

There is something happening here but you don't know what it is

A bible torn into pieces and scattered across the floor, a psychotic woman wearing a suicide bomber belt, and a man explaining art to a dead hare can all be found in KUNSTGLAUBE's latest exhibition, 'Madness and Mysticism' in the Otto Wagner Psychiatric Hospital Church in Vienna.

On the ceiling of the Jugendstil church, built exclusively for psychiatric patients in 1907, fifty helium balloons are lifting a book which describes every feature of a mystical experience. The book is called DSM-IV and not only does it comprehensively describe the experience of hearing voices, seeing visions, experiencing a loss of sense of time and space, and a profound inability to articulate the experience, but discusses each of these as symptoms of a mental disorder.

The exhibition includes artworks by Joseph Beuys, Yayoi Kusama, Seiko Grabner, Laurie Anderson, Olivier Hölzl, Norbert Bula, Robert Drummond, Chris Landreth, Stella Reinhold, Hans Ahnert, August Walla, Virgilius Moldovan, Silvia Bischof, Hanspeter Ilg, Jeanine Osborne, Martin Kunz, Andrzej Kowalski, Richard Saville-Smith, Elias, Andrej Tarkovsky, Matthew Silver and many others. A crypt beneath the church was never completed and is now open for the first time in over one hundred years. Visitors to the exhibition enter the damp and dark underground space and encounter works which deal directly with fears associated with involuntary hospitalisation, mental illness and the history of madness.

A video installation by Laurie Anderson called '*At the Shrinks (A Fake Hologram)*' involves footage of the artist projected onto a 12 cm tall clay figure. She describes her encounter with a psychiatrist, where she had decided not to see the 'shrink' anymore after realising that they both saw things from an entirely different point of view. Immediately opposite the entrance, in a dark corner, is Virgilius Moldovan's '*Double Target*' which features two arms aggressively grabbing the mouths of two men. In a document called '*How to Recognise and Engage the Mentally Disturbed*' prepared by KUNSTGLAUBE, the potential for certain artworks to disturb visitors is discussed and a method proposed to 'deflect' and 'distract.' In discussing Moldovan's sculpture it explains that "a visitor who is afraid of being hospitalised may find this artwork disturbing. Considering its position in the crypt and relationship to the theme of trauma, the artwork is an important reflection on fear." If the visitor cannot move beyond their own subjective interpretation of the work then "it is important to emphasise that the artwork addresses the issue of outside interference and was made as a response to the conflict in the Balkan war." Still in the crypt and directly beneath the main altar, '*Saint Anthony's Fire*' features details from Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece projected onto a brick wall. In the sixteenth century, plants including Verbena, Buckhorn, Plantain, Long-headed poppy, Austrian Speedwell and White Clover were given to people suffering from hallucinations, gangrene flesh and bloated stomachs while they knelt in front of Grünewald's altarpiece. It was later discovered that the cause for madness was ergotoxinosis but until then, the plight of the mad was considered to be a demonic attack.

As one emerges into the light filled church, an overwhelming sense of calm takes over. The experience of climbing the stairs and entering the church after dealing with the ghost train of works underneath is not too different from the experience of a patient wandering into the church from one of the twelve psychiatric wards in the hospital. The curator makes it clear that "it would be irresponsible in any other space to potentially awaken a psychotic episode in the viewer, but this Church was built to console and reassure even the most acutely disturbed visitor." In a similar way that the effect of illicit drugs can induce psychosis in certain individuals, the curator says that an "art induced psychosis can only be handled in a church or hospital" and the exhibition takes place in both

places. For the curator, there is no difference between madness and mysticism, “but mental illness differs substantially from both.”

According to the curator, the most important artwork in the exhibition is Seiko Grabner’s ‘1200mg’ which features 1.2kg aluminium pills placed on each of the side altars and main altar in the church. “The best medicine for the ‘*geisteskrank*’ is art and religion” says Rastas and follows this statement by quoting Pope Francis who wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the Eucharist is “is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

Madness and Mysticism is the third major exhibition in a church, realised by KUNSTGLAUBE since the organisation was founded in March 2013. More information on exhibitions, courses on Contemporary Art in the Church and research on art in sacred spaces can be found at www.kunstglaube.at

Madness & Mysticism

Kirche am Steinhof, Otto Wagner Psychiatric Hospital, Vienna

1st October until 27th November 2016

www.kunstglaube.at/madness&mysticism