

Tribute, Central Switzerland Culture Award 2019

Janine Schmutz

Art aficionados,
Rochus, Luzia, and family members,
honoured guests

Close your eyes for a moment.

Do you see the white rabbits, the dark brown loaves of bread, the blood-red hearts, the babies, the flying women, the resplendence of those oversized halos, the thorns, the “big teddys” and black rubbish bags and the grey-greenish cocoons – all of these installations occupying entire rooms, with innumerable sculptures that seem so realistic and tangible at first glance and yet, on closer inspection, perhaps trigger a smirk, unexpected astonishment and confusion or even an unpleasant feeling?

This is exactly what happened to me eleven years ago when I first saw one of Rochus Lussi’s remarkable art installations as part of a group exhibition in Arosa – a cluster of 24 sea turtles floating on the lake left an indelible image. I still see in my mind’s eye those little green mounds, their shells, grouped together on the surface of the water like lily pads, and recall that unsettling feeling. Turtles here in Arosa? And ten years ago I was able to open Rochus Lussi’s exhibition “Mit Haut und Haar” in Baar with several orangutans, orangutan furs, elephant and human skin, eagle wings and turtle shells.

Since then, other impressive works have been added, and it is a very special pleasure for me today to honour you, Rochus, with the 2019 Central Switzerland Culture Award. You deserve it not only for your continuous artistic work and your installations, but also for your long-standing commitment to culture in the Nidwalden region, in Central Switzerland and far beyond.

As a visual prelude to the multifaceted insight into Rochus Lussi’s wide-ranging work, I would like to share with you object from his “Kokon” installation in 2012/2013. Some of you might have already seen it five years ago here in the Nidwaldner Museum (Winkelriedhaus) as part of Rochus Lussi’s “Dünne Haut” exhibition. At that time, this small cocoon inhabited the corner of the vaulted cellar, along with more than a hundred of its kind spread out on the floor, stuck to the walls and suspended from the ceiling. Countless larger-than-life cocoons, representing, so to speak, what is alive yet still nascent, and what will eventually metamorphose into magnificent butterflies. In the large mass, however, the grey-green objects not only had an aesthetic effect with positive anticipation, but also evoked an increasingly uneasy feeling upon prolonged observation. For they brought to mind comparable situations with similar creatures such as maggots populating cellars and gardens.

The scene was by all means ambivalent – and it soon became obvious how fine the line is in Rochus Lussi’s artworks between perceiving something as aesthetically pleasing or repelling. For as a rule, in his room installations he not only presents us with a large array of similar objects in a highly illusionistic manner, but also with themes and settings that have an associative effect and prompt bizarre, surreal, perhaps even slightly macabre tipping points. This is very often brought about by the sheer mass of similar objects and, as in this case, the stark amplification. His objects appear like actors on a stage and tell a story taken directly from real life and matters currently concerning the artist.

I would like to take the liberty of a brief interjection here. Surely you feel the connection to the theatre, don’t you? Already as a teenager, Rochus Lussi had acted on stage in youth groups, then later took part in two productions in the theatre in Stans and often designed stage sets for various productions.

He himself has said: “The realism is deliberate, but behind that I always want to include something concealed, to create confusion. I come from the world of theatre, so an element of the psycho-dramatic is always present in my installations.”

At the same time, it is precisely his altering the scale of everyday objects that enables him to tell new stories again and again: how the bats, for example, when greatly enlarged, become Dracula-like monsters; or how the halos, in their colossal size, resemble fortified halberds.

Themes/Motifs

Rochus Lussi selects his themes very intuitively. They always revolve around the 'you' and the 'I' and, by extension, the relationship to the 'we', but also around the individual and the masses, or boundaries and vulnerability. Whereas until 2007, it was mainly human figures, portrayed in a wide variety of constellations, about ten years ago they were joined by segments of skin and hair, as well as a variety of surfaces such as tree bark or desert landscapes. Suddenly, new questions took centre stage, issues concerning the source and the surface texture, as well as the implied sensuality and the associated impulse to touch it. In the meantime, human figures have almost completely disappeared from his works and are often only perceptible in their absence or, as Rochus Lussi would put it: "The human being is still present, but just no longer visible."

