

Raphael
Hefti

09.10.2020–
03.01.2021

EN

Salutary
Failures

Kunsthalle
Basel

Size, Raphael Hefti would tell you, *matters*. Not that all of his art is necessarily big, or that he considers monumentality to be superior to the intimacy of small things. But in an age in which nearly everything can be seen on social media—instantaneously, at a single glance, and everywhere, unmoored from its physical site—he believes it to be essential for art to surpass what can easily be captured on a digital screen. And he believes that it is crucial to provoke precisely the sort of wonder and discomfort that the screen cannot convey. He is, you might say, in search of the sublime; he finds it in ordinary phenomena, both natural and industrially-made, and in the sorts of outcomes that can only arise from the efforts of highly skilled craftspeople, impelled by the artist to push materials and techniques to their very limits and, at times, beyond.

The results of this approach can be encountered in Hefti's exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, the largest institutional show of his work to date. It comprises more than 27 tons of black sand pressed into an array of daunting, irregular monoliths (some featuring channels doused with molten aluminum, some bearing lava-like swellings); a swath of 600 kilos of liquefied and then hardened bismuth, glistening like an iridescent panoramic landscape; multiple beams made from the metal alloy X6CrNiTi18-10 subjected—over the course of eight years—to extreme temperature changes that simulate around 5,000 years of natural aging (as an industrial ventilation system circulates the air around both beams and visitors, unsettling viewing conditions); more than a dozen abstract “paintings” on differently sized aluminum sheets produced through a process of semi-controlled corrosion caused by repeated exposure to acid and pigment baths; and 15

four-meter-long glass vials that enclose various noble gases, electrified to flicker spectrally. Such is a more or less matter-of-fact way to describe the five newly produced and recent bodies of work divided across the spaces of the exhibition *Salutary Failures*, pulling focus on their numbers: the sheer scale or weight or temporal measure they imply.

While these colossal figures suggest that Hefti is unafraid of the weighty or potentially dangerous, he also reveals himself to be an artist fearless of failure. And one who knows to ask: When is failure not failure, but, instead, productive, interesting, even beautiful? This question has been at the heart of his art since he first completed his studies and a related apprenticeship to be an electronics engineer only to go on to study photography and to reinvent himself as an artist. But, as he well knows, not every failure is worthy of attention. And yet, as someone who has made a lifework of using industrial methods and materials the “wrong” way, Hefti reminds us that the question of failure might be one of the most fundamental to art as such.

There are risks. In the process of his still young career, the artist has subjected himself to extreme heights and endured punishing heat, he once accidentally blew up his car (and as a result was under investigation for years by an anti-terrorism unit), and his hair temporarily fell out due to the substances he was using to produce his early photograms. For a solo show in 2013, he piled more than 25 tons of sand in his then-gallerist's tiny London space and set in motion a chain reaction that sent an unstoppable flow of 1,600° Celsius molten steel down sand channels in an act that was partly sculptural and

