

IRIS TOULIATOU “GIFT” AT KUNSTHALLE BASEL

Text by MOUSSE Magazine
13 April 2023

What is the value of a human life? For example, that of a woman, officially registered as a “painter” without children or a stable, regular income, who, to fulfill insurance assessment requirements, was obliged to declare that she is of sound body and mind, a non-smoker, and abstains from drugs and alcohol? The bureaucracies that measure risk and value use all of this data, and more, in their prognostic calculations; those of the Greek insurance company INTERAMERICAN, contracted by the artist, defined a specific sum for this particular life: a maximum of 100,000 euros.

To obtain her Simple Annual Life Insurance, policy number 01729973, Iris Touliatou entered into lengthy negotiations. Her request was, after all, a bit peculiar: to insure her life in 2023, the year of her solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, naming the Swiss art institution’s body of members—all 1,344 of them, as of the last published count—as the policy’s beneficiaries. Negotiations with the insurance company included numerous conversations, a mix of rational explanations and pleading entreaties. The artist submitted evidence of her identity and answered intrusive questions, providing insight into her specific biography, social status, and way of life, all to feed the predictive logics that determine the posthumous value of a human. It is not by chance that the resultant euro amount almost exactly corresponds to what Kunsthalle Basel has, over the past decade, put aside annually for the protection of its building—its own accruing financial safety blanket of sorts. Touliatou intends one risk to be imbricated with the other.

The act is fitting for an artist whose particular brand of conceptual art has long been invested in economic and emotional entanglements—instances where the institutional and the affective, reciprocity and intimacy, bind to each other. To reveal such enmeshments, she creates “scores” for operations to be performed in which questions of risk, precarity, protection, and care come to the fore. As a set of instructions or guidelines, a score prompts and sets in motion a series of events; and while not strictly prescriptive, it provides direction. At Kunsthalle Basel, the outcome of this ongoing line of inquiry is a sited artwork, *SCORE FOR COVERAGE* (2023), in which the artist has her life insurance contract—in Greek, English, and German—painted across the longest wall of the exhibition space; or rather: as much of it as could fit, as much of the painterly labor as could be afforded by the institution’s exhibition budget, and as much as could be accomplished in the allotted installation time. A list of the policy’s beneficiaries occupies another wall. The body of the artist is thus bonded with the body of the institution.

In full formal legalese, the painted document manifests as a wall tattoo of sorts, in the very hue of greenish patina that marks Kunsthalle Basel’s copper roof. The choice connects not

only building and body (physical as well as metaphoric and administrative), but also the protective (architectural) cover with the protective (insurance) coverage. The exhibition's walls are lined with the letters of this green-pigmented bond for the duration of Touliatou's exhibition, although the artist knows well that years, decades, or even centuries later, until successive layers of paint are scraped from its walls, the text will continue to mark the room subcutaneously.

Further on, a strange hum, quite like the sound of a ventilation system, emits from seventeen speakers arrayed in the exhibition's second and third spaces, comprising *SCORE FOR HOLD TIME* (2023). Consistent with the strategies of her practice, the artist salvaged these public address speakers from an Athens municipal building. She is interested in sites, technical systems, and infrastructures intended to deliver public service—systems that, when relocated elsewhere, still carry the ghostly traces of their past functions and lives. At Kunsthalle Basel, these speakers transmit a 1999 trance classic, “Alice Deejay's Better Off Alone,” a song of personal significance to the artist, yet rendered completely unrecognizable by being stretched to match the nearly three-month duration of her exhibition. Infiltrating the institution's communication infrastructures, the modified song also plays for callers when put on hold on Kunsthalle Basel's main phone number.

Most enterprises' phone systems have such a hold function. For the artist, it is a public space of sorts that she occupies by way of her sound work, extending the exhibition outside its physical space. Another piece, *SCORE FOR TONE CHANGE* (2023), also radically extends the reach of the exhibition by insinuating itself into the institution's internal and external English communication: Touliatou has merged the Dictionary of Affect in Language by the psychology and linguistics scholar Cynthia Whissell with the default dictionary operating on the institution's office computers that might ordinarily correct the spelling of a word or suggest a synonym. As a result, when staff members now write an email, create a text document, or prepare a newsletter or social media post, they will be confronted by options that could (if chosen, free will being crucial to the artist) render their language more emotive and warm. For the duration of the exhibition, the piece will be continually in operation, at every moment potentially shifting, softening, influencing choices, subtly impacting labor—whether the alternative terminology suggested actually enters written communication or not.