The primary subject continues to be the skin in its most diverse manifestations – of humans, animals and, in an extended sense, also in the form of the earth's surface – depicting the boundary from the inner personal to the external public, its protective function. At the same time, however, as a fragile and highly vulnerable organ or as a locus of communication and transformation. The "skin" motif also evokes questions about the body and about our existence. In a broader sense, this is what also occurs with the cocoon because its content, the caterpillar, is enclosed and protected by a kind of shell that loses its function after pupation and remains useless.

With these themes in mind, it is immediately clear why the colour red plays a prominent role in many of Rochus Lussi's works: it represents the blood of life, sensual energy, love, but also violence and injury.

Rochus Lussi is open to a wide range of inspirations, be they from the Middle Ages, the Gothic and the Romanesque, which he likes above all for their austerity and expressiveness. He has always been fascinated by newer artistic positions as well, such as Louise Bourgeois'. This certainly also because her works are similarly poised on the threshold between aesthetic impression and painful themes, while radiating a potency that can only be grasped at second glance. Georg Baselitz once said very aptly about sculpture in this regard: "Sculpture is a shorter path than painting to express the same problem, since sculpture is more primitive, more brutal and more unconditional. The lively evocative power of the creative means is much more directly legible and much less encoded in the medium of sculpture."

This can only be confirmed when looking at Rochus Lussi's sculptures, for they have been delighting viewers throughout all of Switzerland for more than 25 years. And Peter Bucher recently summed it up so wonderfully in a nutshell: "The eye sees and views the object from the outside. But you feel that these works, as rough and woody and haptic as they are, somehow get under your skin, they touch you." In this way, they join the line of expressive figurative wooden sculptures by, for example, Paul Gauguin, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Georg Baselitz, but go their own distinct way in their multiplicity and the spatial reference.

Realisation

Rochus Lussi's realisation is also unique and unmistakable. As Urs Sibler so aptly put it – he is a "woodworker through and through". Wood has been his medium since he was 16. From it, he forms everything that moves him inwardly, even if he occasionally uses other mediums. For sculpting in wood, he not only has endless passion and the necessary tenacity, but as a trained carpenter with sculpture training in Brienz, he also has the skill. As a local material, wood has the desired warmth for him and can be shaped in many different permutations. Rochus Lussi is fully aware of the certain degree of absurdity as well as the illusions created when he sculpts soft objects such as a pillow or a rubbish bag in wood. But it is also the execution that he finds so appealing: using his craftsmanship in such a way that the objects feel real and engender a perplexing sensation. In doing so, he not only has a penchant for perfection, but also in a way for suffering. Whenever possible, he carves the objects – or as he calls them "trophies" – out of the wood with the chain saw, the hatchet, the cutting disc, the chisel and the rasp.

This is physically hard work over the course of several weeks. But he needs this physical exertion and the entire process – from the idea to the concept and preliminary drawing to the realization and colour scheme – so that it feels right for him. The serial works require the highest degree of concentration over a longer period of time. Now this may sound quite monotonous to some of you – but it is like a kind of meditation for him, opening up a creative thinking space in which he is already grappling with new ideas or looking for answers to inner questions that are constantly posing themselves to him.

He is also fascinated by the interplay between creativity and industrial production. In several works since 2002, he has sculpted only the prototype by hand and then had it industrially reproduced with a CNC machine. Only then has he further processed them manually: sawing them apart, twisting individual parts and reassembling them in order to restore the individuality of each object out of the mass. Absolutely anti-handicraft, as he points out, and definitely a challenge concerning the issue of authorship – but at the end of the day, Rochus Lussi is very much an artist, and according to Luzia, “at all times, actually”.