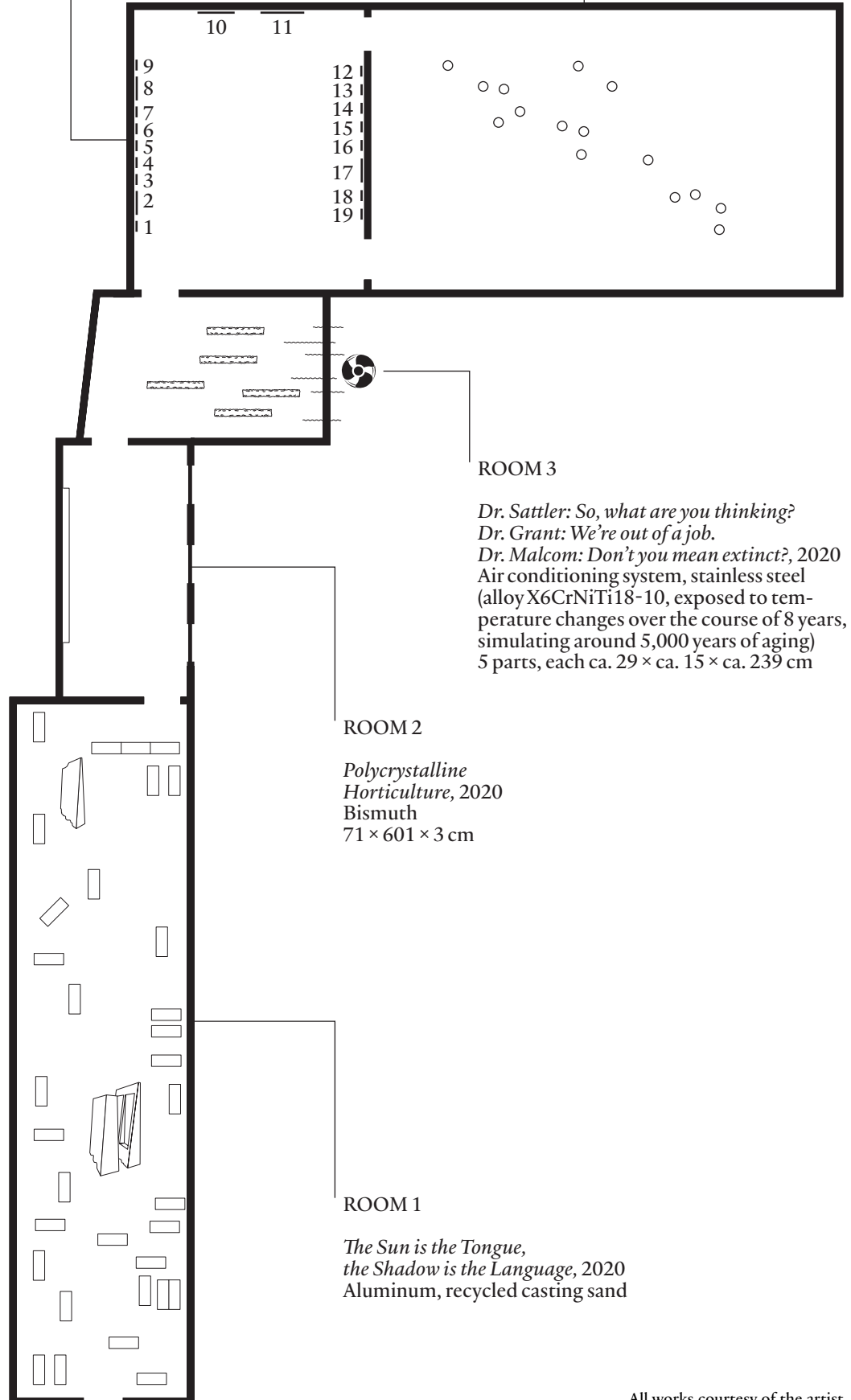
ROOM 4

- 1 RHE 9503, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 2 RHE 9510, 2020
140 × 110 cm
- 3 RHE 9511, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 4 RHE 9512, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 5 RHE 9513, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 6 RHE 9514, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 7 RHE 9515, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 8 RHE 9516, 2020
140 × 110 cm
- 9 RHE 9502, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 10 RHE 9517, 2020
220 × 180 cm
- 11 RHE 9518, 2020
220 × 280 cm
- 12 RHE 9519, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 13 RHE 9520, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 14 RHE 9521, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 15 RHE 9526, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 16 RHE 9527, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 17 RHE 9530, 2020
140 × 110 cm
- 18 RHE 9525, 2020
80 × 50 cm
- 19 RHE 9506, 2020
80 × 50 cm

All works aluminum

ROOM 5

Message Not Sent, 2020
Series of works
Glass, noble gases
15 tubes, each 4 m long,
Ø 18 cm



ROOM 3

Dr. Sattler: So, what are you thinking?
Dr. Grant: We're out of a job.
Dr. Malcom: Don't you mean extinct?, 2020
Air conditioning system, stainless steel
(alloy X6CrNiTi18-10, exposed to temperature changes over the course of 8 years, simulating around 5,000 years of aging)
5 parts, each ca. 29 × ca. 15 × ca. 239 cm

ROOM 2

Polycrystalline Horticulture, 2020
Bismuth
71 × 601 × 3 cm

ROOM 1

The Sun is the Tongue,
the Shadow is the Language, 2020
Aluminum, recycled casting sand

partly performative. No one was hurt and the gallery floors held up, but that these processes remained benign could not have been predicted with certainty. To make his art, and importantly also, to show his art, Hefti probes the limits of the possible, for himself as much as for the institutions who exhibit his projects. (This one being no exception: The weight of some of his works challenges the structural limitations of the historic Kunsthalle Basel building, the electricity coursing through other pieces court a high-voltage risk.)

