

**URS LÜTHI. JUST ANOTHER
STORY ABOUT LEAVING**

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The choice of "Just another Story about leaving" as the title of this exhibition for Rome came to Urs Lüthi quite naturally and immediately. It is almost as though it were the simplest way of speaking about his work and the narrative he has entered into in relation to the city.

This is the way everything appears to him, a series of things as simple as life, with all its difficulties and profound contradictions, but that basically we are all capable of seeing, taking part in, and attempting to put to the test.

His research led him to this awareness when he had just turned twenty, when he no longer considered it sufficient for the participation of the public in his exhibitions to become an unconscious performance of the works themselves. In 1966, when he put on his first solo exhibition, Lüthi put together some refreshments with "canapés, vegetables, fruit, and pastries just like the works hanging on the walls."¹ By eating them, the visitors symbolically broke down the structure of the work and, by playing with the carousels he had placed around the premises, they enjoyed themselves and participated in a way that later led him to make some significant reflections.

Shortly after, he had understood how essential it was to have personal experience of his own research, and he started out on the irreversible journey that has bound his investigations to his face and body all the way through to today, and which he has even ironically transformed into *Trademarks*.²

This is the direction that for over forty years his work has been moving in, and which, throughout that time, has maintained that the narrator must necessarily be willing to show great discoveries and mundane, crazy, happy, painful and normal experiences. For Lüthi, art and life look at each other in the mirror, allowing each other to make indications and delightful quotations. However, they do so without overlapping and without one necessarily generating the other, as is so often the case in the work of other artists. It is no longer a matter of duets and equivalences, nor is it one of making life aesthetically beautiful, but rather it is a case of taking inspiration from it, taking its normality and freeing up its most disorientating aspects.

The project that Lüthi has devised for Rome has its roots in this journey through the separate universes of history and everyday life, in which time flows in different ways and with different rhythms – and which the artist reinterprets in the most intense manner.

Lüthi had not the slightest doubt about the title, "Just Another Story about Leaving," for two main reasons.

First of all, because his research runs along a track of stories about leaving, separation, and ending, in a broad and symbolic manner. The work that bears the title, and which is on show

here, reveals the gradual emergence of the mark of time on a face that has become something "other" than what it is, and that has become detached from his essence as a person. It has done so in order to become the concrete object of a shift towards transformation, defeat, and end. It is a journey through the separation from the ego and its affiliations, becoming an almost universal disquisition on being and existing. Every shift in these rhythms experiences its own present, but it is also an offering to the future which we see in the following image. Time appears as a linear development sustained by what Lüthi does or by what happens to him, until the point comes when, in all his stories, vision becomes comprehensive, the stories contaminate each other, and his investigation takes shape as a single line of reasoning that started way back in the late 1960s.

Today, as then, rhythm and seriality have their own importance, and this project for Rome creates a real new opportunity for interaction between the present, history, and man.

But the choice of "Just another Story about leaving" was natural and necessary partly because it is linked to a city that embodies the idea of eternity in all its countless stratifications. Lüthi could only have started out from here, because taking on this subject necessarily means wondering what heritage and what values one's own present will leave.

To respond to these queries, the artist once again chooses himself, and when he decides to portray himself in the most famous places in the ancient city, he realises he can photograph himself only by showing his own empty hands.

Lüthi makes no promises and has no answers – he has only himself and the opportunity to experience things, so he makes a further attempt. As he himself says in his conversation with Christoph Lichtin in this catalogue, in the case of Rome he made the extreme, paradoxical decision to bring a statue into a city of statues.³ Choosing a sculptural self portrait that shows him in the classic iconography of the Roman toga, his hands are always empty and he wears a clown's nose. His art makes no vain promises, showing itself to be a process of acquiring history (the iconography of sculpture) which runs through a present that may create illusions (the clown's nose) but that necessarily has no certainties (the empty hands). *Selfportrait with empty hands* thus starts his journey in search of a space and a context, and the place where classicism is not a time but a value. Where time itself makes sense in relation to his presence and his being there. His journey stretches through the city and its commercial establishments, its restaurants, parks, and ancient statues, from the most sophisticated to the most kitsch atmospheres, revealing the city's hidden potential and its most disorienting lyricism. This roaming stops at nothing, touching on all forms of ambiguity, mixing up with pink lights,

and descending into the underground. It is an instrument of reason in a relationship with antiquity, a precious and rare object in the most sophisticated boutiques, just another commodity in shops.

