

Parcours curator Samuel Leuenberger on sculpture now

Samuel Leuenberger

‘The medium gives material contour to things that are difficult to encapsulate,’ he says

Conceiving **Parcours** always begins with a walk through Basel’s historic center. Though it’s something I do often, this is a different kind of walk. I set off thinking about what it means to embed an artwork in the beating heart of Basel, moving slowly to track the changes in the urban fabric, as if conducting an annual survey. To those involved, I attempt to convey the virtues of *Parcours*, a project that blows open new points of access. The artworks, interventions, and performances that make up the sector have a striking way of shaking up the laws of the land, revealing alternative angles, uses, and inhabitations of the city.

Contra to prevailing thought, *Parcours* is not a *plein air* sculpture exhibition, but a citywide project responding to a civic entity. For this reason, the majority of projects that appeared in the 2018 edition made use of domestic and interstitial sites, including vacant houses, storefronts, and museum stacks. Many of the works bridged interior and exterior space by occupying fringe sites at the borders of private and public land. This approach prompted audiences to consider the lawn as an extended living room and the square as a museum atrium. What, after all, makes these spaces unique in function and form? Such sites are likely familiar, even expected of civic space.



Ron Terada, *You Have Left the American Sector*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

Parcours 2019 takes this notion further by attending to the space of and for an artwork. With a focus on sculpture, this edition asks critical questions about the *habitat* of sculpture: The ideal conditions and environs that aid the encounter, as well as how an environment changes once the sculpture is installed. The past three editions have broadly considered how artworks operate within an existing urban typology, taking its layered history and cultural property as a point of departure. Over the years, Parcours has introduced many discrete and decentralized projects, from sound-based installations to modular works that build narratives across far-flung corners. This year, however, I found myself thinking about intervention from the perspective of the 'displaced' objects. What if, rather than being artifacts and sites waiting to be 'activated,' such entities were autonomous, mavericks capable of unsettling a status quo? The ones I have in mind are those that have become civic furniture, stultified by their own pedestrianism. Generally speaking, we are trained as audiences to seek out a caption, a wall text, or any kind of discursive tool that serves to contextualize and historicize an artwork. *Then* we look. The encounter is often buffered by this process of contextualization, for better or for worse. But what happens when entities speak for themselves? Or speak louder than the captions that represent them? This prompts a new reading of artistic *intent* and *intervention*.

At Schiffflände this year, you may encounter a large street sign emblazoned with the words 'You have left the American Sector' in English and Spanish. Conceived of by the Canadian artist **Ron Terada** in 2011, the work faces the Grossbasel side of the city, with its back to the Rhine and Kleinbasel, where Art Basel is held. Adapted from the Checkpoint Charlie sign indicating the split between East and West Berlin, it was shown at the American-Canadian border for an exhibition a few years ago and acts as a roving proxy border. In this way, it evokes political and cartographic divides, past and present, as well as unfolding crises in the context of ongoing border militancy. When deployed in Basel, a city that fringes two other countries, it dramatizes a longstanding feud between the bourgeois area of Basel and a traditionally working-class neighborhood. Sitting on the Rhine, which remains the main trade route for Switzerland, the sign entreats us to contemplate the future of Basel's global portal.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *The Recovered Manifesto of Wissam [inaudible]*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Maureen Paley, London.

Just a few minutes up the hill, in the courtyard of the State Archives of the Canton of Basel-Stadt, we come to a work invested in the material politics of speech by the Beirut-based artist **Lawrence Abu Hamdan**. *The recovered manifesto of Wissam [inaudible]* (2017) comprises a group of fake clementine trees with mini-cassette tape entangled in their branches and three plastic rocks emitting an audio sequence. The installation mirrors a series of fruit trees the artist once came across in the Chouf Mountains of Lebanon, where tape is commonly used to protect against birds and insects. Upon analyzing the tape, Abu Hamdan found that the voice belonged to Wissam, a figure known for recording a manifesto on the elusive concept of *taqiyya* – ‘An esoteric Islamic juridical concept that is widely understood as the right to lie.’ Within the grounds of the State Archives – an institution whose purpose is to reinforce a historical civic record – the installation plays on the transmittal of history through a crew of unreliable narrators. As the tape moves in the wind and occasional bursts of white noise come out from the rocks, we are reminded of the partiality of history-making, here entrusted to inanimate objects as insincere as they are withholding.



Camille Henrot, OCPD, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and kamel mennour, Paris and London; König Galerie, Berlin and London; and Metro Pictures, New York City.

Moving below the crown of the trees at Münsterplatz we come to a cluster of bronze sculptures by the French artist **Camille Henrot** – ‘System of Attachment’ (2019) – a new series riffing on the characters of linguistic forms, from question marks to approximated signs. Evocative of human contour and comportment, the artworks heighten the slippage between object and subject – a nod to philosophical notions about the explosion of semiotics in everyday shapes. Others appear slumped and lazy, tempting the idea that the sculptures need a change of scene and desire more from life.

All three projects belie the notion of sculpture as a sealed material entity. With an enduring relationship to language, history, and bodies, we see how sculpture retains barely there oral testimony and mythic events that, when angled differently, unlock new meanings. Sculpture suspends animation, but it also gives material contour to things that are difficult to encapsulate: A sign, an expression, a feeling. With these various strategies, I hope to amplify the timely stakes of sculpture as both a witness and an agent.