The fact that he developed an affinity for art at an early age was no doubt partly due to his sixth-grade teacher, who recognised his talent in drawing. Almost at the same time, Rochus received his first set of carving knives for his confirmation. Then later, the drawing courses with Verena de Nève in Stans and Italy, courses at the Art School in Lucerne and his year of studies with Jan Hendrych at the Academy of Arts in Prague in 1995 also contributed significantly to this. And last but not least, his familial bond with the iron sculptor Josef Maria Odermatt, his mother’s cousin, whom she told him about again and again and whom Rochus Lussi had already observed as a young carpenter.

Exhibitions/Art in public spaces

In addition to the artworks generally created hermetically in the studio, it was always particularly important for Rochus Lussi to have exposure to a greater public at large. Exactly 25 years ago, he showed archaic human figures in his first solo exhibition at the Vogelsang Gallery in Altdorf. Since then, his works have been exhibited in more than sixty solo and group exhibitions in Central Switzerland, in Berlin, Auxerre, Prague and just recently at the Fabrica de Arte in Havana. His works are also regularly exhibited and sold by renowned galleries in Lucerne, Bern, Zurich and Zug.

Of particular significance for him was the 2001 exhibition “Projekt Zentralschweiz” in the then-new Museum of Art Lucerne. He was not only given carte blanche – to freely fill a room in the museum with human figures – but it also paved the way for numerous subsequent projects. The aforementioned exhibition “Dünne Haut” in the Nidwaldner Museum in 2014 also proved to be pioneering with some freer works, including the “Dünne Haut” room installation with 845 sharply pointed objects hanging from the ceiling of the pavilion; this above a baby and piglet sleeping back-to-back and intimately united, sleeping the sleep of the blessed, virtually unaffected by the danger threatening them.

In recent years, Rochus Lussi has also repeatedly won competitions involving art in public spaces. Just this summer, three 3-square-metre skin surfaces – a human skin, an elephant hide and a tree bark – were installed at the “Höheren Fachschule Gesundheit Zentralschweiz” in Lucerne, and last year he was commissioned by the Culture Commission in Stans to create two reliefs for the school and community library. You might also be familiar with some of his works in public spaces in Nidwalden: for example, the sculpture of Wilhelm Josef Müller and the two red apples, which stood in the front garden of the Turmatthof housing development until 2015 – an updated restaging of the Wilhelm Tell story – or the three life-size cocoons in front of the carpentry school on Bürgenstock, to name just two examples.

Rochus Lussi also creates a new installation every year for the disused telephone booth in the sculpture park in Ennetbürgen.

But to associate Rochus Lussi only with sculpture and wood would be too short-sighted, for he is also active as a drawer and performer. For more than forty years, he has been collecting ideas, visions and stories in countless sketchbooks while hiking, travelling or during his studio sojourns, such as in New

York in the summer of 2016. These serve as a reservoir for his artistic realisations later. In performance his inherent interest is in terms of a moving sculpture.

As early as the 1990s, he launched a number of interesting performances in the Lucerne area with the “dia” collective, which he was able to follow up on during his stay in New York in 2016. In Solivagant, an exhibition space on Orchard Street, he implemented a five-part performance series and has intensified this kind of artistic engagement since his return to Nidwalden with the “happen” series, which he has curated at periodic intervals ever since.

And as a sneak preview, we will be able to enjoy a performance later by Rochus Lussi, one especially conceived for today, entitled “Tomorrow”, which I am very much looking forward to.

Cultural impact

Rochus Lussi’s artistic work is only one aspect of the impact he has had, although surely it is certainly the most important. We are honouring Rochus today in the same way as an exhibition-maker, organiser, networker, art mediator and, not least, family man.

Rochus was born in 1965 in Stans into a large family, the fifth in a family of nine, and grew up in Oberdorf. Within the family he was the somewhat rebellious and defiant one and liked to compete with his siblings. In any case, after acquiring a good portion of perseverance and humour, he henceforth took his life into his own hands. Together with his wife Luzia, who actively supports him on his artistic journey, he is the father of two sons – Cyrill and Leander – whom he has looked after in job-sharing with Luzia for the last twenty years. All those who create art and have children of their own know what an admirable balancing act this is.

