

# NEITHER PEACE NOR CALM

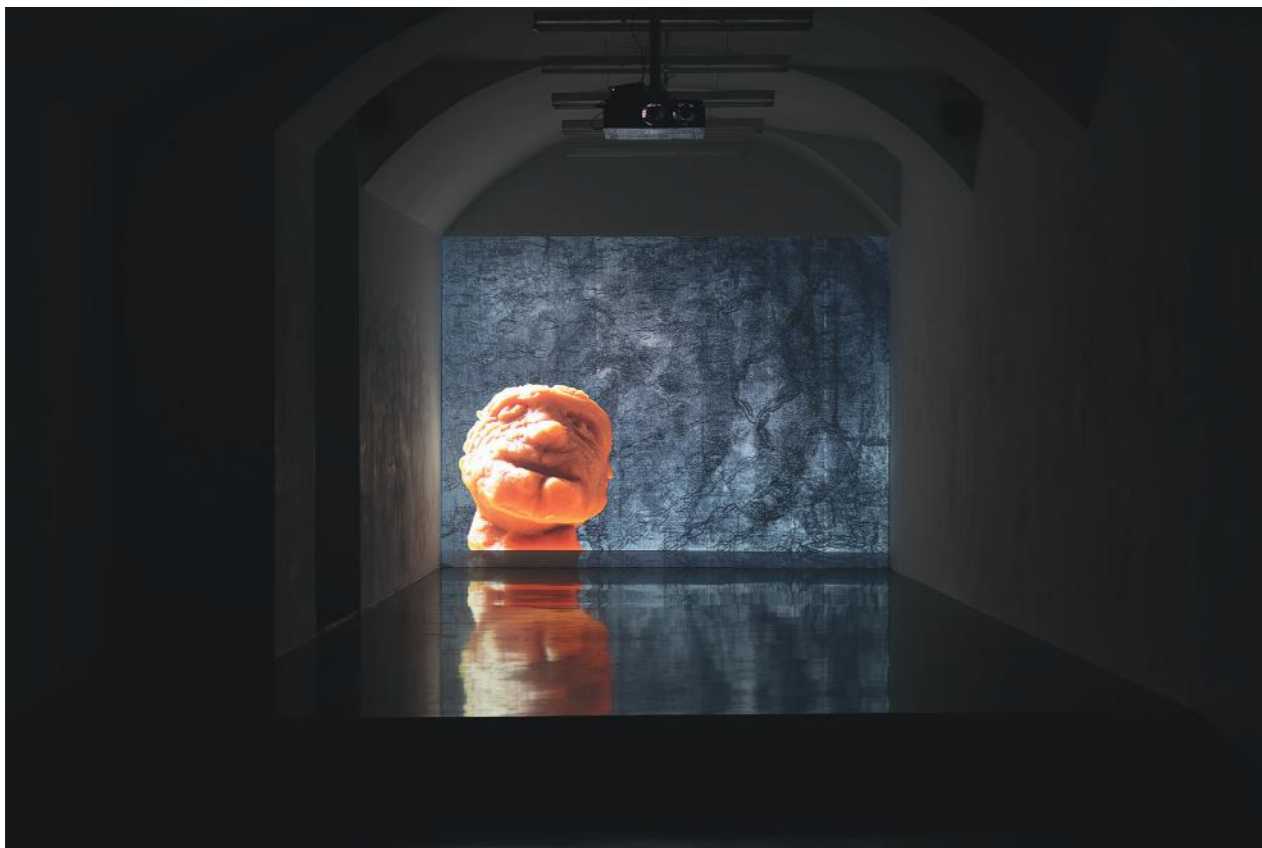
NIKLAS LICHTI  
 "CONCRETE QUARTERLY"  
 GALERIE EMANUEL LAYR  
 25 JANUARY –  
 7 MARCH 2020

The gallery was a dark, bipolar place this time around. Two new videos by Vienna-based artist Niklas Lichti – *Flat Baroque* (2019) and *Concrete Quarterly* (2020) – were projected onto opposite walls, turning the otherwise empty vault into a dim tunnel. There was thus light at both its ends, but everything still seemed somehow hopeless.

Alternately switched and looped, the videos presented a relentlessly recurring panorama of deep inner conflicts: self-discovery and loss, giving up and moving on, momentary motivation, and woeful frustration. In *Concrete Quarterly*, a dented, yellowish plastic face with a darkly distorted voice uses diary entries to recount attempts to free oneself from depression and physical decay. In the process, one learns about the narrator's fetish for special-interest magazines, among them *Counterpunch* and the eponymous *Concrete Quarterly*, which apparently represent the only connection to the outside world and assume the role of a kind of lifeline. "The Black Herald was great company, tiny format but printed on very soft paper," the figure notes, or, "From *GST* [*Green Social Thought*] you learned about tipping points, a concept you

assumed that could be easily applied ... also to a precarious state of mind." In the end, however, loneliness remains: "This concept of shared solitude was a mere projection. There was no tribe, no community built out of isolation."

In the second, much shorter video, the view is broadened to the social, while at the same time condensed into a montage of image, text, and sound. People of the 1968 generation dance at a Buddhist centre in Germany in front of a band while the audio track is an Estonian rune song with ethereal sounds and rhythmic falsetto singing. The words "Back to Bretton Woods" and "Back to Walden Huts" are faded in, again and again. The result is a difficult-to-penetrate mix of many codes and strata, a kind of dream sequence through which the stringent ideological lines of today's conflicts



Niklas Lichti, *Concrete Quarterly*, 2020  
 HD video, 20:20 min, Installation view, Galerie Emanuel Layr

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna/Rome



Still from Niklas Lichti, *Flat Baroque*, 2019  
 HD video, 3:46 min

shine through: "Walden" is an allusion to the novel in which the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau describes his retreat into pure seclusion – exemplary for all dropouts and isolationists. "Bretton Woods" refers to the postwar fixed-currency system by which exchange rates were de facto pegged to the US dollar. Both ideas – the politics of isolationism and the privileged position of the USA – relate directly to the present. *Walden* and Bretton Woods are contrasted with the legacy of solidarity and collectivity: delirious representatives of the 68 generation, still (or again) preoccupied with acts of self-discovery.

Lichti's videos are apt tales that detail the abundance of lives lived without options, which in some of their content remind us distantly of Tom McCarthy (isolation and mediated access to the world) and Mark Fisher (the psychological as indirect consequence of the social). In a postcommunist, postcapitalist, posthuman, Anthropocene, burning or sinking post-Trump world, the alternatives are not action or inaction, whether collectively or alone. Perhaps all the isolation any of us really needs is to go home, self-quarantine, and continue reading our magazines.

Maximilian Geymüller

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