemblage of architecture, sculpture, and video, Prouvost challenges the sedimentation of history within art institutions. Floating away from the dirty past—Prouvost's eponymous task for us viewers—calls for reimagining the future of the museum, paradoxically, through an immersion into its history.

"We have been waiting for you to arrive for so long" flashes on a small screen that forms the head of a figurative sculpture at the front of the installation. "Waiting for so long" extends present anticipation into the realm of the past, thus foregrounding the centrality of history, specifically Haus der Kunst's institutional history, in Prouvost's project. Walking counterclockwise to the back of the installation provides the opportunity for a detour into Haus der Kunst's adjacent Archive Gallery, which functions as an additional *mise-en-scène* that stages the historical force of the artist's intervention.

The Archive Gallery narrates the history of Haus der Kunst, originally "Haus der Deutschen Kunst" (House of German Art), built between 1933–1937 as the first representational monument to the Third Reich. The museum

demonstrated Nazi art policy as the party's chief art institution. A mythologized "German-ness" of art reified the values of the Nazi regime while the contemporary art of the now-historical avant-garde was defamed, particularly in the notorious *Entartete Kunst* ("Degenerate Art") exhibition of 1937. Archival photographs reveal the Middle Hall, the site of Prouvost's installation, in its original iteration as the *Ehrenhalle*, or the "Hall of Honor," wherein "honor" was iconized by the swastikas that once donned its walls. Prouvost's work is the fourth annual commission of "Der Öffentlichkeit—Von den Freunden Haus der Kunst" (To the Public—From the Friends of Haus der Kunst), in which a contemporary artist is invited to transform the Middle Hall. Thus amidst the various genres and forms that comprise Prouvost's installation, it is integral to view Haus der Kunst as its primary source material. In dramatizing a transformation of the museum, Prouvost underscores that the subjective envisioning away from its "dirty past" is contingent on lifting up its floor to continually question the history on which it lies.

Walking around to the back of the installation reveals the projection of Prouvost's video *If It Was*. The large screen frames the opening to the tent-like space, constructing a cinematic environment. The upright screen emphasizes the orthogonal severity of the room and alludes to the ideological violence for which such geometric purity once stood. Two more figurative sculptures guide the viewer into the makeshift cinema, one enticing the viewer with a plate of fresh raspberries. A custom-designed carpet patterned with images of bicycles, tools, previous "Der Öffentlichkeit" commissions, breasts, and phrases like "nothing is lost" lies on the ground of the interior space, metaphorically under the museum's lifted floor. The carpet's appearance, which evokes an archeological site, foregrounds the video's humorous



speculation on what Haus der Kunst's past could become if Prouvost determined the course of its future. This atmospheric use of film to reimagine the future from embedded histories and myths remains a compelling feature of her practice, following from prior works such as *Wantee*, winner of the 2013 Turner Prize.

If It Was forms the structural and narrative core of Prouvost's installation. Filmed in Haus der Kunst, the video begins with the artist narrating the phrase "If it was my museum..." This subjunctive clause, which becomes a repeated refrain throughout the video, is followed by visual and verbal descriptions of the humorous (and grammatically subversive) conditions that Prouvost imagines if Haus der Kunst and its history were hers. Kaleidoscopic images and a panoply of sensory pleasures dominate Prouvost's virtualized museum. Architectural transformation and embodied ecstasy become an oasis: the façade would be made crooked, all corners of the Middle Hall would be smoothed, the floor would be kissed nightly, visitors would be personally greeted and receive back massages, conceptual art would be moved to the back corner to make room for Zumba... the list of conditionals goes on. Yet Prouvost's sensuous envisioning is grounded in layers of historical contention. Her invitation for viewers to "touch everything" challenges the hegemony of vision within the traditional museum. Moreover, it continues the historical struggle of restoring the sensory body to institutional spaces beyond objectification, reminiscent of feminist artworks like Yoko Ono's *Touch Poem for Group of People* (1963), a one-line imperative to "Touch each other." In another scene, breast milk is ebulliently squirted over Prouvost's museum walls in the style of Jackson Pollock-like drips, advocating the return of embodied pleasure against its historic-institutional rendering as othered, abject, and excisable.

If It Was concludes with Prouvost narrating that in her Haus der Kunst the viewers would lie down and all of the artwork ever shown would float above their eyes. She further exclaims, "We wouldn't have to talk about the problems of the world." Through visualizing the ideological space of what gets swept under the rug at Haus der Kunst, Prouvost authorizes the fantasy of floating away from its dirty past. Yet Prouvost's insistence on what her museum would become positions the future of the past in the historical time of now, the sensory present separated from the future of *would*. Until then, floating away from the dirty past still requires lifting up the museum's floor to occupy the contestation of its history.

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