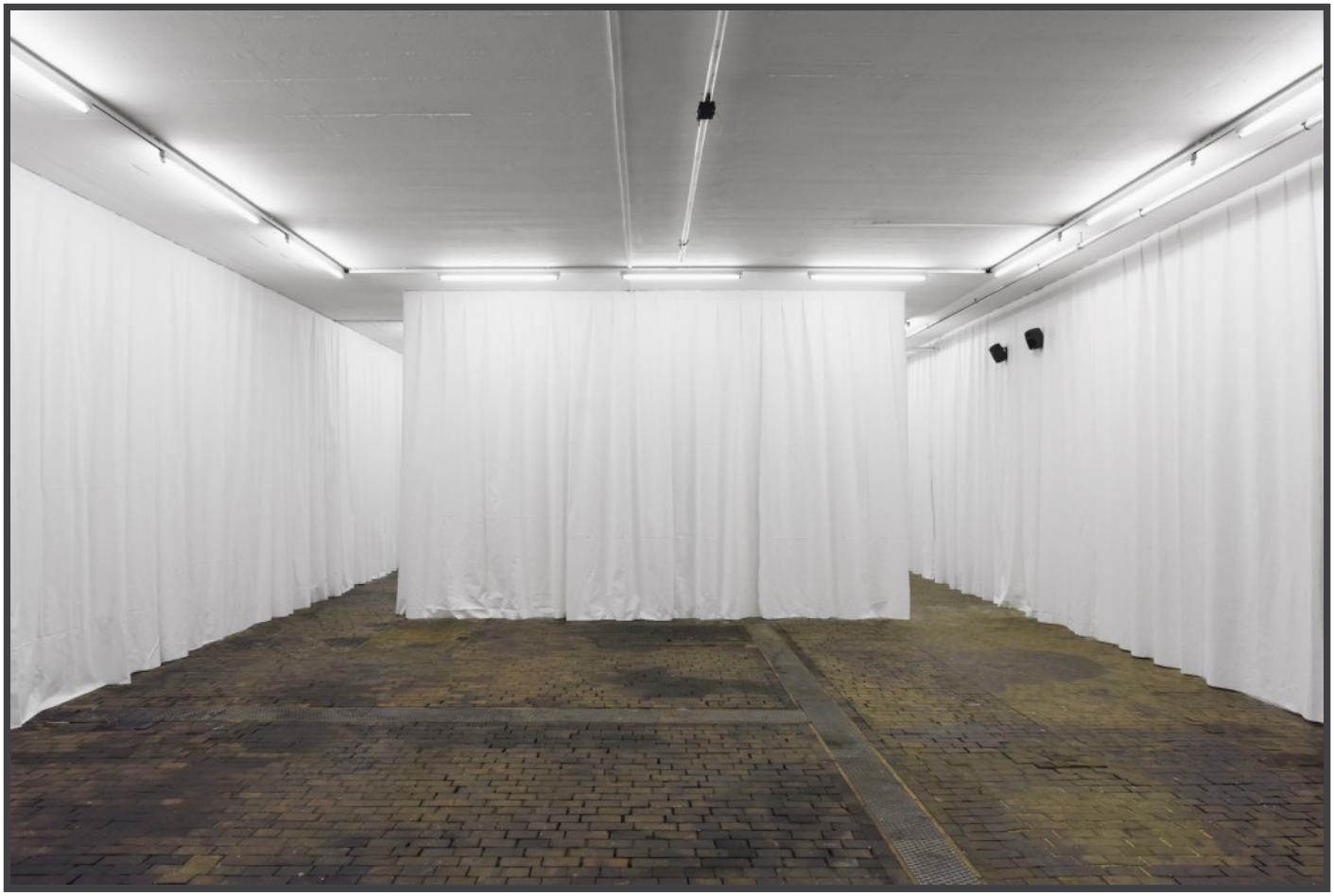
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The Curtain Was Drawn

Laurence Schmidlin

At the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Hannah Weinberger leaves viewers to their own devices in a three-part show that begins from their very first steps in the venue’s entrance hall. Her interventions, concise and dense, are based on an infrared installation that reacts to the public’s presence, drawing visitors into a disconcerting yet invigorating exchange.





Exhibition view Hannah Weinberger, *we didn't want to leave*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, November 8 2019 to January 5 2020, photo Mathilda Olmi

Hannah Weinberger often insists that an exhibition does not exist when there are no viewers in the gallery or galleries. It is this point of view that she wants to highlight in her solo show at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève. The pieces on display, which are on the order of installation sound art, do not work when no one is around – the silence is one that is bound up with their inactivity. For the artist, the public is not contingent. Rather, viewers give her works their *raison d'être* by enabling them to fully realize their potential since they are interactive and hence their form fluctuates.