And then at last this roving goes back to being a sculpture when it reaches MACRO, and here it stops. It is closed up in a showcase and becomes a work that finds its own tranquillity, but that also silently continues to offer its own story as part of a disquisition (the exhibition) that starts with *Urs Lüthi weint auch für Sie* [literally, "Lüthi Weeps for You Too"], a reprint of a work he made in 1970, which has the intensity of a lamentation. The two halls of the museum that contain the exhibition have been turned into a single environment, and while visitors are welcomed by a young Lüthi in tears, the dramatic nature of the other works is made insecure by the disorienting nature of the place itself. On closer examination, we see that the artist has chosen to put on an operation like the one in Berne in 1966. He turns the presence of the public into a performance of people who, as though in a hospital ward, look at the lives and thoughts of another patient. Here it is the artist Urs Lüthi, who, when he was still very young, started to realise where his life would take him and, understanding that it is our common fate, he starts shedding tears for himself and for all humanity. Then he looks into his own shadows (... *As My Own Shadow*), accumulating experience (*Thousand or More Images*) and tries to make sense of them as he grows older (*Just another Story about leaving*). Like all individuals, he reaches the end, his body dematerialises and is duplicated in a burial (a transparent showcase that contains two glass sculptures in ex-votos). This acknowledges his dual nature as man and artist, and lets the spectators look at these delicate sculptures as though they were religious relics.

Here we also find his *Selfportrait with empty hands*, which shows Lüthi in the guise of a "stupid saint"⁴ and as a man of reason and justice, but also as an explorer who is always ready to leave (in the city pilgrimage and in *Selfportrait, The Emigrant*) in search of an absolute that can bring together time and existence in something certain (also in *The Remains of Clarity*), and then for a moment he stops and gets his breath back. He perceives the beating of his own heart and he listens carefully, trying to capture its rhythm and give it shape, beating with the same sense of expectation and imminent revelation that we find in the *Ex voto* video installation. Here it is his daughter Maria who takes part in the action, and in it we have an increasingly strong feeling that something is insinuating itself between its forms and movement. A rhythmic passing of time, a symbolic overlapping of beats and constant evolution are other forms that we often find in the artist's works, except that in this case Maria's dance for Lüthi

becomes one of flight – the act of looking at things from a position on high, different and special. It is the act of slowing down the course of time; it is a vote for a world which will remain as a trace in memory, in works and in the objects (*Still Lifes*) of which the actress is the future. After all, eternity is something we might even be able to reach: this can be seen in the classical way in which it can turn into a contemporary value. History shows that there may be a possible knowledge of man in the responsibility of individuals, and the search of those like Lüthi has managed to make its own weight felt even when it has chosen absence (*Still Lifes, Ex voto*).

¹ Christoph Lichtin, *Urs Lüthi | Art is the better life*, page 1610 and 1612, Edizioni Periferia, Lucerne 2009.

² *Trademarks* is a series he made in 2001 for the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in which he returns to his historic shots and turns them into "trademarks," ironically certifying the success of these images, placing them in their historical perspective, and pointing the way to a general orientation of which they are just a part.

³ And the title he has chosen is indeed *Just another Sculpture for Roma*. He is working on the project with Franz Wanner.

⁴ See the dialogue between the artist and Christophe Lichtin in the catalogue: *Life as a quarry for art*.