

## Kunsthaus Bregenz

Anne Imhof

### Wish You Were Gay

08 | 06 – 22 | 09 | 2024

Kunsthaus Bregenz is delighted to announce *Wish You Were Gay* by Anne Imhof. *Wish You Were Gay* is a deeply personal survey presenting several new bodies of work that reflect on and further develop a number of core elements that have constituted Imhof's repertoire from the outset. Throughout the exhibition, Imhof explores notions of finitude, reality and artifice, chance and fate, absence and presence, set against a backdrop of postapocalyptic isolation.

*Wish You Were Gay* encompasses all-new sculpture, painting, sound, and a series of six never-before-seen video works in which the artist revisits early material from 2001–03, a crucial moment of transition in the artist's life and work. At that time, Imhof's life and work were closely linked and at times indistinguishable, imbuing the present exhibition with a distinctly biographical note and touching on notions of chosen family, a reality for many queer people.

With the advent of handheld digital camcorders – which allowed the screen to be flipped for the first time, an early precursor to today's ever-present front-facing cameras – Imhof used this nascent technology as a mirror recording device, before which she performed movements and gestures, animating and setting the scene. Using her body as a medium, alongside other makeshift means such as borrowed guitars and amplifiers, and recording songs and her voice as a means of finding it, she created art with her community – friends, lovers, collaborators – engaging the raw materials of life as it unfolded. These video works convey an underlying sense of urgency, embodying force through insistence and presence, manifested in continuous rehearsal and improvisation. Over the next two decades, Imhof wove these elements – via countless mirrorings, doubles, and variations of the motifs originating from this formative period – into a profound practice of movement that places the body at its center. Raw moments are at times slowed down in a surreal manner, brought to a stillness full of tension and potential for explosive action, something that returns in her idiosyncratic performance pieces enacted through others and informs her sculptural and painting practice.

The show begins with an overture: red light saturates the scene in *Maria*, 2002, an early self-portrait video. The artist is seen boxing and throwing punches at the camera lens through a vignette, set to songs from *West Side Story*, acting as a Romeo to the other half of the star-crossed lovers after whom the work is titled. During this period, Imhof trained in karate and boxing as forms of self-defense.

Starting on the first floor, Imhof divides the space in two. Visitors encounter multiplied crowd barriers commonly found within concert stages, forming a narrow corridor. Black steel panels placed at eye-level block the view of most of the remaining space, creating an imposing horizontal, black monochrome streak that extends nearly to the very end of the space, evoking a claustrophobic feeling. Moving along, the viewer passes a readymade sculpture, left behind in a seemingly arbitrary manner. This scene serves as a restaging of a moment from Imhof's celebrated exhibition and performance *Natures Mortes* at Palais de Tokyo,

Paris, a symbol of personal significance, evoking moments of discomfort and dysphoria in the artist's biography. Behind the barricade, an apocalyptic scene unfolds: her newest iteration of cloud paintings, a recurring motif in her practice and a continuation of imagined dystopias, enigmatic, filled with beauty and horror. They are artificial and imagined, digitally generated cloudscapes, rendered hyper-realistically by hand, resembling a motionless disaster that nevertheless seems to be approaching, bursting at the canvas's seams. Explosive clouds of poison, at times set against a vividly bright blue sky, imbued with baroque artifice. The space is bathed in a gloomy red light, tinting the viewer's vision, and evoking photographic darkrooms.

Set to a roaring heavy-metal soundtrack, the video work *Zebra*, 2002, depicts the artist in her early twenties enacting a concise scene. Initially facing away from the camera, she moves with precision, revealing her back, adorned with tattooed angel wings. Abruptly, she extends her arms out wide before turning – a movement that loops and is varied repeatedly in her subsequent performances. The work cuts between self-portraiture and a recording of a glitch-ridden, partially obstructed television screen showing zebras in violent combat. The center of the space is occupied by a monolithic glass structure, another element from *Natures Mortes* that returns here in altered sculptural form. Once an open structure occupied by performers, it is now doubled and enclosed, barring entry and transformed into a space for projection – a display of marked absence characteristic of the artist's practice.

Imhof intensifies her spatial delineations on the second floor, employing another barricade to partition space vertically and a stage floor made of steel raised just below the ceiling, segmenting the space horizontally and casting a darkening shadow. The stage component recalls the raised glass floor from Imhof's landmark show *Faust* at the 2017 Venice Biennial – a sculptural intervention inspired in its materiality by the mirroring skyscrapers of Frankfurt am Main's banking district, oppressive structures in a public space that she and collaborators once transgressed. Here it is reimagined as an inverted proscenium stage, rattled by a foreboding bass sound that seems to be breaking through the walls. Partially occluded by another glass structure housing a motorcycle, *Wish You Were Gay III*, 2024, confronts viewers at an unusually close distance: a three-by-four-meter large, nearly abstract painting, rendered in shades reminiscent of thermographic cameras, on which a figure pointing a gun to its head is faintly distinguishable. This is a new version of the suicidal gestures that have been a staple of Imhof's past performances and drawings. The motif is further veiled by a moiré pattern, an effect that results from photographing screens, causing irregular and disorienting rippling structures of pixels. The image appears like a split-second moment paused, arrested in motion, photographed, or *shot*, then meticulously rendered by hand, pixel by pixel – an effect that is new to Imhof's painting practice.

Furthermore, Imhof also transposes her ongoing drawing practice into sculptural patinated bronze reliefs, creating embodied, eternalized drawings that appear to emerge from the wall. They depict androgynous figures with elongated limbs and tilted heads framed by halos that imbue them with a notion of iconicity and lend them the appearance of contemporary broken saints. The figures appear in an embrace that is both tender and violent, giving it the impression of a relic, weathered by time and elements. Life and art converge further within the reliefs in the exhibition as the artist's chosen family and memories inspire the figures that inhabit her imaginative realms.

*Work*, another video work from the early 2000s, depicts Imhof and a beloved friend and former bandmate as they record an unrehearsed and unscripted scene in the bathtub of a former army base turned squat. She was living there at the time, endlessly recording images and sound, musing about creating artworks as they were creating another one – 1960s soul music playing in the background. In *Turnpike*, 2002, Imhof performs scenes filmed by Nadine Fraczkowski at the beginning of their long-term relationship. Together, they often conducted shoots in public spaces, taking to the streets at night to create alternate analogies. The work reveals the artist bare-chested, posing, and walking, at one point tagging a rat on the wall, a symbol that has undergone multiple iterations throughout her practice.

On the third floor, tension reaches its zenith, and the rat resurfaces as a spray-painted emblem. Three monumental paintings, brightly lit by stage lights, are installed symmetrically, facing one another. Further vertical barricades and a concert floor create narrow pathways, directing the visitor's movement through the space.

The juxtaposition of raw personal action and interaction with artificial unrealities is echoed in the exhibition's sound. Pieces composed of taped recordings and improvised sessions from 2001–03 are reworked into eerie, dreamlike soundscapes. These recordings undergo countless iterations, with the same content repeated in music styles such as country, new wave, and Americana. Created using AI and sung by voices that sound male but are, in fact, all artificially generated, these disorienting soundscapes are devoid of any real human expression, in stark contrast to the vulnerable and intuitive moments of collaborative creativity and kinship from which the original material stems.

Text: Jakob Eilinghoff

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