



Walter Pfeiffer May 4 – August 28, 2022

Swiss Institute is pleased to present the first institutional survey of celebrated Zürich-based artist Walter Pfeiffer in the United States. The exhibition, the artist's most wide-ranging to date, primarily consists of artwork shown publicly for the first time. Pfeiffer is recognized as a key figure of contemporary photography, having ascended to prominence within Zürich's countercultural circles in the 1970s. Infamous at the time for his frank depictions of gay sex juxtaposed with scenes of domestic solitude and snapshots of friends, Pfeiffer explores the syntax of pictures: how acts of arrangement and modes of presentation generate moods and associations. Organized chronologically, the exhibition brings together photographs, paintings, drawings, videos and collages made by Pfeiffer over the last six decades to showcase the artist's approach to capturing life's pleasures, poetics and oddities in images. From still lifes to landscapes to portraits, Pfeiffer's style oscillates between graceful naturalism and playful self-awareness.

Pfeiffer was born in the rural village of Beggingen, Switzerland in 1946 and moved to Zürich in 1966 to attend the newly established experimental art school, Form & Farbe, as a member of its inaugural class. There he was first exposed to the satirical and disruptive attitudes of Dada, an artistic movement which was founded in the city fifty years prior, as well as to Pop Art. To support his newfound art practice, Pfeiffer worked as a graphic designer and stylist for Globus department store, illustrating advertisements and arranging window displays. A towering painting of a cat's expectant face made in this period greets visitors to SI's gallery.

Whilst living communally in a 19th century villa on Freigutstrasse in the center of the city, Pfeiffer began photographing friends, lovers and visitors to his home, using flash to correct a blur caused by his tremulous hands. He quickly began to incorporate photography into his artistic practice, expanding upon the stylings of Wilhelm von Gloeden, the portraiture of George Platt Lynes and Herbert List, the tableaux of Paul Outerbridge and Luigi Ghirri, as well as the aesthetics of beefcake magazine *Physique Pictorial*. Alongside detailed pencil drawings of body parts and mundane objects, these photographs demonstrate Pfeiffer's blending of precise timing with the casual, often impish attitudes of his models.

In 1974, at the invitation of Swiss curator Jean-Christophe Ammann, Pfeiffer participated in the groundbreaking exhibition *Transformer: Aspekte der Travestie* at Kunstmuseum Luzern. Inspired by the fluidity of gender, sexual reflexivity and the stylings of Glam rock musicians, the exhibition placed Pfeiffer in dialogue with artists including Urs Luthi, Luciano Castelli and Katharina Sieverding. In addition to providing the catalogue's cover, Pfeiffer presented 19 photographs of Carlo Joh, his muse, who died shortly before the exhibition's opening. This survey marks the first time these prints have been exhibited since their original display.

Following a decade of travel and collaborations, Pfeiffer seldom left Zürich in the 1990s, retreating from the the circuits of contemporary art to focus on painting and teaching. The resultant solitary nature of Pfeiffer's practice prompted a shift towards scenes free of bodies: kaleidoscopic still lifes, flower paintings and nature photography that, in spite of their personless content, still simmer with a vitality also present in Pfeiffer's depictions of homes and interiors. Views of Pfeiffer's current apartment complex undergoing renovation, cast against an overcast sky, are accompanied by a portrait of the artist's mother and a drying rack strewn with white garments. In parallel with these quotidian studies, Pfeiffer's attraction to opulence emerges. In a more recent photograph, the windows of Marie Antoinette's bedroom in the Petit Trianon are shown ajar, overlooking the Temple of Love.

Distinguished by their tonal variety, a selection of Pfeiffer's self-portraits are installed on SI's second floor gallery alongside a display of the artist's scrapbooks, an integral element of his practice developed from 1971 to the early 1990s. In agendas, binders and notebooks, Pfeiffer formulates collages as punchlines, integrating his own photographs amongst 3-D objects and images cut from fashion magazines and classified ads. Reminiscent of the absurdist potency and irreverent spirit found in collages made by Hannah Höch and later William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, Pfeiffer's books meticulously synthesize color, form, texture and language into a droll vernacular unique to the artist. On the opposite wall, three monitors cycle through hundreds of pages of Pfeiffer's unpublished journals and the guestbook of his Freigutstrasse villa, while a fourth plays two videos: *Music for Millions* (1977) and *The Plaza* (1985-2001). In the former, Pfeiffer and

friends experiment with a camera in his studio, tuning the radio to different stations, dressing and dancing in accordance with the changes in frequency. Across these varied formats and stages, Pfeiffer conveys in pictures how life's vacancies are punctuated by eruptions of expression and charm. With both distance and intimacy, the artist illustrates these spontaneous revolutions.