Entering the Weinberger show means then setting it in motion. An initial intervention awaits visitors in the museum's entrance hall; different international radio stations are playing in real time and switch whenever someone passes in front of them – in my case, I was greeted by Natalia Imbruglia's hit song *Torn*. The second and third floors, on the other hand, are entirely occupied by two installations that differ markedly from one another. Visitors suddenly find themselves an integral part of two spaces, which have been transformed very economically, using just a few elements, but transformed nonetheless in an extremely powerful way. Whereas the first installation plunges viewers into a murky half-light and the ambiance of an underground garage while sending back multiple images of them filmed from behind, the second fashions a contrast through its brighter illumination – that is, the lights are aggressive while the walls are covered by a white curtain with uniform folds.





Exhibition views Hannah Weinberger, *we didn't want to leave*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, November 8 2019 to January 5 2020, photo Mathilda Olmi

Each installation includes a sound dimension that is activated by the presence of viewers and their movements. The activation mechanism depends on infrared sensors that are able to pick up the body temperature of those present. These sensors activate a soundtrack based on an algorithm. From one tour of the show to the next, the sound composition is never the same since it varies according to different parameters (the path the visitor or visitors take, their stops and starts, the simultaneous presence of the viewers and their number, etc.). While from

the lower floor can be heard pockets of synthetic sounds seemingly welling up from some night party, it is drumming that overwhelms visitors with full sharp rat-a-tat beats and kettledrum rumblings, assailing them here and there in the immaculate space of the third floor.
Although useful – it serves to absorb the echoes – the fabric hung along the walls both erases the specificity of the venue and underscores it, especially since spotlights and bright neon lights pick them out. The surface and structure of this floor of the venue are emphasized. The eye can only see that and details that are still visible. It carefully scours the floor and its wooden beams, the ceiling, and various marks, then suspiciously sizes up the speakers and the small black boxes that are scattered a bit all over since the gallery set-up clearly lets visitors glimpse the sound system and infrared sensors fixed to metal bars.





Exhibition views Hannah Weinberger, *we didn't want to leave*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, November 8 2019 to January 5 2020, photo Mathilda Olmi

This context, with its technology on view absolutely does not point to interpreting the installation as a critique of the technical devices we use every day, or as some sort of submission to them. Weinberger employs them for what they are, tools, and points up the role each of us play with regard to them. The show then doesn't weave a reflection on the excess of security devices that we are facing more and more. Its success is due to the primal experience the artist offers us. Visitors are designated as bodies in a given time and place, and are confronted with the present moment above all in terms of sensory perception. These installations set a trap for viewers, the trap of the future event. From here on in, anything may occur and they will be a part of it. Plain, elementary, the décor rests almost entirely on the artist's choice of the color white, which reflects the light, neutralizes the space, and renders it artificial, and, perhaps despite the artist's intention with regard to the symbolism of the curtain, seems a sign that suggests theatricality and play. The curtain appears to have been lowered on a scene on which it will not rise again. The artist had already used this device in earlier installations, partly on the scale of an entire room (for example, *You can just reach for me*, 2017, at the Kunstverein Braunschweig; and *When Time Lies*, 2018, at Villa Merkel in Esslingen am Neckar).



Hannah Weinberger, *You can just reach for me*, 2017, exhibiton view at Kunstverein Braunschweig, photo Stefan Stark, courtesy of the artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles / Paris



Hannah Weinberger, *When Time Lies*, 2018, installation view at Villa Merkel, Esslingen am Neckar, photo Frank Kleinbach, courtesy of the artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles / Paris

One day I was alone at the show on the third floor. I began to walk around and explore the place, at once familiar and unrecognizable. I let my eyes now wander over the floor, now carefully examine the installation. Nothing happened. I was impatient because I knew I was supposed to hear sound and I would be influencing it in one way or another. I regretted knowing that because I then began hunting around for the sensors. They were there and they

were indeed visible. The first beats ring out and the shock is immense. I continue my tour, I go back, I listen, the drumbeats rain down. I manage to anticipate them a bit by cheating a little and walking around more and more to set them off. They take their time, occasionally resonate in waves, peter out. If I regretted knowing too much at first and so became incapable of letting things run their course, I eventually ended up yielding to the installation, and it grabbed me. There is something on the order of a struggle between yourself and the sounds, vigorous, alive, and strangely internal, of who will catch who first. I was alone in the exhibition at that time and that day, and I had never wanted so much to be surprised by the interaction of other viewers with the piece, to see just how far the composition might develop. I was on my own.

Translated by John O'Toole

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Docteure e?s lettres, Laurence Schmidlin est historienne de l'art, critique d'art et commissaire d'exposition, spe?cialise?e dans les domaines du dessin et de l’estampe. Elle est conservatrice au Muse?e cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne et vient de publier *La Spatialisation du dessin dans l’art ame?ricain des anne?es 1960 et 1970* aux Presses du re?el, Dijon.