

Popping up  
all over the place  
since 1949

# ArtReview

Pope.L



There are only symptoms

Ola Vasiljeva *Haus der F.*

Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld 29 March – 15 September

The idea of inviting an artist to introduce a new and nonacademic perspective on a collection has, in recent years, been pursued ad nauseam by museum curators. Still, this familiar measure can sometimes succeed beautifully, as with Ola Vasiljeva's *Haus der F.* Working with the museum's opulent Werkbund collection, the Latvia-born artist references a 1914 exhibition in Cologne, *Haus der Frau* (House of Woman), in which the female designers of the Deutscher Werkbund presented their work as equal to that of their male colleagues. Though Vasiljeva combines objects from the collection with her own furniture pieces, the exhibition as a whole is unmistakably her own: as is typical of her work, the space appears as a stage filled with props that carry private and suggestive references.

This stage is waiting, surely, for a chamber play or *Kammerspielfilm*. An open wall unit, a dresser and a desk (all works untitled) – these designed by Vasiljeva in the Werkbund style, functional with occasional excessive ornamentation – structure the space. In some places oversize knitted items of clothing are draped over the furniture; some stand scarecrowlike in the space. These doffed giants' garments (a recurring motif of the artist's) open up a

dialogue with the playing-card and book-cover designs of Werkbund designers Lucian Bernhard, Mela Köhler-Broman, Hans Kalmsteiner and Rudolf Kalvach, which hang on the walls or on Vasiljeva's furniture props. Because the majority of works chosen from the collection by this female artist are by men, *Haus der F.* responds to gender inequality just as *Haus der Frau* did a century before.

A subtle sense of humour guides the central placement of a beautiful advertising poster by Lucian Bernhard from 1908, which shows an elegant woman's shoe with a bow and the company name Stiller. The German word also means 'quieter', and the quieter presence of the women of the Werkbund is addressed through the woman's shoe motif. Vasiljeva uses it in a chalk sketch on the inside of a wall unit; it's more clearly decipherable, though, in one of her large metal lattice works in a corner. On it are two cartoonish figures that, while distorted, can still be identified as man and woman: he is plainly kicking her in the butt. Vasiljeva depicts patriarchal society as not so much brutal as ridiculous and highlights the absurdity of early-twentieth-century male designers writing off their female colleagues as incompetent, and constructing

various 'glass ceilings', even as the company's products addressed a predominantly female clientele. All of this also functions as an acknowledgement of debt to the women who have struggled for equality in the creative industries.

Vasiljeva's own work benefits from her engagement with the collection. It is still noticeable how well designed her works are, but their openness to narrative interpretation stands out more clearly in their juxtaposition with objects designed to fulfil a function. As props for an imaginary play, her works also seem to be designed to be used, and the intimacy of the staging tickles our voyeurism. Most explicitly, on the desk sits a paperweight made of black porcelain: it holds a letter (sealed with a stamp, showing the woodcut *Frauenportrait* by Dutch artist Bernard Essers from 1923), a crossword puzzle and other papers. Since the exhibition invites you to regard every object – at least initially – as a piece of design, it takes a few turns of the head to notice that the paperweight is modelled on a penis, the letters balanced between glans and testicles. Set against the marginalisation of the Werkbund's female designers, it's a covert but certainly appropriate punchline. *Moritz Scheper*



*Haus der F.*, 2019 (installation view). Photo: Dirk Rose.  
Courtesy the artist and Kunstmuseum Krefeld