



FUKUSHIMA
2019 - 2022
HANA USUI

Why can't we play with the sand?

Neuer Kunstverein Wien
FOTO WIEN, 2022

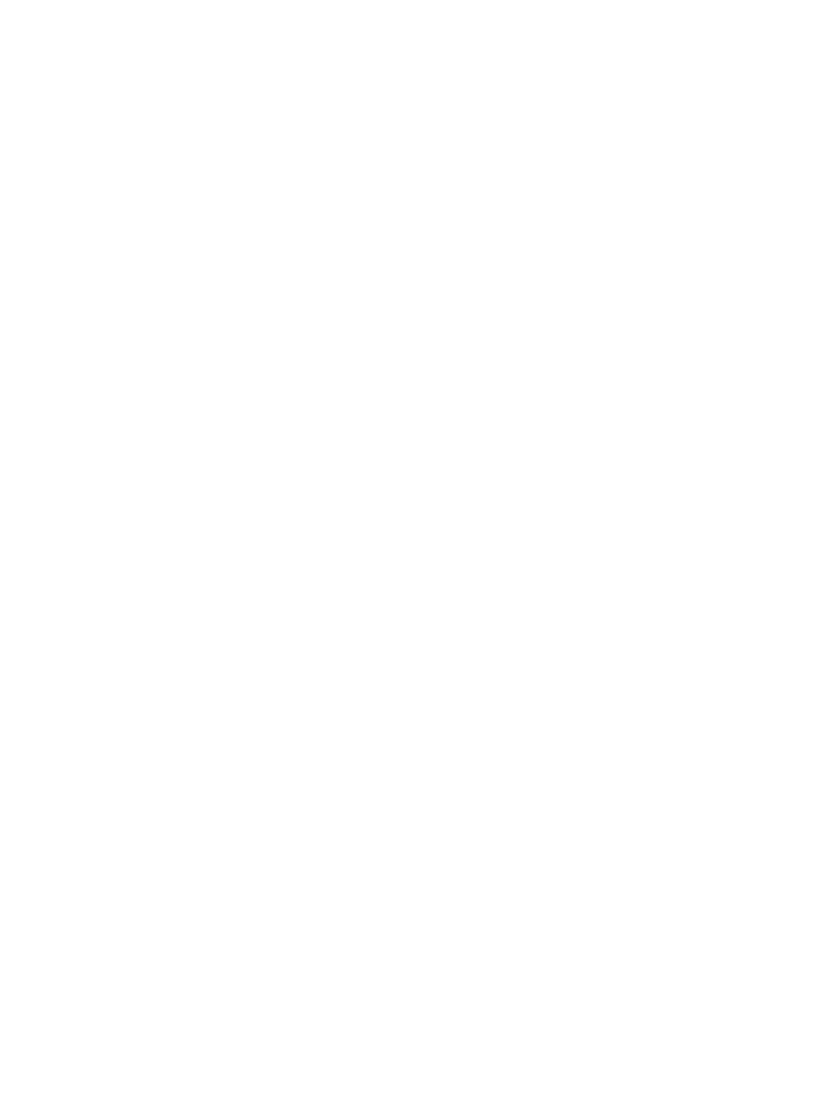
Installation with puzzles, playing cards, and memory games showing artworks from the 'Fukushima' series (2019), children's table and chairs, carpets, charcoal lines, etc.



















Walter Seidl

Why can't we play with the sand? Thoughts on Hana Usui's Fukushima-Cycle

The works of Japanese artist Hana Usui deal with the effects of the Fukushima Daiichi reactor accident in 2011 in a variety of ways. The artist addresses the incident from different perspectives in new, ever-changing constellations. Trained in Japanese calligraphy, Hana Usui's work oscillates between drawing and photography, combining elements of manual activity with realistic depiction. For some years now, Usui has been working continuously on installations. For her project as part of FOTO WIEN at Neuer Kunstverein Wien, she created the spatial installation 'Why can't we play with the sand?', which is dedicated to the living conditions of children after the nuclear accident. Here, the core theme is visualising the invisible, the concealed, how various patterns of perception emerge or are held back.

The situation of the children in Fukushima was only brought to the general awareness in a marginal way and with delay. It was on 19 April 2011, a whole 40 days after the reactor accident, that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

Technology (MEXT) published the first guidelines for children's outdoor activities. Should radiation levels exceed 3.8 microsieverts per hour, children were only allowed to spend one hour outdoors each day. As this limit was far above the average natural radiation exposure (e.g. 0.08 microsieverts per hour in Tokyo and 0.43 microsieverts per hour in Austria), the city of Koriyama was one of the first municipalities in the Fukushima Prefecture to lay down its own measures: the municipal education office called on all schools to refrain from outdoor activities in April 2011 and began removing topsoil from schoolyards and playgrounds. As early as May, the MEXT lifted restrictions on all outdoor activities, as radiation levels had dropped to some extent. This created outright resistance among the population. In Koriyama, children aged 0 to 2 years were still restricted to 15 minutes outdoors per day, children aged 3 to 5 years to 30 minutes. At the beginning of the school year in April 2012, Koriyama City lifted the restrictions on outdoor activities as well, mainly because, as a result of decontamination and natural attenuation, radiation levels in schoolyards averaged 0.2 microsieverts per hour. However, precautions for outdoor play still required children to wear long trousers, long sleeves and a hat. Walking on grass was prohibited, as well as touching soil, sand, puddles or pond water. Putting their hands in their mouths was also forbidden, and children were encouraged to always wash their hands and gargle after playing. The impact of restricting children's outdoor activities in Fukushima was reflected in the deterioration of their physical and motor skills such as gripping strength, running and throwing balls.

