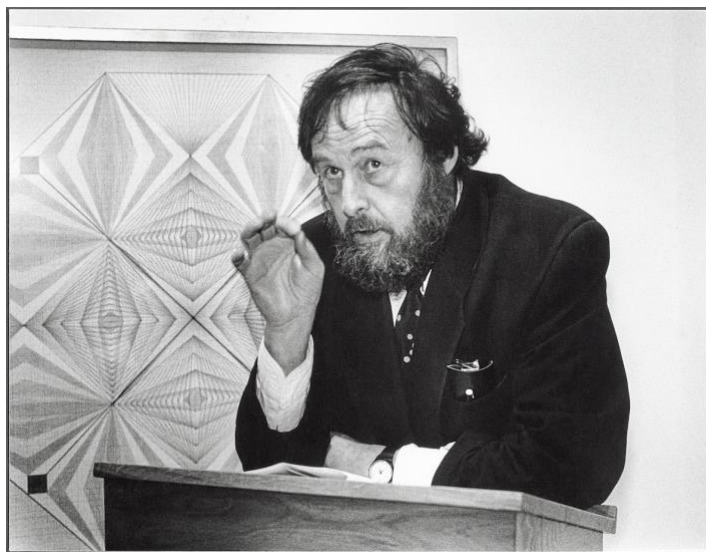


PRESS RELEASE



Harald Szeemann lecturing in front of *Werk Nr. 003* (undated) by Emma Kunz, n.d.
The Getty Research Institute, 2011. M. 30. Artwork courtesy Emma Kunz Zentrum.
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Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions

February 26 – May 26, 2019

Curated by Glenn Phillips and Philipp Kaiser with the collaboration of Doris Chon and Pietro Rigolo

Organized by the Getty Research Institute of Los Angeles in collaboration with the CRRI – Castello di Rivoli Research Institute, the exhibition *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions* analyzes the fundamental stages in the life and career of **Harald Szeemann** (Bern, 1933 – Tegna, Switzerland, 2005) through a series of themes that characterized the Swiss curator's life and activity. With archive material, photo documents, and videos as well as a selection of artworks that distinguished his most important exhibitions, the event aims to offer visitors a glimpse into the ideas, visions and obsessions, controversies and debates that accompanied the existence of this exceptional figure.

After debuting at the Getty Research Institute of Los Angeles, which in 2011 acquired the immense Szeemann archive, and after touring to the Kunsthalle in Bern and the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, the exhibition will be presented on the second floor of the Castello di Rivoli with an installation that explores the curator's intense relations with artists from Turin, integrating works from the collections of the Castello di Rivoli and other private collections. The show also includes *Grossvater: Ein Pionier wie wir / Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us* which reconstructs Szeemann's first

exhibition project following *documenta 5* (1972) for which, in 1974, in his home in Bern, he traced the life of his grandfather coiffeur, Étienne Szeemann.

The Exhibition

The itinerary, which unfolds in the stately rooms on the Museum's second floor, opens in **Room 33** which documents the "Fabbrica Rosa" in Ticino that hosted Harald Szeemann's archive and library. The room also displays a monumental sculpture composed of multicolored baggage tags issued by the airline companies Szeemann gathered in the final decades of his career; these bear witness not only to the frequency and extent of his travels, but also to the choice of a profession that matched his great passion for traveling.

In **Rooms 32** and **21** we find precious archive material that traces the years in which Harald Szeemann directed the Kunsthalle in Bern. Appointed director in 1961 at the age of twenty-eight, Szeemann became one of the youngest museum directors in the world, and under his leadership, the museum became an international venue where the latest trends in contemporary art intermingled with historical exhibitions. He is credited with important shows dedicated to Surrealism and artists like Francis Picabia, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Marcel Duchamp, but also American artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein. Szeemann was also the first curator to commission Christo and Jeanne-Claude to wrap a building: in 1968, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the museum, the *Wrapped Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, 1967-68* was presented. But it was with the famous exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), which explored post-Minimalist poetics spreading at that time across Europe and in the United States, that Szeemann played a key role in radically rewriting traditional curating canons by overwhelming the museum spaces with an incredible and provoking installation. The extremely free use of the museum space on the part of artists unleashed a heated international debate that quickly forced him to step down as director. Thanks to the scandal of *When Attitudes Become Form*, Szeemann became the most well-known curator at the time and his popularity earned him the title of artistic director to *documenta 5* (1972).

