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PRESS RELEASE

Wolfgang Stoerchle
before you can pry any secrets from me
curated by Alice Dusapin
March 18th – April 21st, 2018
reception: Sunday, March 18th, 6-8pm

Wolfgang Stoerchle is a particularly notable artistic figure of the early 70s who left a certain but little advertised mark on a generation of California artists, especially through videotapes and performances involving his body as raw material. *Wolfgang Stoerchle, before you can pry any secrets from me* is the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in Los Angeles since a 1976 car accident in Santa Fe brought his life to a close at the age of 32. Born in 1944 in Baden Baden, Germany, Stoerchle's very short but dense life lingers in and through his works – some of which are gathered in this exhibition, as one route of many into his practice.

Wolfgang Stoerchle moved from Germany to Canada with his seven siblings and mother in 1959. After a few years there, he decided with his brother Peter to continue their journey. Together they left Toronto on horseback in January 1962 to cross the United States and realize their long held dreams of becoming cowboys for a while. They finally arrived in Los Angeles on December 23rd after 11 months in the saddle. In 1968, Wolfgang would identify this journey as his first performance.

Working in L.A. as a valet by night and assistant editor for *Teen Screen* magazine by day, Wolfgang left Los Angeles two years later to return to Norman, Oklahoma – a small prairie town he had passed through during his horseback journey across the States. There he worked on a farm to put money aside in order to finance painting studies at the University of Oklahoma, which he would begin in 1965.

After three very prolific years of producing paintings and bronze sculptures, he graduated in June 1968 with a distinguished solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Foundation in Oklahoma City. He and his wife Karen (now Karen Couch Wieder) then moved to Santa Barbara for Wolfgang to start his graduate studies at UC Santa Barbara. Slowly introducing the use of rigid polyurethane foam into his work, he started a series of squashed banana paintings – mixed-media reliefs which give the impression a car tire has rolled over them, smashing the banana on their surface like fruit roadkill in the process. A series of seductive mattress paintings are also remarkable for their similarly illusive qualities. Simultaneously hyper-flat yet invitingly soft and squidgy, they flirt with formal abstraction while revealing their subjects to be more mundane. These works are rich in acute humor, but also steeped in eroticism, as Wolfgang notes in his own words at the time: "Of particular interest to me are the sexually-charged 'skins' which surround us in the commercial environment."

His own body – his own skin – would become a major tool, material, and object of research during his master's studies. His master's degree exhibition in June 1970, from which a video document and many photographs still remain, is a significant marker of this new interest. In a series of small actions, we see Wolfgang running, swinging, and being carried and rammed head first through multiple plaster-cast slabs, which instantly break under the weight and pressure of his moving body. The use of other performers – friends and fellow students – to similarly break plaster surfaces shows his interest in action and process as being of greater concern than the heroic acts of an individual artist. Such a notion continues in later works in which Wolfgang's own body becomes his primary material; never a subject, always a tool. This affection for using rudimentary but fundamental actions to interrogate changing forms of state and status following a series of tasks will remain very present in all Wolfgang's subsequent work, especially his videotapes.

It is while at UCSB that his interest in video appears. Using equipment from the school, he produced a few films that Karen Couch Wieder would keep with her for 47 years, which we digitized in October 2017 while I visited her in Norman. A recording of his master's degree shows actions were part of those found films, and a source of tremendous surprise. Rather like tests or attempts, these filmic sketches present the initial outlines of a research that for Wolfgang would be ongoing. Following their discovery, these films were first shown in a group exhibition at *Ampersand* (Lisbon) in November 2017 – itself a sketch, perhaps, for this exhibition in Los Angeles.