Many activities were moved indoors, which meant that nature after nature had lost its former validity.

In her installation, Hana Usui references the situation of the children at that time in particular, as well as the consequences of the nuclear accident in general, which, although it occurred over a decade ago, has driven the discussion about a worldwide phaseout of nuclear power. After the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and considering Japan's seismically active geography, it is surprising that the Land of the Rising Sun, pressured by the USA, has embraced the path of nuclear power for civilian use. The wound that the nuclear disaster in Fukushima has left on the country and its population is therefore all the more drastic. As a result, the work of several Japanese artists has become increasingly political. Hana Usui had always been interested in politics, but it was only after the Fukushima incident that she began to dedicate her artistic vocabulary to examining injustices from her home country. She travelled to Fukushima in the wake of the nuclear disaster and photographed and filmed the area: the nuclear power plant itself, the tsunamiravaged beach and forest, the countless black bags of contaminated soil, a Geiger counter in a schoolyard, contaminated cows left alive, etc. However, when the artist participated in the exhibition 'No more Fukushimas' curated by Marcello Farabegoli in 2014, the wound of Fukushima still seemed too fresh to her. She did not want the people who were still suffering there to be offended or insulted by her message. Therefore, she initially dealt with the devastating

consequences of the atomic bombings, which tied in more closely with Fukushima than expected. Gradually, she approached the Fukushima issue through other highly charged issues in her country, especially those relating to discrimination. Just as atomic bomb survivors (Hibakusha) had been discriminated against after the Second World War as being contaminated, children from Fukushima were bullied for the same reason. With the Fukushima cycle, Usui has now, in a sense, come full circle.

For Usui, the 13 part photo/drawing-series 'Fukushima' (2019), marks the beginning of the artistic exploration, through which she examined the issue of how changes in the landscape unfold over the years and affect the mental and cultural memory. She overlaid the black-and-white photographs with semi-transparent paper and covered them with black lines. These shaky lineaments hint at the dense high-voltage electrical network that is spread ominously around the Fukushima reactor. The whole process results from Usui's drawings, which also contain photographic and cinematic elements. Based on her intensive study of a subject, the artist abstracts one or more essential motifs and draws their movement and development processes as if they were photograms or stills. She transfers the visual components of the cloudlike ink of her earlier works by applying a thin layer of paper over the photographs, whereby the artist tests the validity of the statements made by the photographic dispositive. She employed that same technique first in 2018 in her photo/drawing-series on the death penalty in Japan, titled 'Tokyo

Kochisho'. Although condensed into concrete images, in Usui's photographic views the actual motifs of the depicted surroundings are only recognisable to a small degree. Thereby the artist addresses Japan's relationship with negatively charged phenomena, which politicians refuse to admit and therefore try to visually ban from the public space. The artistic investigation of such endeavours not infrequently leads to forms of censorship. With her special technique the artist anticipates potential censorship models and while doing so attempts to artistically articulate the essence of Japanese thought.

In her installation at Neuer Kunstverein Wien, Usui integrates the motifs of her Fukushima series into the setting of a children's playground, set up indoors, as contact with soil, sand and water outdoors was not recommended for children. Usui designed several puzzles as well as memory cards on which her photo/drawings can be seen, which have been distributed on children's play tables with matching armchairs as well as on the surrounding floor. The theme is in no way a positive one but is intended as a kind of memorial in the room to remind us of the real catastrophe that caused radiation damage to people, animals, and nature. Usui also created the installation 'Fukushima - 10 Years Later' on the occasion of the ten-year commemoration of the reactor accident on 11 March 2021 in the Red-Carpet Showroom on Karlsplatz in Vienna. Placed inside a showcase in the underground station, she took one of her photo/drawing-works as a starting point or background element, around which the artist created a display

of fishing nets, animal and grain parts, and what appeared to be shells, washed up in ash and sand. Due to the radioactive contamination, the population - including many farmers and fishermen - had to leave the restricted area ('kitaku konnan kuiki', literally: difficult-to-return-home-to area) around the reactor. The breeding animals, which were also abandoned, went wild, starved to death or had to be culled later. The entire farmland as well as the abandoned houses became overgrown with wild plants. Fishermen were either not allowed to fish in the area or had to throw away countless radioactively contaminated fish, over and over again. To capture all this misery, and at the same time the decadent aesthetic of decay and renewal, Usui continued this theme more extensively at Vienna Art Week in the exhibition 'House of Losing Control' in November 2021. This time, there were two abandoned rooms, a changing room with overturned office chairs and lockers that looked as if it had to be abandoned in a rush, and a second, former washroom where fishing nets were strewn about exuberantly. Here, too, animal and grain parts as well as shells were used as set pieces. An old television monitor played a poetical-documentary video about the area and situation around Fukushima, which Usui had worked on together with ORF journalist and Japan expert Judith Brandner.

