

21

Instructions for Happiness

Severin Dünser and Olympia Tzortzi

Happiness is a fundamental human emotion, and every single one of us strives to achieve it in one form or other. This individual pursuit of happiness also forms the cornerstone of this exhibition, but instructions for happiness? Happiness is a very personal thing, and so it seems—quite frankly—absurd to promise that we can get closer to it simply by following a series of instructions. Whatever the truth of the matter may be, this exhibition attempts to approach the phenomenon of happiness from a variety of different perspectives.

Since the dawn of history, humans have sought to discover what it is that makes them happy and at what point they can truly be called a happy person. Although today we have access to a wealth of self-help literature on this very topic, instructions for happiness have existed since antiquity, albeit in a more philosophical form. According to Plato, happiness was to be found in maintaining the balance between the three parts of the soul—reason, spirit, and appetite—and preventing them from coming into conflict with one another. Aristotle saw a fundamental link between happiness and self-fulfillment, as when you do what you set out to do well, you gain a place in society and, at the same time, contribute to its betterment. As far as Epicurus was concerned, an individual's happiness hinged on strategic abstinence: an individual could gain greater happiness by pursuing their pleasures, taking care not to numb their senses by pursuing desires that exceeded their basic needs. One of these pleasures was the cultivation of interpersonal relationships. "Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for" is one piece of life advice offered by Epicurus. "Learn to be silent. Let your quiet mind listen and absorb," advised Pythagoras, who was also quoted as saying: "The more our minds understand, the greater the blessings received."

According to the old proverb, "every man is the architect of his own fortune." We all have a different concept of happiness, and since we each have our own individual needs, the fulfillment of these needs must necessarily be taken into our own hands. Regardless of whether fulfillment is sought in human relationships, the immediate, everyday life, or the beauty of small things, this exhibition seeks to challenge notions of happiness.

Anna-Sophie Berger's piece, for instance, invites us to build a house of cards and knock it down again; to work with care and precision towards a specific goal and retain the freedom to leave behind the fruit of our labors at the end. In Keren Cytter's video installation, visitors reflect themselves on the surface of a screen while watching a story of a family, a lover, a beach house, and a lonely boy, and are drawn into a meditative state by a soothing voice. Heinrich Dunst, meanwhile, raises questions about status. The phrase "Nicht Worte" (Not Words) has been written on a page but has then been scored out; "Dinge" (Things) has been written underneath. Is this a double negative, thus meaning words and things? Beneath this image lies a doormat featuring a Piet Mondrian design: it remains unclear, however, whether this mat is anything more than a thing or whether it instead constitutes an image-like thing or a thing-like replication of an image. The photo by Simon Dybbroe Møller shows a hug between a cook and a plumber. Is this a photo about interpersonal needs? It is, if anything, a representation of physical needs, consumption and digestion, the "basics", so to speak. Christian Falsnaes's sound installation instructs visitors to interact with one another through simple actions that obviously bring pleasure by playfully transgressing social conventions. Barbara Kapusta, meanwhile, invites visitors to make cups and bowls from modeling clay, to use their own bodies in the molding of

21

drinking vessels that will satisfy basic needs. Rallou Panagiotou combines impersonal suitcases with replicas of things associated with happy memories, such as a pair of sandals lost on a beach in the 1990s and a mask—presumably of Medusa—that once hung on the wall of her grandmother’s summer house. Under the motto “Sharing is caring”, Angelo Plessas offers us a USB stick with files that can be transferred onto our own devices. These files seem to cover every one of life’s eventualities and include self-help books, music for meditation, and advice on love and spirituality. Jannis Varelas, on the other hand, instructs us to leave the exhibition space and go for a walk around the city. As we walk, he asks us to think about whether or not we want to go back and turn our attention once more to art. Salvatore Viviano asks us to ask ourselves how lonely we feel while listening to Elvis Presley laughing as he sings “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” Maruša Sagadin’s sculpture collection invites us to reflect on life in public space. On the one hand, she scrutinizes the opportunities for regeneration in urban spaces and on the other, the function of make-up and the formulaic conventions associated with it and representations of the self: if lipstick is a building, does that mean my face is a façade? A different question is asked by Hans Schabus and his sculpture: if good luck is a birdie, does that mean it is fleeting? And if that is the case, wouldn’t it be better to build a house for it? Socratis Socratous’s sculptures also deal with forms of flight and refuge. Small islands and bollards, made partially from smelted-down munitions from the world’s conflict zones, symbolize landing sites. The work focuses on migration over the seas and the safe havens that migrants hope to reach. Finally, Anna Witt’s video installation shows a group of people smiling for sixty minutes. Revolving around the commercialization of emotions and the sale of our own feelings, her video becomes a form of endurance test.

With their artworks, the artists shown in this exhibition ask us to follow instructions, respond to constructed situations, use objects to engage with others, or think about a particular theme. The different perspectives on show, in terms of both form and content, reflect the diversity of the artists’s own perspectives on happiness and those of society in general.

Walter Benjamin once wrote: “To be happy is to be able to become aware of oneself without fright.” In this spirit, we invite you to interact freely with the artworks on display and to use this experience as a chance to reflect on the phenomenon of happiness. One’s own fulfillment is, after all, intrinsically linked to reflecting on one’s own needs and actions, which in turn leads to a conscious, self-determined life and mastery of the *ars vivendi*, the art of living. For as the sociologist Gerhard Schulze once said: “What does one live for, if not for the beautiful life?”