In Santa Barbara, Miles Varner, Daniel Lentz, David Kunzle, and John Arvanitis would become good friends of Wolfgang's with whom he would work and exchange ideas. With the help of art historian David Kunzle, Wolfgang produced a newspaper with fictional news and reviews; creating fake interviews and articles about exhibitions that never happened and works of his that were never made. Showing his wish to game and thwart the system of the

art market, Wolfgang perhaps persists at playing the 'cowboy.' And it actually worked! In a fake interview with the artist Ilene Segalove, he talks about sixteen "casts" he made in bronze from all of his former girlfriends. This information has been reported many times in his biography, while in fact he only ever made one cast in bronze, titled *Bobby*, cast from a woman who was just a friend, not a lover. Thanks to Karen's archives, we found this sculpture's subtitle: "*before you can pry any secrets from me.*" No more need be said.

In early 1970, after meeting Wolfgang Stoerchle a few times, Allan Kaprow invited him to become one of the inaugural teachers – alongside artists including Nam June Paik, Judy Chicago, and John Baldessari – at the new school of art in Los Angeles, CalArts. Freshly graduated and very interested in new media and the possibilities the school could offer in terms of equipment and materials, the young artist started to teach classes such as "Video Project," "Sculpture, Temporary Structure," and "Performance Work" (the latter in partnership with the composer Harold Budd, was a class in which half the students were artists, the others musicians). Ex-students including James Welling, Matt Mullican, David Salle and Eric Fischl note the lasting impact and influence Wolfgang and his classes had upon them.

Aside from his teaching position, this time was very prolific for his video and performative works. He produced a lot of tapes, many of which can be counted among his greatest works. With the use of the Portapak, Wolfgang created studio performances made explicitly for video. *Jumping in the Air*, *Shoe Piece*, *Running Upside Down*, *Falling Box*, *Running with Light*, *Dirt Blowing*, *Crawling out of Cloth* are all videotapes he produced between 1970 and 1972. One very particular work, *Penis with Disney Characters*, I quote Eric Fischl to describe: "My favorite and most memorable video is his birth of Disney. It is a video of his un-circumsized penis unfurling and spitting out at the end small Disney characters like Mickey Mouse, Goofy, etc. It was shockingly funny. Disney money was the money behind CalArts. It was Walt Disney's last wish to start an art school with all the arts represented under one roof. He had no idea how much the art world had changed, become leftist, and radical. More importantly, he had no idea how contemporary artists viewed him and his milk-sugar sentimentalism as the source of our problems. Wolfgang's piece directed a very sure arrow at that target."

The use of his body as an expressive instrument became central. *Making Myself Sneeze Several Times and Using the Energy of Each Sneeze to Propel Closer to a Vertical Position*, and *Urinating Short spurts on the Rug* were both performed, under the invitation of Helene Winer, at the Pomona College in March 1972 (Chris Burden & Hirokazu Kosaka were part of the program as well). A studio tape and a photocollage were also made of the works, multiplying the levels in which they can be read. *Trying to get an erection in front of an audience without the benefit of physical stimulation* (or *Hypnosis Piece*) was first performed in 1972, on Market Street in the studio of Robert Irwin. He would repeatedly attempt this piece on different occasions over his career, but he would never get the erection he and the piece longed for. He also made a studio tape out of this work, on top of which he recorded his voice offering commentary on how the performance was prepared through seeing a hypnotist, and his own thoughts on the work's result: "In the end it didn't work, but I think it may have in some ways worked better than it could have... success in failure." An interesting comment that sums up thoroughly what the work was finally about. I could add to success in failure: comfort in vulnerability. "His work was memorable and uncomfortable, what made the early seventies so early seventies" – William Wegman.

During summer of 1971, after a month long trip to Europe, Wolfgang and Karen separated. Wolfgang kept teaching for another year and then left California for New York in summer 1972. Sharing a studio at 55 W 26th Street with John Arvanites and Elizabeth Gilchrist, he continued producing studio tapes and performing pieces in public. William Wegman remembers when Wolfgang performed the erection piece on 26th Street: "He stood naked before us with eyes closed and tried and failed to get an erection. Such a bad idea and so good."

