



Dorit Margreiter Really!

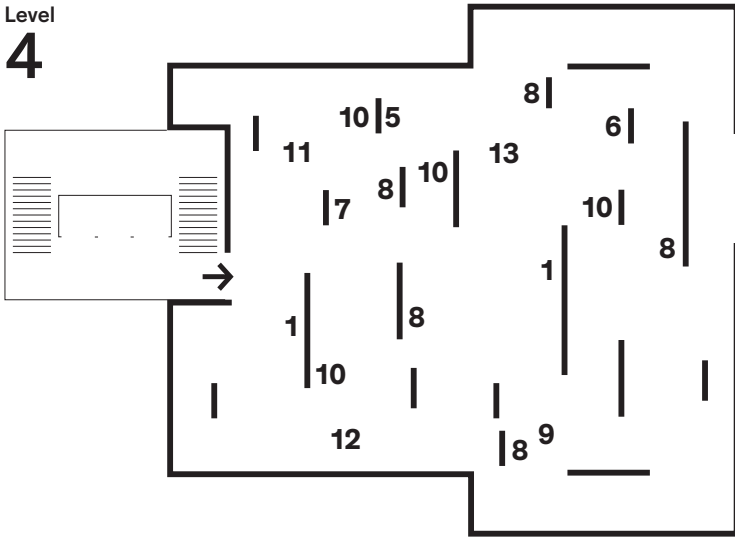
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museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

mumok

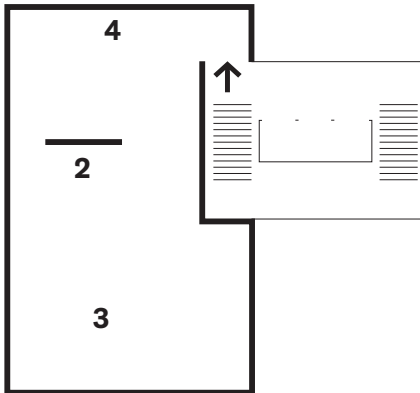
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Colored planes, patches, or stripes appear; light reflections flash; we see motifs that are organically distorted, blurred, and then become razor sharp again: *Mirror Maze* (2019) (1), Dorit Margreiter's latest film installation, shows images that appear to be abstract. Only sporadically can three-dimensional structures or architectural surfaces be identified. As soon as movement comes into play, our doubts about what we are seeing only multiply. Flickering lights, shadows emerging from nowhere, or diffuse changes in lighting increase our bewilderment and render any attempt at spatial orientation futile. The artist shot *Mirror Maze* in the house of mirrors known as "Calypso" at the Prater amusement park in Vienna. The "shop of laughter" sets visitors loose to trace their meandering course through all sorts of perceptual tricks and visual irritations: a maze of glass and mirrors, movable obstacles, funhouse mirrors, and various other illusions. The adventure and amusement architecture dates back to the 1950s and is one of the oldest attractions at the Prater. The house of mirrors promises visitors a diverting loss of orientation and control that takes place under safe conditions and within a secure framework. Everything that usually constitutes architecture—clearly defined walls, spaces, and openings that determine who sees what and whom or what is seen—is open to question in Calypso. The house of mirrors deprives our orienting gaze of its elementary foundations. The relationship between visibility, materiality, and spatial order is turned upside down. Walls made of glass and various types of mirror conspire with architectural components in eccentric colors to deliberately mislead the eye, duplicating or displacing objects, bodies, and structures. They distort and superimpose themselves on what is seen, suggesting openness and permeability where material structures in fact form insurmountable barriers and labyrinthine paths. At the same time, those trying to make their way through the maze are observed by others standing outside, because watching the goings-on through the glass walls is a key part of the attraction. The visitors' disorientation is put on show, and anyone who buys a ticket knows full well what they're getting into. Confusion and surveillance, loss of control and monitoring from the outside take place in parallel. This may all seem harmless and entertaining at first glance, and yet when applied to the mediatization and digitalization of our everyday lives and the associated changes in our physical and visual orientation, the paradigm reveals quite a different side.