Still another way to consider his artworks is via their formal qualities, the way they engage with and turn on their head the principles of minimalism, which found beauty in the rigor of geometries and perfection and sheen of industrially-made forms. The attraction of Hefti's art, conversely, lies in imperfection, in gouged surfaces, in unpredictable effects. Yet, little of the result might look like traditional sculpture or painting, although these are exactly the conventions his work both emulates and responds to (note how his sculptures recall monumental earthworks of the 1960s or how his anodized aluminum panels evoke 1950s abstract expressionism, or how his glass works bring to mind the fluorescent light sculptures of Dan Flavin). And if some of Hefti's pieces at first glance look rather like construction debris, or, alternately, laboratory experiments, to study these and other works is to see in them the marvels of nature, the irregularity of chance, and the strange and ordinary sublime that the confrontation of materials with pressure or heat or electrification can produce.

“Every material has a social side,” Hefti insists. Aluminum, for instance, is extracted from a specific place, using certain tools and traditions and labor, and the exposure of these undergirds his practice. Embodied in each of his objects are the sweat, care, and transfer of knowledge from skilled workers to the artist, who underscores how significant are the unusual cooperations that make possible his praxis. If the production processes innate to capitalism are, as we know, founded on dispossession, labor exploitation, and resource extraction, Hefti's art aims to rebuke their tenets. His work relies on a certain generosity, on curiosity and leaps of faith, on intense collaborations, on unalienated labor, and often, the material it employs is only temporarily dignified as art: taken from its industrial context, it may return there after exhibition.

Think of that air blowing through the middle of the show, temporarily bringing artificial wind—and with it, lightness and movement, but also a kind of strangeness—into the literal heaviness of his exhibition. Hefti's search for the sublime may need industry, but is no less extraordinary for it. Similarly, think of the show's final room, which glows with oversized industrial glass containers suspended from the ceiling like futuristic stalactites. They are alive with a dazzling spectrum generated by electricity shot through the contained gases within to make multi-colored ghostly emanations. Each one of the so-called noble gases (in order of density: helium, neon, argon, krypton, and xenon) to varying degrees circulates freely in our atmosphere, but they are never visible, and in nature will hardly look quite like this. Here, Hefti captures them, elevates them, displays them in a slow burn, and renders them a metaphor for his entire process: take elements that exist in the world and make us behold them, showing there is extraordinary potency in a collision of forces—nothing at all might happen, the whole thing might combust, or quite to the contrary, something magical might occur. Hefti, for his part, is courting the latter.

Raphael Hefti was born 1978 in Boudevilliers NE, CH; he lives and works in Zurich, CH.

A lavishly illustrated monograph, *Raphael Hefti, Works*, will be published in English and German on the occasion of the exhibition, edited by Fabian Schöneich. Published by Kunsthalle Basel with Lenz in Milan, including contributions by Elena Filipovic, Raphael Hefti, Nora N. Khan, Dieter Roelstraete, Fabian Schöneich, and Carmen Van Pamel, and designed by Maximage, it will be available in November 2020.

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GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German, except on Sundays when the curator's tour takes place

Artist's tour with Raphael Hefti, in German
9.10.2020, Friday, 5 pm
10.10.2020, Saturday, 3 pm

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, joined by artist Raphael Hefti, in English
11.10.2020, Sunday, 3 pm

Guided tour, in English
22.10.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm
3.12.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Mediation offer *Talk to Me*, in English and German
9.10.2020, Friday, 3–6 pm
10.10.2020, Saturday, 2–5 pm
11.10.2020, Sunday, 2–5 pm

During the opening weekend, visitors can informally learn more about the works of Raphael Hefti from the art mediation team.

Kids workshop with Raphael Hefti, in English and German
6.12.2020, Sunday, 2–5 pm

Accompanied by the artist, children explore the exhibited works by means of various material experiments and thus learn first-hand about Raphael Hefti's working methods. Registration at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

School project
October to December 2020

What fascinates and inspires children about the exhibition of Raphael Hefti? Over the course of eight weeks, a class from the Gellert Schulhaus in Basel gains insights into the different materials, techniques, and thoughts of the artist. You can follow the results at kunsthallebasel.ch under education.

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Raphael Hefti.

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More information at kunsthallebasel.ch