SI gratefully acknowledges the support of Bottega Veneta as Main Partner of *Walter Pfeiffer*. Additional support is generously provided by Art + Commerce. SI wishes to thank the lenders to the exhibition: Beda Achermann; Verena & H.R. Fricker; Torvioll Jashari; Fotomuseum Winterthur; Bob van Orsouw; Ernst Reich; Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich; Galerie Sultana, Paris. SI also thanks Philippe Brutus, Remo Eyer, Patrick Frey, Michel Gilgen and Andrea Kempfer. Walter Pfeiffer wishes to thank Edy Marconi for his production support.

On the occasion of the exhibition, a new monograph on Pfeiffer featuring commissioned texts by Devrim Bayar, Dean Kissick, Wayne Koestenbaum, Meredith North and José B. Segebre Salazar, will be published with Lenz Press in late Summer 2022.

This exhibition is organized by Simon Castets, former SI Director, and Daniel Merritt, Curator and Head of Residencies.

About Walter Pfeiffer

Walter Pfeiffer (b. 1946, Beggingen CH) is a Zurich-based artist. He has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthaus Zurich (1982); Kunsthalle Basel (1986); Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2004); Fotomuseum Winterthur (2009); Grand Palais, Bern (2012). Group exhibitions include *Zürcher Künstler*, Kunsthaus Zurich (1973); *Transformer: Askpete der Travestie*, Kunstmuseum Luzern (1974); *Swiss Video*, Tate Modern, London (2006); *Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins*, Barbican Gallery, London (2018); amongst many others. He has produced several publications, including *Welcome Aboard - Photographs 1980 - 2000* and most recently *Bildrausch. Drawings 1966-2018*, both published by Edition Patrick Frey.

About Swiss Institute

Founded in 1986, Swiss Institute (SI) is an independent non-profit contemporary art institution dedicated to promoting forward-thinking and experimental art making through innovative exhibitions, education, and programs. Committed to the highest standards of curatorial and educational excellence, SI serves as a platform for emerging artists, catalyzes new perspectives on celebrated work, and fosters appreciation for under-recognized positions. SI is committed to being an organization that is diverse, equitable, and accessible in its work, structure, and programming. Open to the public free-of-charge, Swiss Institute seeks to explore how a Swiss context can be the starting point for international conversations in the fields of visual and performing arts, design, and architecture.

SI Programming is made possible in part with public funds from Pro Helvetia, Swiss Arts Council; the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature; and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. Main sponsors include LUMA Foundation, Friends of SI and the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation. Exhibitions are made possible in part by the SI Annual Exhibition Fund with leadership support provided by the LUMA Foundation, Michael Ringier, Olivier Audemars, Philippe Bertherat, Max and Monique Burger, the Garcia Family Foundation, Florian Gutzwiller, Dominique Lévy, Susanne von Meiss, Iwan Wirth, Ghislaine Brenninkmeijer, the Kevin Wendle Foundation, and the Freedman Family Foundation. SI gratefully acknowledges Swiss Re as SI ONSITE Partner, Vitra as Design Partner, Crozier Fine Arts as Preferred Shipping Art Logistics Partner, and SWISS as Travel Partner.

Critical operating support has been provided to SI in 2020-22 as part of a collective fundraising effort. We thank the following supporters: The David Teiger Foundation, The Willem de Kooning Foundation, The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, The Cy Twombly Foundation, The Stavros Niarchos Foundation, The Destina Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, The Arison Arts Foundation, The Fox Aarons Foundation, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation, David Rockefeller Fund, Sotheby's, Blavatnik Family Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, The Jill and Peter Kraus Foundation, The Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, and The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation.

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