For many years, Margreiter has focused in her art on the connections between visual systems and spatial structures and the consequences for our everyday life in society. Her examination of modern and contemporary architecture along with forms of media representation brings to light gender roles and power relations as she pursues thematic links between past and present and questions the relationship between reality, representation, and fiction.

For her solo show at mumok, Margreiter has transformed the entire exhibition space into an artistic installation incorporating display elements and architectural components, films and mobiles, as well as photographs. The labyrinthine installation and exhibition architecture centers on her latest film, *Mirror Maze*, which is presented as a two-channel video installation. Mobiles made of mirrors and shiny aluminum and suspended from the ceiling reflect the various projections distributed throughout the space while creating a further aspect of disorientation and spatial dissolution. Just as *Mirror Maze* reproduces the distortions of the house of mirrors using a static camera, the mobiles refract light back onto the viewers in the room. Writing plays an important role in Margreiter's mobiles and in early works such as *zentrum* (2006) (2). In 2004, she discovered prominent neon letters on the façade of the Brühlzentrum in Leipzig, a cultural center dating from the GDR era that was about to be demolished. Leipzig has enjoyed a reputation as a creative center for type design since the 1920s, and the neon letters thus captured the artist's interest because they represented a modernist artifact of almost archaeological status. For her film, she reactivated the broken letters by wrapping them in reflective material and illuminating them with film spotlights to make them glow once again. Margreiter makes targeted use of this typographic aesthetic in her mobiles (3) as well. The shapes cut out of aluminum are fragments of those characters. Hung low, at eye level, they float in space without joining up to form a whole letter, offering potential readings without ever really becoming legible—caught somewhere between image and text, information and abstraction. While on the one hand these works recall the imaginative mobiles of Alexander Calder, the artist also alludes here to the tradition of writing and typography that has been supplanted by today's digital information processing. The industrial aesthetic of standardized typesetting refers back to early modernism and thus to a time when typography was part of a radical social vision.

Made up of abstracted letters, the mobiles—which as such always involve the play of light—correspond with the neon lettering in Margreiter's film *Boulevard* (2019) (4), which was made in Las Vegas. On view at mumok for the first time, the film was inspired by the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, a kind of cemetery for discarded neon signs. *Boulevard* relates in various ways to the themes of Margreiter's earlier works as described above. She focuses here on huge discarded neon signs with obsolete bulbs that used to light up the Las Vegas Strip at night as a calling card for the glittering and fast-paced city of entertainment—a place where architecture and illusion, visuality and materiality are paradigmatically intertwined. Simulation and deception are a defining element of the gambling and entertainment mecca that sprang up from the Nevada desert, with shows

and casinos that attract millions of visitors each year—a gigantic cousin to Vienna's Prater. Margreiter films the relics of the night in the glaring light of day, under which these gigantic remains of the nightly entertainment culture unfold an almost monumental presence.

Las Vegas is one of those American myths that architects like to look askance at. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown published their groundbreaking study *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972, shedding light on the indiscriminate sprawl of the city and the associated proliferation of commodity aesthetics and neon signs that compete to attract customers and try to outdo one another with ever-new effects. Las Vegas is regarded as the prototype of capitalist urban development: The role played by the piazza in ancient Rome has been taken over in the modern city by the Main Street and the shopping center. In a capitalistically organized society as exemplified by the USA, the majority of the population has much more experience with commercial premises than with architecture of a high aesthetic standard. Advertising thus commands the foreground, producing an architecture whose forms do not follow any canon or tradition. According to Venturi and Scott-Brown, any attempt to reflect everyday reality with aesthetically high-quality architecture has failed. In an architecture without architects, the emblems of commodity aesthetics prevail over architectural form. A programmatic example of this development is The Grove, described on its website as "... a popular fashion and lifestyle destination offering the best mix of retail, restaurants and entertainment ...". This shopping and entertainment center near Los Angeles simulates a traditional nineteenth-century town center—naturally with all the amenities and social standards of the present day. *The World May Not Be Deep But It Is Definitely Shallow and Wide* (2004) (5) is the name Margreiter chose for a film she made out of prolonged static shots taken in The Grove. She focuses on the artificial attractions, the fountain with its sprays, the nostalgic train, the showy shops and restaurants. As soundtrack, the American urban and media historian Norman M. Klein speaks about urban sprawl and the spectacle culture of so-called "architainments" like The Grove. Klein analyzes the development of the public and the city and paints a dystopian vision of the future as the "victory of entertainment as the model for identity and politics."