Room 32 offers some of the iconic works presented in Bern in 1969 during *When Attitudes Become Form*, including the version of *Igloo con albero (Igloo with Tree)*, 1968-1969 by Mario Merz, *Io che prendo il sole a Torino il 19 gennaio 1969 (Me sunbathing in Turin 19 January 1969)*, 1969 by Alighiero Boetti, and *Pipe (Tubo)*, 1968 by Bill Bollinger.

Room 21 presents documents and archive material that bear witness to the over eight years he spent at the Kunsthalle in Bern during which he became a close friend of many artists. Letters, proposals, and drawings by artists found in his archive all date to this period as well as a selection of posters from over fifty exhibitions held in the Swiss institution.

After stepping down as director of the Kunsthalle in Bern, Szeemann focused on being an independent curator, proposing to various museums projects characterized by an independent approach. The first commission was entrusted in 1970 by the Kölnischer Kunstverein of Cologne, for which he curated the show *Happening & Fluxus*. This event, organized with the artist Wolf Vostell, aimed to historicize the 1960s through over 600 documents and images displaying the development of performance art across the world, but the chaotic performances held at the inauguration - many of which were sexual and violent in nature - offended the public and tarnished the outcome of the research.

The turning point was 1970 when Szeemann became general secretary of *documenta 5* in Kassel. Defining the project and supervising a team of important curators, Szeemann was able to update and radicalize the event's program that engaged over 200 artists during 100 consecutive days of performances and events held in the summer and fall of 1972. The exhibition, titled *Befragung der Realität - Bildwelten heute (Questioning Reality - Image Worlds Today)*, explored themes ranging from conceptual art to performance art, from Pop art to political propaganda, from architecture utopias to sci-fi, from artist museums to the art of the mentally ill.

The exhibition – still considered the most significant and ambitious of the 1970s – contributed to establishing new organizational criteria for major international retrospectives.

Room 22, which hosts the works *Infinito (Infinite)*, 1971 by Giovanni Anselmo and *Svolgere la propria pelle – finestra (To unroll one's skin – window)*, 1970 by Giuseppe Penone, displays not only important archive documents but also the extraordinary rolls of checked paper that covered Szeemann's office, listing each artist, each section, and each deadline for *documenta 5*, which for this event have been digitalized and assembled, while the intimate space of the **Chapel** exhibits the installation *Objekts from the forest*, c. 1951–1972 by Armand Schulthess.

During the decade following *documenta 5*, Szeemann gradually cut back on his engagement with contemporary art; he decided to move to the Canton Ticino, where he worked on a complex trilogy of exhibitions: *Junggesellenmaschinen / Les machines célibataires (The Bachelor Machines)*, 1975, *Monte Verità / Berg der Wahrheit: Le mammelle della verità / Die Brüste der Wahrheit*, 1978, and *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800 (The tendency towards the total work of art: European utopias from around 1800)*, 1983, which presented a new interpretation of modernity. This trilogy is considered a further attempt to radicalize the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Besides documents and a selection of artworks displayed during the three shows, **Rooms 23 and 24** offer part of the material from Szeemann's research collections relating to the ideas he interpreted as utopian models: Pataphysics, anarchism, and reformist life movements. The sections of his archive on visionary artists – mystics, self-taught, considered mentally disturbed, and other fantastical geniuses – include figures that appear more than once in the career of Szeemann, having supplied him with the tools needed to understand the creative process and the role art can play in society.

Rooms 23 and 24 are dedicated to the exhibition *Junggesellenmaschinen / Les machines célibataires (The Bachelor Machines)* from 1975 that explores the growing interest for machine aesthetics in both visual art and in literature across Europe between 1875 and 1925.

