

Paloma Varga Weisz  
*Glory Hole*

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Text book

## **Paloma Varga Weisz. Glory Hole**

*Text by Seamus Kealy*

For our summer exhibition, the Salzburger Kunstverein is pleased to present the work of German artist Paloma Varga Weisz. This project involves a site-specific, sculptural installation in the Main Hall of the Salzburger Kunstverein.

Paloma Varga Weisz's sculptural work is characterized by references to iconographic and traditional means of figuration, combining historical narratives with a contemporary artistic practice. Trained as a wood carver and artist, Paloma Varga Weisz creates figures that relate to a rich source of personal and collective motifs. Her sculptural work and drawings could be described as having references to different European arts and crafts, especially those from the Middle Ages. Meanwhile her work often plays with forms of surrealism and dark fantasy, as well as evoking various historical references, giving it a contemporary tone especially in her approach to topical, even taboo subjects.

The exhibition *Glory Hole* is no exception. This installation occupies the Main Hall in the form of a traditional barn acquired from the Lower-Austrian country-side. The barn was transported here and rebuilt by the Salzburger Kunstverein technical team, then altered to house sculptural elements. Over the past year, Paloma Varga Weisz has conducted research in Salzburg that informs this project. She has worked closely with the entire team to source the materials for the installation, which also includes taxidermic specimens from Haus der Natur in Salzburg. The artist has also produced two new figurative sculptures that sit within the two interior rooms.

The approach to the installation is deliberately voyeuristic, where one can see parts and not the whole of the interior of the barn by looking through peek holes situated along the exterior walls. This partial withdrawal of visual forms and entire withdrawal of the physical forms inside the barn is part and parcel of a gesture of deliberate fragmentation of its components. What appears hidden from view is not quite hidden, but rather partly

obscured, so as to play further upon the notions of desire, voyeurism, childhood fantasy and an element of perversion that all reside within the interior of the construction.

The title *Glory Hole* is itself naughty in its double meaning. While *Glory Hole* may refer, in part, to the collapse of a once great Austro-Hungarian empire and the remnants that remain after its dismantling (as in the case of any former great nation reduced to a fragment of its former self), the term is also a more directly sexual reference. The term “glory hole” is slang for a setting used for anonymous sexual encounters. Often found in semi-isolated sites, such as highway toilets, abandoned buildings, or even part of or adjacent to night clubs, glory holes usually involve a partition or enclosed area where holes between two sections enable individuals (or groups) to have anonymous sex. This sexual activity is naturally outside societal norms, mostly underground in its manifestations, while often acted out in public spaces. First appearing in the gay scene decades ago, glory holes have now entered more into the mainstream, and are frequently depicted in heterosexual and homosexual pornography, for example. Of the 34 Austrian glory holes publicly listed on an active online archive, there are none listed for Salzburg.

Until now.

Sexual encounters in glory holes also involve a kind of fragmentation and partial obscuring of each sexual subject, especially the recipient of the active participant. Where glory holes have often served as a place of liberatory, homosexual encounter (especially in sexually-repressive time periods and societies, whether today or not), the culture of glory holes can be identified recently as shifting into a more dominantly heterosexual experience, where the female participant is fragmented and reduced only to being a hole (or holes) to receive the male sexual organ and to then perform as a pleasure machine, without a sense of the entire female body or person. However, the reverse is also true, where the male body is reduced merely to a phallus that must be serviced, or depending on the scenario, is the tool of pleasure for the recipient. Naturally, numerous glory holes may be found in one setting, where these questions of anonymity,

sexual gratification, dominance, and fragmentation thus multiply.

In this exhibition, we are invited to engage in a voyeuristic activity, and to become, perhaps, self-aware of this looking simultaneously. This is also almost like a gaze within, at one's self or one's possible self, at one's dreams or nightmares. The view is not altogether comfortable, although a dose of humour is here. What is offered by the artist is, we might say, akin to a counter-narrative of the tableaux of contemporary life, with its steady signification of stability and meaning. Society has its orders. Many symbols necessarily collude to add up to and produce this order. Paloma Varga Weisz takes this stability of reality and turns it on its head, offering us instead an unstable vision, humorous in one sense, deadly serious in another. She works with familiar forms – a country-side barn, trophy animal heads – and absurd forms – sexually-perverse, moving figures, stuffed simians, then the heads of dogs amongst the trophies, and a number of familiar symbols and versions of the world among us.

All the colluding objects and their symbolic meanings or associations in *Glory Hole* also amount to a visual slippage between notions of *Heimat*, *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. *Heimat* is a German word with no English equivalent, denoting the relationship of people towards a certain place or space. Usually carrying positive connotations, and easily associable with the Alpine region for example, we might associate it with feelings of warmth, comfort, family and nostalgia as circumscribed by a place of one's childhood and culture. This is also easily associable with a romanticized past, such as a former national greatness or empire. The closest word in English is probably "homeland." But the notion and meaning of *Heimat* may also, by its very nature, also necessitate its opposite. Can you not have *Heimat* without also feeling alienated from a place or a people that are not part of one's *Heimat*? This also draws equivalents with notions of otherness, and further, fear of or revulsion for the other. Not far from *Heimat* is the term *heimlich*, an adjective denoting a similar association and meaning. The Freudian term "*unheimlich*" (the uncanny) is also implicated in this chain of meanings, with the uncanny forms deliberately placed within the barn for our experience and voyeurism. Freud reminds us that there is no uncanny without the *heimlich* (the homely), that these

notions are inter-changeable and contingent upon each other. The barn itself - a powerful emblem of *Heimat* – is thus not only a container for this string of meanings, it actually entails it. And perhaps it always had, perhaps these meanings and associations are within the very ordinariness of our landscape, within the fabric of our surroundings, within our actions and language, our manners of being; and thus symbolic forms are constructed around us that deny or disassociate them, while simultaneously asserting them.