Dorit Margreiter's *Broken Sequence* (2013) (6) likewise reflects on American urban and life fantasies, but against a more exotic backdrop. The Wonderland amusement park that forms the focus of the film was built near Beijing in the mid-1990s. Farmers were expropriated and villages torn down to launch a project designed to lure China's affluent new middle class to Asia's largest amusement park. Wonderland was laid out like a medieval village, and its theme worlds recall the various iterations of Disneyworld.

Construction was stopped in 1998. Margreiter made her film a few months before the demolition. A sequence of static camera shots reveal an eerie dream landscape with crumbling buildings, collapsed roofs, graffiti scrawled across on columns, and natural surroundings in a state of neglect. The candy-colored Magic Castle that was once built to enchant visitors is still recognizable. The Disney magic—the bright and colorful fantasy world of laughing characters and people—never came to fruition here: no roller coaster, no pastel tones, no music, only dust and plastic fragments wafting by, and barrier tape fluttering in the wind casting a phantasmal spell on the scene.

The Disney theme park concept was designed from the outset to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between the American myth produced in part by the movies and mundane everyday life—all set in an artificial world where the visitors themselves became actors. The first park, Disneyland, opened in Anaheim, California, in 1955. For Walt Disney, the park was not a kitschy and trivial escape from the routine but a reflection of actual needs and reality: “The park is completely real, it is reality.” This is a world from which everything negative and unwanted has been expunged. Disney’s world (and its architecture) draws on the utopian notion of small-town America as a sentimental place of longing that never really existed or could exist: the modest, community-oriented, family-friendly, and natural way of life of hard-working Americans. There never was such a thing, of course. Urbanization, unemployment, and population decline in the postwar period had by the 1950s already turned many small towns into epicenters of violence and drug abuse, places where xenophobia and a tendency towards right-wing extremism were cultivated. Instead, Disneyland as well as The Grove near Los Angeles simulate a “Main Street” harking back to a pre-industrial way of life with an emphasis on domestic bliss and family values. Or, as Walt Disney put it: “In Disneyland, clocks and watches will lose all meaning, for there is no present. There is only yesterday, tomorrow, and the timeless land of fantasy.” There are no social tensions here; everything is peaceful and all negativity repressed. In *Broken Sequence*, Margreiter shows how American sentimentality has been transplanted to faraway China and ends in a derailed dream made up of ruins, rotten wood, and rusty steel. Field workers can be seen reclaiming their land, sowing seed at the desolate sites. In this brief moment on film, contrary to Walt Disney’s vision, the dreamlike traumatic Wonderland actually has a here and now.

Other works displayed in the labyrinthine exhibition are dedicated to the specific setting of the museum and its forms of representation. Margreiter’s contribution to the 2009 Venice Biennale focused on the

architecture of the Austrian Pavilion in the Giardini and its exhibition space. Designed by Josef Hoffmann in 1934, the building is a utopian space for art that with its open structure is an architectural sculpture in its own right. In *Pavilion* (2009) (7), long, steady camera pans turn interior and exterior views into a sequence of abstract forms, and it is not always possible to discern whether we are seeing artworks, room elements, or pedestals. In a visual scanning of the room, views inside and outside, surfaces and figures alternate. In between we see women looking at themselves in the mirror or making sweeping movements with large feather fans that might be in preparation for a revue. With *Pavilion* being shown at mumok rather than in the Austrian Pavilion, viewers are unable to experience in parallel the setting on which the film is based, and the work thus also addresses the history and readability of architectural fragments. Fragments of reality are likewise seen for example in *Bearing Masonry, Concrete Block (1923)* from 2014–2019 (8) and *Bearing Masonry, Concrete Block (2014)* from 2015 (9). The first is a series of photographs of pieces of concrete and the second a series of casts made from these pieces. They had been broken off a house designed by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright that served as the setting for movies including *Blade Runner* (1982). Just as set pieces for film backdrops are transformed from three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional images and back again at will, the fragments here run through a process going from architecture to film to photography to sculpture, the original context gradually being eliminated in order to finally arrive at an independent sculpture in the exhibition space.