The show – inspired by a 1954 book by Michel Carrouges, who was the first to demonstrate similarities between the work of Duchamp, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even)*, and the machines described in the writings of Alfred Jarry, Franz Kafka, and Raymond Roussel – presented sections on Jainism, Greek mythology, anthropomorphism, robots and androids, the *femme fatale*, and finally artistic and erotic machines. The retrospective, for which Szeemann created the physical manifestations of some of these literary machines by commissioning large-format interpretations of impossible mechanical devices, displayed models of Leonardo da Vinci's inventions, objects from popular culture, and recent works of kinetic art. As the first major project of his *Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit (Agency for spiritual work abroad)*, the exhibition presented noteworthy logistical challenges for Szeemann.

Instead, **Room 25** presents the works *Harry*, ca. 1975 and *You Missed My Masterpiece*, 1975 by James Lee Byars.

Room **27** is entirely dedicated to the utopian community of the Monte Verità in Canton Ticino: from when the anarchist ideologist Mikhail Bakunin lived in the region in the 1870s, and from when some followers of Theosophy and of Annie Besant moved here, the hillside became a place of many utopian experiments and various attempts to transform society. The community was composed of movements with anarchists, nudists, vegetarians, dancers, and artists that flourished near Ascona where Szeemann spent the final thirty years of his life and where he found an important recovery of modernist history: an avant-garde community with solid foundations in spiritual, visionary, and utopian ideals. The exhibition *Monte Verità / Berg der Wahrheit: Le mammelle della verità / Die Brüste der Wahrheit*, which Szeemann dedicated in 1978 to the creative communities that settled near the hills of Ascona, provided a holistic and trans-historical vision of the mountain,

highlighting the symbolism and potential for change through events that took place during the show.

Szeemann divided the exhibition into four main themes, which he related to the breasts of a goddess of Truth, a divinity he himself invented.

The room also hosts the work *Sedia a intreccio "sedia del vegetariano"* (*Woven Chair, "chair of the vegetarian"*), c. 1910 by Karl Gräser and three costumes by Charlotte Bara for her 1920s dances.

Room 28 exhibits the documents related to the final show in the trilogy, which is perhaps the most ambitious ever conceived by Szeemann: *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800* (*The tendency towards the total work of art: European utopias from around 1800*). Inspired by the concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* by Richard Wagner, who attempted to unify all the arts to achieve heightened sensorial awareness that would free the audience from the stasis of technological life and return to nature, the exhibition curated by Szeemann presented at the Kunsthaus in Zurich in 1983 included visual, cinema, dance, performance, and sound works made by around fifty visionaries so as to create a total work of art (*gesamtkunstwerk*).

The exhibition also includes *Grossvater: Ein Pionier wie wir / Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us*, originally presented in 1974 by Szeemann at his own residence above the Café du Commerce on Gerechtigkeitsgasse 74 in Bern. Dedicated to his Hungarian grandfather Étienne Szeemann – a famous coiffeur working for royal families who invented a device for the permanent wave – the show presents over 1,200 objects that belonged to his relative with whom he shared a pioneering attitude towards life. In the fascinating installation, Szeemann wove the story of a life, allowing the interior display to turn into a biography. A combination of an artist museum and a Surrealist experience, the exhibition used the possessions of his grandfather to create a series of dynamic juxtapositions that could explore, at the same time, his relative's biography, the migrations of people in Europe, the wars of the twentieth century, the development of hairstyles as a modern parallel to artistic developments, and the absence of curating as a creative activity.

Rooms 29, 30, and 31 at the Castello painstakingly recreate the environments Harald Szeemann, for the small exhibition dedicated to his grandfather, brought to life with hundreds of black-and-white photos portraying his granddad, trunks with countless handwritten notes, a small wardrobe with clothes, hats, and lace from the early twentieth century, a desk with numerous cabinets topped by objects of all shapes, but also a vanity with brushes and combs and a primordial machine for the permanent wave that his grandfather had invented.

The exhibition is made possible by support from

fondazione svizzera per la cultura

prohelvetia



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Castello di Rivoli Press Office

Manuela Vasco | press@castellodirivoli.org | tel. + 39.0119565209

Brunella Manzardo | b.manzardo@castellodirivoli.org | tel. + 39.0119565211



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