That is the necessity of order. These notions of reality, desire, order, repression and society collide in this exhibition. And the components of this collision also merit an examination of its parts.

Mechanical, repetitive sounds emit from the installation. Within the two distinguishable rooms of the barn sit two human-like, wooden figures. Much can also be made of what would normally be the stillness of all the figures, as dead, unmoving objects, but these two wooden people are automatons. Their mechanistic movement is one of several interruptive gestures that Paloma Varga Weisz inserts into the installation. The movements underline the uncanny element of each represented figure and then simultaneously mimic an active carnal activity, although that of the un-living, each tremendously alone in their grotesqueness. In the case of the male figure, an exaggerated penile nose moves upwards and downwards. The woman merely opens and closes her legs. A perverse puppetry unfolds within the two chambers, where a programmed mechanism of sex is not only presented to the viewer through the wooden eyeslits of the barn, it is itself being witnessed within the interior by the unseeing gazes of taxidermic specimens.

Within, dead gazes cross-pollinate with one another and ultimately undo the coding one would ascribe to relations between, for example, the moving female figure and the gorilla that appears to gaze at her. That is, for example, interrupting that dualistic relationship, and undoing the order of this already perverse relationship, is a third party – a baboon figure – that watches the watcher. We then realize the involvement of our own gaze in this perversion. Our gaze completes and defines the encounter.

As the dead animals watch seemingly private, absurdly sexual activity, we too are implicated. We activate the perversion.

And these dead animals, such as the trophy heads on one wall and the two simians in the female room, also underline notions of the uncanny, *Heimat* and *heimlich*. They are the sad trophies of some sort of deflated glory or lost heroicness, or a limp machoism, as really, all these kinds of trophies really are. Trophy hunting could really be a thing of the past, but like a bad haircut style that won't pass with time, these trophies still appear in certain regional guesthouses, in the living rooms of homes around the world, and, likewise, appear online in the form of digital images of game hunters taking down rhinos or giraffes in Africa. The familiar "charm" that these trophies resonate for some people is exactly a sense of *Heimat* that Paloma Varga Weisz manipulates. This delusion of macho conquest over nature, an assertion of male sexual empowerment or dominance, is inseparable from and even asserted by the perversion to then place the heads of these dead animals upon the wall, framed, mounted, like works of art themselves. This perversion is also underlined by Paloma's selection of dog heads: actually the best friend and helper of the hunter, they also can't escape ending up on the trophy wall. We might thus see these barbaric rituals as a means of substantiating identity and reality. Further, might we ask, could we see an association between expressing these quieter forms of civil violence by enacting these more accepted, almost invisible rituals, as the sacrifice of small children was used to contain the violence of the pre-Colombian culture? Can modern, civil society not function without these vestiges of a time past?

Sexual aggression and mechanical behaviour may be said to repeatedly arise *en masse* in history in destructive tendencies with expressions of violence, terror and war, like a collective perversion, as Freud, among others, reminds us. Varga Weisz evokes a very mechanical, programmed nature of human behaviour and sexuality itself. Not unlike folklore and folk tales that always keep a form of violence just below the surface of reality, her mechanical figures placed within this tableaux of hunting trophies and sentimental taxidermy unravel a number of narratives that resonate with real and imagined histories.

This exhibition is dark at its heart. It is an unflinching reminder of recent histories here in Austria (as well as that of the artist's country, Germany, as well as other histories and contemporary situations of collective violence) and of possibilities of irrational human decision-making on a daily basis. The backdrop of Salzburg as a theatrical, tourist destination with its high-end festivals, its visibly traditional forms of dress, its *Sound of Music* romanticism, and its overall sense of *Heimat* is an important consideration for this project. However, the appearances of the repressed that this exhibition circumscribes are not merely specific to this region. They manifest globally in different forms.

Paloma Varga Weisz offers a secretive gaze, to gaze within, within ourselves, within a recent past, with consideration of a more distant one that still resonates in cultural expressions today. *Glory Hole* is also a dark comedy. It is a glance onto human nature, and rather than flinch or turn away, it asks us to ponder upon hidden desires that reside within the everyday. The project might also hint at our continual need to find alternatives, both on an interior basis and *en masse*, to the grand narratives and symbols that tend to dominate reality. This is a singular humanistic quality inherent in the project, despite the darkness of the interior, and the unseeing eyes that reflect nothingness back to us.

Paloma Varga Weisz has made many exhibitions around the world, including solo exhibitions at Gladstone Gallery (New York and Brussels), Sadie Coles HQ (London), Konrad Fischer Galerie (Düsseldorf and Berlin), Douglas Hyde Gallery (Dublin), Chapter (Cardiff), Hayward Gallery (London), and many others. Paloma Varga Weisz (1966, Mannheim) lebt und arbeitet in Düsseldorf.

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Hours Exhibition: Tu–Su 12–19 pm

Hours Café Cult: Mo–Fr 9–23 pm,  
Saturday, Sunday and Holiday closed