Family time was never a hindrance for Rochus Lussi, but rather a twofold impetus to be present in numerous exhibitions, to be represented by galleries and to participate in performance festivals throughout Switzerland. After all, it was and is his ambition to be able to make a living from his art, and during this time it was particularly important for him to be involved in associations or on committees deciding cultural policies in order to keep abreast of contemporary art and generally keep a finger on the pulse.

From 2002 to 2007 he was active on the board and later also head of the exhibition group for the gallery of Chäslager in Stans. You may remember when Chäslager was completely wrapped in black foil in 2002 to demonstrate against the noise complaints of a neighbour. With success! The municipality of Stans was able to appease the neighbour and thus fortunately preserve Chäslager as a versatile cultural venue for Stans. Rochus Lussi has also revived the regional art market, which, after a brief slumber, took place for the third time last Saturday.

From 2004 to 2012, he was also a member of the Culture Commission of the canton of Nidwalden, where he was especially committed to promoting artists from Nidwalden beyond the cantonal borders and repeatedly made a determined plea for artist-in-residence stays not to be abolished, but to be further bolstered. He was also significantly involved in working on the new cultural mission statement for the canton of Nidwalden and strongly advocated that culture be given a firmly established place in the canton.

Furthermore, and almost at the same time, from 2005 to 2010, he was a board member of visarte central switzerland (visual arts association) and headed its exhibition group in Lucerne. It was extremely important to him that the focus was not only on the work of young artists, but also that the somewhat older, established art positions of Central Switzerland were not forgotten and regularly integrated into exhibitions – for example, the artist Henri Spaeti – or that artists who had been living elsewhere for some time – such as Ruth Buck from Basel – were also brought back to Central Switzerland.

In addition, Rochus Lussi has always been active as a freelance curator. For Gertrud Guyer Wyrsh, a long-time artist friend, he curated the retrospective on her 90th birthday in the Nidwaldner Museum in 2010, and the two temporary exhibitions for the sculpture park in Ennetbürgen, “In Holz gehauen” (2008) and “In Holz gebaut” (2010), which brought artistic creation with wood back into public awareness. As a well-versed expert, Rochus Lussi is also often invited to sit on juries for exhibitions as

well as for art projects in public spaces, and he has opened more than 30 exhibitions over the past 25 years. Since his two children have grown up, he has gained more flexibility and – above all – time to devote himself fully to his artistic work and to tackle even more complex and extensive projects... or to take a well-deserved creative break for a few days, most preferably in big cities like Berlin or New York.

Tribute

Rochus Lussi is – as I am sure you all know – a people person who likes it “ghoulish” sometimes, with social interests and a helping hand for his contemporaries. He is committed to fostering the traditional Epiphany concerts and preserving the nut trees in the region, and village life in Stans is particularly close to his heart.

He himself claims to be a boundless optimist. I would like to add: a positive thinker with insight, a professional approach and perseverance, as well as an admirable willingness to help, which always and everywhere ensures that he is frequently invited to participate. For no matter what Rochus Lussi does, he never thinks only of himself, but always of others and beyond himself. He is fundamentally and genuinely interested in the artistic works of his colleagues and equally interested in them as people with their unique biographies. And he has already motivated many an artist to continue, offering words of encouragement or using his wide-ranging experience and network to help them.

Whether as a teacher at the public school, where he taught creative design until 2010, as a course instructor for woodworking or as a freelance curator: Rochus Lussi is always present, committed and highly appreciated everywhere. For just as he has continuously developed his artistic work in an admirable manner for more than 25 years, he also spares no effort in championing others as well as cultural creativity in Central Switzerland.

In conclusion, let's come full circle and back to the cocoon. The central question still remains, at which point of transformation are we currently standing? Or in the figurative sense relating to Rochus Lussi's artistic works and enormous cultural commitment: What is still to come after all of these magnificent things?

So, let us finally give the butterfly time to unfold freely. I am convinced that the Central Switzerland Culture Award, along with its tremendous recognition and great appreciation, will make a very special contribution to this.

In this spirit, congratulations to you, Rochus,
and an inspiring evening to you all.

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