“Infrastructures,” the artist once noted, “often remain invisible, enigmatic, sometimes unquestioned. They become apparent and change when friction is applied.” The artist applies such “friction” here, questioning the institution's tone of communication by offering alternatives to it. Someone might write a sentence that says: the wording of an exhibition handout should be precise. Through the artist's score, and following its suggestions, that statement would become: the wording of an exhibition handout should be precious. One word replaces another, and the difference in overall tone, in attitude and sensibility, is significant. Alerting the public to this, a disclaimer is added to the end of this very handout and to the email signatures of the staff's digital correspondence, noting that the lexical intensity of any written communication in English may be due to Touliatou's work.

In the last room of the exhibition, the artist installs a piece that is as much physical as it is operational: *SCORE FOR REFUSE* (2023) relocates the Kunsthalle Basel office's document shredder to a back room of the exhibition, near a window through which visitors can see the office itself. With the machine now on public display, the artist has asked staff members specifically dealing with the institution's finance and administration to regularly shred all their

discarded documents within the exhibition. The act treats this refuse, whether or not it contains sensitive content, as something to be simultaneously secured (shredded) and made visible (entirely public). Protection and risk emerge, again, as undercurrents.

One could describe “Gift” as an exhibition comprised of paint on walls, speakers, sound, communication protocols, and relocated office equipment. But to focus on these would be a ruse. In fact, the artist often uses ready-made infrastructures in her work—whether fluorescent lighting systems recovered from bankrupted businesses, the sorts of public drinking fountains found in hospitals and schools, or, here, the public address speakers that were once used in Greek municipal buildings, and an art institution’s own office equipment. Even an insurance contract serves as a kind of readymade. Through these, Touliatou’s art persistently—lovingly, even—exposes the points where the personal and the public, institutional infrastructures and affective economies meet. Across her practice, she investigates how emotion but also risk is registered—materialized and embodied, but also spread and shared. The choice is not accidental. Having seen her hometown of Athens devastated by the 2009 financial crisis, she has made the hallmark of her practice to give form to late capitalism’s ravages by way of subtle procedures that have made negotiation her primary medium, scores her preferred working modus, and a distinct attention to affect and care her art’s recurrent beating heart.

With her exhibition, Touliatou has offered Kunsthalle Basel a benevolent present. A gift. But is it actually a gift when it consists of the monetary value of a life? A gift that is only actualized if an irreversible loss were to occur? As long as nothing happens to end the artist’s life, the contract remains nothing more than pure potential. But were the cataclysm to occur, the potential would be realized: the transaction no longer abstract. Although, as the contract stipulates, not if the insured event occurs as a result maleficence by any one of the beneficiaries. Similarly, the end of the insured’s life as a result of civil war or such activities as hang-gliding or kickboxing or, most dramatically, suicide, prevent the insurance sum to be paid out. These exclusions to the contract can be found, for the duration of Touliatou’s exhibition, on the receipt each visitor receives to document their payment of the exhibition’s entry fee. These receipts further complicate the triangle of value between artist’s life, insurance, and artwork, connected through the medium of value; for, now, visitors hold in their hands not just a mere ticket, but an artwork acquired for the cost of admission, *SCORE FOR COVERAGE (EXCEPTIONS – EXCLUSIONS)* (2023). The project decidedly expands the artist’s keen interest in economies of exchange: after all, Touliatou used the production budget of the show to buy a life insurance for herself that might, ultimately, benefit the members (which are, in a certain sense, also the patrons) of the institution in which she is exhibiting. Given this scenario, the artist is quite aware that in German—the official language at the site of the transaction—the word “gift” of her exhibition title means poison.

<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/iris-touliatou-kunsthalle-basel-2023/>