

The Elastic Self

To be “elastic” means to give way under stress, to be flexible. To spring back into form, and most of all not to break under pressure. This quality, in combination with stability, is desirable in both materials and people that one must depend on. A high degree of elasticity and adaptability paired with an inner strength guarantee durability, maximizing the likelihood of survival.

The exhibition *The Elastic Self* – presented by artist Petra Sterry at the Rondell Gallery in Schwanberg, Austria in early 2019 – brings together works from the last three or four years. Some were made by her hand, some by the hands of others. Among the artist’s own creations are large-format text pieces entitled *Trigger Warnings*, which assemble four words under star-shaped symbols. Short poems, emotional islands, intensifying admonitions are formed by verbal columns like the following: hate, fight, doubt, anger or love, curiosity, joy, lust. As calligraphic word-images and collections of associatively related word families, they evoke contradictory perceptual levels and moods. Sterry works in an ambiguous poetry. In the letters’ appearance and in their contentual references, these works imply something concealed behind them, or repressed. Through minimal displacements, the artist reveals echos that can arise in the depths of visual and linguistic experience. At times the contradictions do in fact serve as triggers, releasing ambiguities. It is precisely the indefiniteness that makes these listings uncanny. Even the title of this series reads like a subliminal threat, referencing the current debate surrounding the question of the “unspeakable”. The concept of the *trigger warning*, in other words of a warning that something could release emotional disturbance, originates from psychology; more specifically, from behavioral research involving posttraumatic disorders. The term has come to signify a notice preceding a text, video or other potentially disturbing content. It is assumed that trigger warnings were first used as a protective measure in internet self-help forums for victims of sexual violence. Primarily in the USA, the trigger warning has become a frequently used method for “disarming” a statement, particularly on college campuses, where heated discussions have erupted regarding what may or may not be said in lecture halls without providing a trigger warning.

In addition to Sterry’s *Trigger Warnings*, the show also features faces she has drawn in ink. Abstract and yet expressive, they are reminiscent of characters from Japanese mangas. Their distortions and

exaggerations give rise to a phenomenology of emotion that wells from both their uncanniness and their familiarity.

Exhibition visitors also experience ambiguous associations when viewing a great number of diversely treated cards, which, combined into several serial presentations, make up a substantial part of the show. Here, in a variety of hand-written notes and colored drawings, one can trace the thoughts and feelings of elderly people in their everyday life. These include remarks on the nice weather, favorite activities and matters of current interest, which were set down during workshops with seniors conducted by the artist in institutions in and around Schwanberg. The physical and verbal immediacy is at times moving: here a shakily rendered line, there a poignant orthographic error, and in the midst of it all suddenly a couple of completely unexpected sentences regarding mistreatment suffered in childhood, long-gone but still resonant. In their dense presentation, the cards penetrate to the emotional core of the empathetic beholder.

The exhibition *The Elastic Self* brings together work that Petra Sterry has produced during the last two years within the context of a Kunstraum Steiermark Grant. Conceived as a participative art project, the series of postcard-sized contributions can be seen in relation to Sterry's artistic research during recent years into emotions and inner states. The intentional blurring of concepts like authorship and artwork is also central to her artistic agenda. Through her very own notion of "fuzzy art production" – as she herself refers to it – she draws attention to intermediate levels of communicative production and perception, in which the nature of emotion and rationality and the role of social nurturing is traced by working with "the others" and making use of their "expertise". On multiple levels, Sterry references the direct researching of an "elastic self", both in her audience and within her own psyche as a creative artist.

The exhibition is introduced and concluded, as it were, by a multi-line poem in colloquial language. Painted in simple letters on large-format paper, it is filled with bodily directness, everyday casualness and linguistic gloom, becoming a visual image of an experience of elasticity: floating freely between the abysmal and the down-to-earth.