Tapes from his time in New York are more rare, but Wolfgang's obsession with the tunnel effect (an endless tunnel of video feedback, caused by pointing the camera at its own playback image on a monitor) continues to appear in the work. Playing with both his equipment and his audience, he lures the viewer into believing they understand the video's trick, before revealing that they don't at all. Painting with illusion again.

In 1973, Wolfgang participated in a dance workshop at Connecticut College that led to a tremendously beautiful work, which would also be the most ambitious video he would create in terms of its technical proficiency and production. Titled *Sue Turning* he made it with the dancer and performer Carolyn 'Sue' Pfaffl. With the use of three cameras, a rotating platform and skillful editing, the dancer Sue becomes an outstanding automaton under Wolfgang's direction. For the record, Sue had broken her ankle during the dance workshops prior to the shoot, greatly inhibiting her ability to participate in the course. Through *Sue Turning*, Wolfgang again finds success in

potential failure, by choreographing a dance without movement. Carolyn describes it as “Wolf’s imaginative answer to an unexpected problem”.

In late 1973, feeling no longer comfortable in New York, thinking the art scene there was corrupted, Wolfgang decided to leave his studio and art practice to pursue a spiritual path living as an ascetic in Mexico alone in a tent. After some health issues that led to three operations within two years, and some back and forth between Santa Barbara and New York, he reconnected with Carol Lingham, a former art student from UCSB, and they married in November 1974 in Santa Fe. Spending a lot of time in nature, in the Santa Ynez Valley, he practiced Tai Chi and studied his dreams for a few months. After “a disastrous trip to Mexico” (backpacking from Tijuana to Cuernavaca) in the summer of 1975, he and Carol separated. Continuing on his journey, Mexico, Santa Barbara, Shasta Mountain, and Tucson were places he would spend some time pursuing his introspection.

In fall 1975, he returned to Los Angeles where he performed for the last time in front of an audience on October 17th in the studio of John Baldessari. History says that after releasing a grey kitten into the space, and following a long monologue about sexuality and art, he revealed he wanted to perform oral sex on a man from the audience. “How is it that art is the only place left for the expression of these feelings?” he asked the audience. Finally someone volunteered and joined him in the performance. With time twisting memories, what sexual act actually happened is not very clear, but perhaps does not matter; what remains from the piece are impressions and opinions.

“The performance was partially intimidating. Risk taking, bullying the audience have appeared in previous works by Stoerchle, but in each performance, as in this one, the artist’s vulnerability has offset the initial affront. [...] If the performance is about anything, it is about resistance. Stoerchle stated that his art takes the low road. And in our culture the low road, the road of the unconscious, is always given the strongest resistance of all. To express this in public, to give momentary light and visibility to these lunar forces as Stoerchle did, took an extreme effort.” James Welling

“He was interested in his own identity in relationship with his body. Putting himself in that situation was playing with so many elements – such as sexual identity, moral issues, but also objective reality. The result was not important only the fact to try was. And I do not think he was revealing his homosexuality, he was just sexual and wanted to test limits. Very avant garde.” Matt Mullican

After this performance Wolfgang went back to Santa Fe and reunited with Carol Lingham. He worked at Dell Weston foundry and slowly returned to his own art practice, but on March 14, 1976, a car hit the pair as they were driving. Wolf died.

- Alice Dusapin -

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This exhibition would not have come to fruition without the kindness of the lenders to whom I extend my profound recognition. I warmly thank Karen Couch Wieder, Carol Lingham, Miles Varner and Daniel Lentz who have been more than present and generous with ideas and knowledge about Wolfgang’s life and work since the beginning. This project is part of a major research I started on Wolfgang Stoerchle’s work in 2016 that will lead to a monograph to be published in 2019 by Christophe Daviet-Thery. All the quotes in the text are extracted from interviews I conducted.