

Art in America

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Valérie Knoll on Curating Remotely



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When the pandemic hit Europe and the United States in March, Kunsthalle Bern director Valérie Knoll was in the midst of organizing a solo exhibition with Park McArthur. The American conceptual artist had been working on a site-specific project, but found herself unable to travel to the Swiss institution. The Kunsthalle Bern was previously directed by famed curator Harald Szeemann, who cooperated with artists Christo and Jeanne- Claude to make it the first building they ever wrapped. Below, Knoll discusses the process of working with artists who can't visit the Kunsthalle.

I had been conferring long-distance with Park McArthur on her solo show for a year before the coronavirus hit Europe. We'd hoped that she would come and stay here for a couple months to develop her site-specific project. She wanted to work with the history of the Kunsthalle, and with the team. But in March 2020, it became clear she wouldn't be able to travel here. We began Skyping twice a week for several hours. She talked with the whole team: the people from administration and communication, the technicians, the Kunsthalle's photographer, the person who distributes invitations for our events, and so on. Some of them told me that they felt closer to Park than to other artists we've worked with, even the ones who spent weeks in our galleries installing their shows. In the end, Park made an audio guide, like PARA-SITES, the one she made for her solo project at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2018. Titled (like the show) *Kunsthalle_guests Gaeste.Netz.5456* after our Wi-Fi network, her new audio guide describes our building and the artworks within it, as well as some of the institution's history. Even before the virus, Park knew that she wanted to make the show accessible to people who couldn't come to the Kunsthalle in Bern, and so the full audio guide is available online. At one point, we thought maybe no one would ever see the show itself!

I'm about to open another exhibition, a group show called "No Dandy, No Fun," but we are on the brink of a second wave of the pandemic. Artists are telling me, "I booked my flight. I'm coming." Then a few days later, they say, "Never mind; now Berlin is on the travel restrictions list." I'm fortunate that the Kunsthalle format allows me to be responsive: last spring, I changed my program, and it was not a big deal. Normally, I plan my program about a year and a half year in advance, rather than five years out, like at many museums.

I co-curated "No Dandy, No Fun" with the German artist and writer Hans-Christian Dany. We're tracing the figure of the dandy back to its beginnings in the nineteenth century, and focusing on characteristics that are still relevant today: gender fluidity, malleable identity. The show has vitrines with books and archival documents, but also works by artists not typically thought of as dandies: Heji Shin, Andrea Fraser, Jos de Gruyter, and Harald Thys. Shipping has not been an issue at all, but it's been difficult to work with artists to properly position their work when they can't be here. The uncertainty is very annoying.