Dorit Margreiter investigates transfers and translations of architecture and materiality into different forms of media representation in relation to different contexts. For the series *Silicon Valley* (2019) (10), for example, she aimed her camera at glass surfaces reflecting abstracted street scenes, cars, or passers-by—reflections that recall her film *Mirror Maze*. In these photographs, however, Margreiter focuses not on an amusement park but on the façades of buildings that are home to IT and high-tech companies like Google in California's Silicon Valley. The film raises subtle questions about the relationship between materiality and superficiality and between reality and its digital translation in a private and working world fixated on data exchange.

Margreiter deals in various works with (utopian) ideas about lifestyle and housing that have gained currency in the course of the history of modernism. Her documentary on the *Case Study House #22* (2001) (11) by Pierre König shows the artist with the client and inhabitant of the house in Los Angeles. They are sitting in the same spot where the famous architectural photographer Julius Shulman had posed his models for a 1960 photograph in "Harper's Bazaar" that brought the building overnight fame. König designed

his house of glass and steel as part of the Case Study Program launched by the magazine *Arts & Architecture* in 1945. The aim of the competition was to deal with the postwar housing shortage by coming up with ideas for simple, inexpensive model homes. De facto, however, the houses, designed by well-known architects, became icons of modern living, paragons of deluxe domestic architecture that are still familiar to everyone with enlightened bourgeois taste to this day.

Another property the artist has taken as theme for a film likewise represents a high point in classical modernism: *10104 Angelo View Drive* (2004) (12) is the address of a home built by the famous architect John Lautner. The modernist architecture is showcased here in all its clean-lined sleekness, whereby architectural and cinematic dramaturgy coincide: Asymmetrical, streamlined forms and surfaces are set in motion by invisible technology, glass walls being pushed aside as if by magic. Room elements can be moved at the touch of a button and windows disappear into the floor. Lighting conditions change as the glass roof opens, and everything seems to be set in motion by an invisible hand. A television rises out of an apparently solid concrete block, so that from the camera's point of view the moving architecture itself seems to act like a kind of eyepiece taking in the room or the scenery outside. The leisurely mechanics of the house and the calm camera work suggest a harmoniously flowing continuum of architecture, nature, and urban environment. This private residence has achieved media fame as a location for various Hollywood movies. Scenes in "Playing God" (1997), "The Big Lebowski" (1998), and "Bandits" (2001) take place there. One might assume that the language of this modern architecture can be understood as a metaphor for a mobile and forward-looking American society. But curiously, the house usually functions on film as the lair of shady characters, crooks, and villains. It is in this "uncannily" clean and seemingly autonomous setting that Margreiter has chosen to stage a performance by the Toxic Titties, a Californian lesbian performance group. The feminist artist collective puts on a shrill show that utterly unbalances the artist's ostensibly documentary film about the house. The parody-like appropriation upsets the conventional distinctions between documentary and fiction in the same way that clichéd notions of the psychological effect of architecture are guided and determined by the mass media—in this case especially in Hollywood movies.

In the video *Jock* (2001) (13), Dorit Margreiter turns the camera on herself. She stands in a baseball cage, equipped with helmet, gloves, and bat, ready to hit the balls coming at her from a throwing machine. The camera is mounted on the machine and our gaze thus follows the path of the

ball, which is thrown at the artist every five seconds for her to bat away. Her hits form the rhythmic staccato of the plot. The ball—the camera—is directed with penetrating intensity at the artist, who parries it sixteen times with rapt attention. In this video, Margreiter stages the act of seeing as inseparable from the body and its reactions. In American parlance, a jock is a popular athlete who is not necessarily gifted with great intelligence—the opposite of the intellectual nerd—but is equipped with an unbridled libido. The libidinal instinct that underlies seeing—the desire to see and be seen—is equated here with the camera. And thus in a figurative sense it is always the viewers' gaze, shaped by expectations and conventions both social and artistic, that the artist fends off with her bat.

Imprint

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Exhibition

Dorit Margreiter
Really!

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Exhibition Booklet

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