

Media release
Zurich, 14 December 2023

A whodunnit is coming to the Kunsthaus Zürich from 9 February to 12 May, as Barbara Visser's film installation 'Alreadymade' takes us in search of Dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.

'Fountain', a urinal that was declared to be a work of art in 1917, is perhaps the best-known conceptual object of the 20th century. Signed 'R. Mutt', it was submitted anonymously to an exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists in New York; since then, everyday objects can be 'readymades' and qualify as art too. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) claimed authorship of the work. However, there are rumours that it was not he who masterminded it but rather the Dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874–1927).

Barbara Visser (b. 1966) devotes her film installation 'Alreadymade' to the quest for this forgotten artist. In the process, she asks questions about authorship, originality and the difference between fact and fiction.

ALREADYMADE – BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

The film 'Alreadymade' (2023), which forms the basis for Visser's site-specific installation, is an alternative whodunnit that explores the boundaries between genuine and fake. 'Fountain' is the starting point of the artist and film-maker's investigation into the speculation surrounding Duchamp's authorship. Adopting the readymade approach, she produces the work from existing material: found film footage from which she creates her own moving images, employing new technologies such as motion capture and meta-human modelling. The result is not an art-historical documentation; rather, the mix of existing and newly created material serves as a reflection on such fundamental questions as 'what is reality, and what is fake?' Who is the author? What is an original and what is a copy?

IS THERE ANYTHING TO THE LEGEND?

When 'Fountain' was submitted to the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition, its provocative challenge to the concept of art meant it was not put on display. Today, the original has long since been lost. Visser explores speculation that casts doubt on Duchamp's authorship. She quotes, for example, from a letter in which the artist writes that a female friend of his had sent the work in, using the male pseudonym 'Richard Mutt'. But who could the work's creator be, if not Duchamp?

ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN

Visser's film turns the spotlight on one of the most dazzling figures in New York Dadaism: von Freytag, who knew Duchamp, is often associated with the urinal for a variety of reasons. The ephemeral character of her art is reflected in photos showing her extravagantly dressed. In addition to the performativity of her work, the artist – also known as 'Baroness' – produced experimental poetry. Did her unconventionality, combined with the fact that she was a woman, result in works not being attributed to her? Indeed, will it ever be possible to say with certainty whose work 'Fountain' is? Do we conceive all realities depending on what we want to be true?

AVATAR OF THE DADA BARONESS

One leitmotif in Visser's film is the constant search for the Dadaist and her ephemeral oeuvre, little of which has been preserved. A contemporary once described von Freytag as 'a combination of Jesus Christ and Shakespeare', while Duchamp himself went so far as to say: 'She is not a futurist. She is the future.' At the Kunsthau, the search for von Freytag can be experienced in two places: first, in the English-language film implemented as a multi-channel installation; and second, in works from the Kunsthau Collection chosen by Visser in an effort to bring the Dadaist back to life. Visser creates a digital avatar of the Baroness and makes it dance, while presenting unique, previously unknown, historical moving pictures of von Freytag which she has unearthed. Curated by research associate Simone Gehr, Visser's installation thus zooms in on one of the most exceptional figures of New York Dada – in Zurich, the very city where Dada was born at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. In parallel with the exhibition, the Kunsthau will be exhibiting works in the Dada cabinet that deal with the issues Visser addresses.

BARBARA VISSER

Barbara Visser is a visual conceptual artist, director and documentary filmmaker. Born in the Netherlands, she studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy Amsterdam and the Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. Most of her projects, which take the form of photographs, films, prints, texts or performances, investigate the uncertain relationship between registration and dramatization, play with notions of original and copy, and explore the ways in which history and memory are shaped by the individual and society. Visser's works have been shown at film festivals and exhibitions around the world. She currently heads the 'F for Fact' master's programme at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam. 'Alreadymade' is the artist's first solo exhibition at an art museum in Switzerland.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

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For details of admission prices, opening hours and events see

www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/ and www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/agenda/. Tickets can be obtained from the cash desk or in advance at www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Zurich Tourism, tourist information office in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, info@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

INVITATION TO THE MEDIA BRIEFING AND CONTACT FOR EDITORS

The preview of the film installation by Barbara Visser takes place on 8 February from 10 a.m. to 12 midday. Welcome by Kunsthhaus Director Ann Demeester and introduction by curator Simone Gehr at 11 a.m.

Media releases and images to download as well as an overview of dates for media briefings in 2024 can be found at www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medien-bereich/media-corner/.

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