

Susi Gelb

user-defined Landscape

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Terraforming refers to a process of modifying other planets in such a way that their atmosphere becomes similar to that of Earth, making them habitable by human beings. This idea, originally developed in the context of science fiction, has recently become increasingly popular in Silicon Valley. In times of climate change and talk of the Anthropocene era, people are reaching for extreme manmade solutions in the midst of overwhelming manmade problems: While on Earth, entire ecosystems are becoming more and more unstable and technical equipment is increasingly called upon to compensate for depleted natural resources (using up more resources in the process), the human ability to influence the environment and the atmosphere is being cast in a positive light and reimagined for the unspoiled scenery of another planet. Although ecosystems are at the heart of this thinking, it comes from an elevated perspective, from exterior control and creation, rather than from the vantage point of those who are integrated in these systems and understand that they need to be economical with available resources.

In Susi Gelb's exhibition *User-defined Landscape*, this notion of terraforming is an at times implicit, at times explicit point of reference. Virtually all the works engage with – in one way or another – the principle of the atmospheric and the mechanism of immersion: A central light column perpetually changes colour temperature, putting the entire space and everything in it through different moods. The video of a waterfall, running on a hologram rotor, appears to be floating in the air without a frame, without a border, fraying into the surrounding space, seemingly immaterial.

Then again, there are other works that seem to take a step in the opposite direction. Precarious, their status uncertain, their appearance opaque, they are marked by fissures and cracks. They work with an upending, contorting and interleaving of opposites: In aquarium-like sculptures, rocks appear to be floating, bringing to mind miniature landscapes or planets; with torn-open, pedestal-like resin casts, the distinction between inside and outside becomes as brittle as that between work and display, and not least of all, there are fragments whose origin is difficult to grasp at first, which appear equally organic and technical, resembling rubble or clods of dried-out soil. In either case, the principle of terraforming is taken up here not just by way of immersion; it is also depicted. And this establishes a distance, literally a rupture: the dry, cracked earth versus the bubbling water; the closed system of a vortex driven by a mixer.

Art as well, speaking very generally, is a form of creating worlds. And an exhibition is always a “user-defined landscape” that is determined as much by the artist as by the viewing public. Yet, art – at least in its manifestation as so-called contemporary art – is also an act of reflective questioning and of putting oneself at a distance conceptually; it means breaking with the created atmosphere. Susi Gelb's works move precisely in this tension: between plunging in and shaking off the water. Lines blur and are drawn again. Going in headlong, then taking a step back. Here, complete immersion, there, the very idea is being countered. After all, there is never an unbroken unity to all that is. There is always a crack that runs through. Through this world – our world – and the next.

Dominikus Müller

(Translation: Kennedy-Unglaub Translations)

Susi Gelb's objects and videos are concerned with the modification and alteration of the environment. The exhibition title comes from the interface of a laser cutting machine that is used to cut out and engrave artworks. A user-defined surface is an interface between the reality of the user, the machine that does the work and the material that is being processed. The landscape is changed by the user. So who is the user and what definition is followed in the transformation process? Susi Gelb engages with the fluid boundary between nature and technology. She creates a landscape that transcends itself. While taken from technologized processes of work and industry, her objects and materials have a life of their own. Like moveable pieces of scenery, different elements of reality invite us to immerse ourselves in them. Creating their own atmosphere, they appear like the test set-up for larger terraforming experiments.