The above-mentioned video ('Fukushima', 2021) was shown for the first time at the Berlin Art Week 2021 and is shown again at Neuer Kunstverein Wien, where it is projected in a separate room in order to point out, among other things, the false truths that are

being spread to propagate nuclear power. Here, text fragments, which could just as well have come from the EU's green energy statements announced at the beginning of January 2022, have been used ironically: 'Nuclear power is clean. Nuclear power is sustainable. Nuclear power is good for the environment. Nuclear power is CO2-free. Nuclear power is reliable. Nuclear power is the energy of the future.' The effects of the disaster in Japan have shown how severe the consequential damages of nuclear power can be. 'It has been ten years since the dismantling of the nuclear power plant began. It will take another 30 years until all six reactor blocks are disassembled. Four thousand workers are working on this every day. It will take millions of years until the radioactivity from the fuel rods of Fukushima has completely disappeared,' Brandner says in the video. Also on view in the video are the beach sites that Usui addresses, abandoned, and washed up by the sea, as well as overlays of her works. Sand as an element is made manifest in the installation at Neuer Kunstverein Wien in cream-coloured, circular carpets underpinned by the light-brown exhibition floor. Along the walls there are lines reminiscent of the high-voltage power wires that appear in the photo/drawings and are ever-present in Japan, encircling or enclosing the space. The children have been deprived of the hope of playing on the beach as they once did. Presence and absence are linked in the confrontation with an invisible energy, which determines the relationship between man and nature, and which Usui artistically examines.

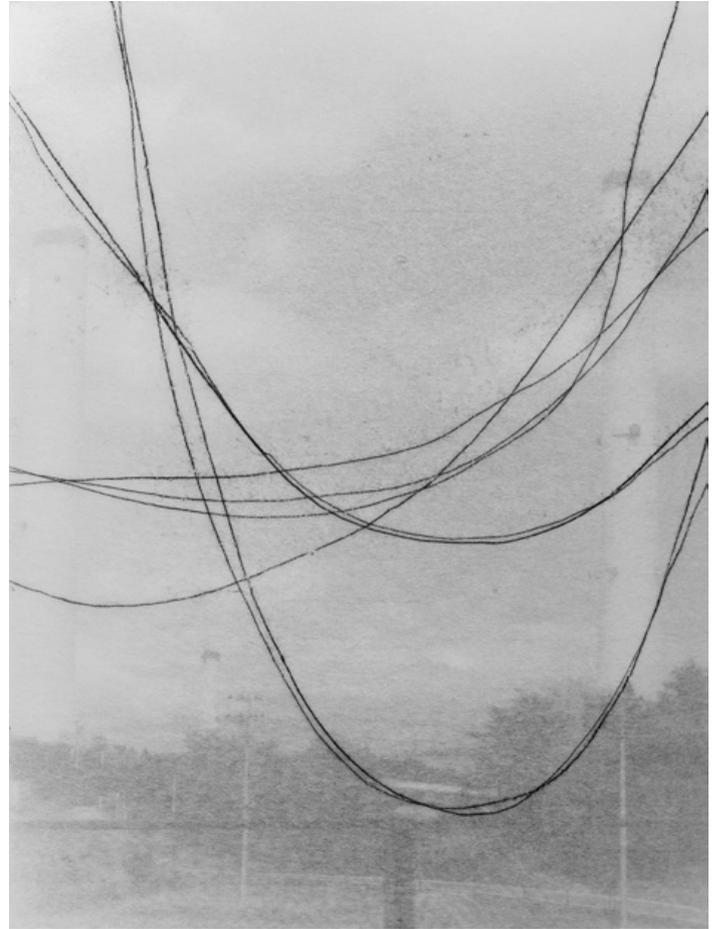
Fukushima

Selection from the series, 2019

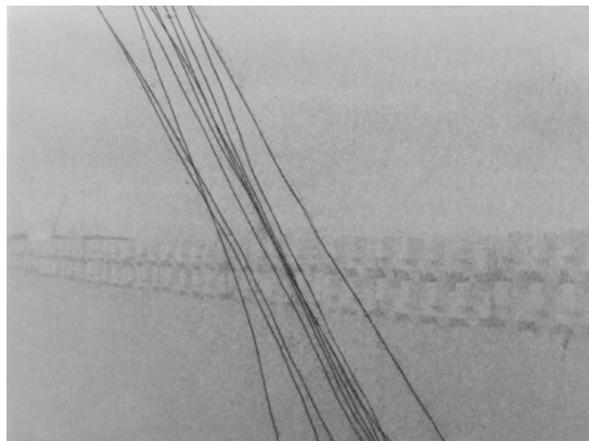
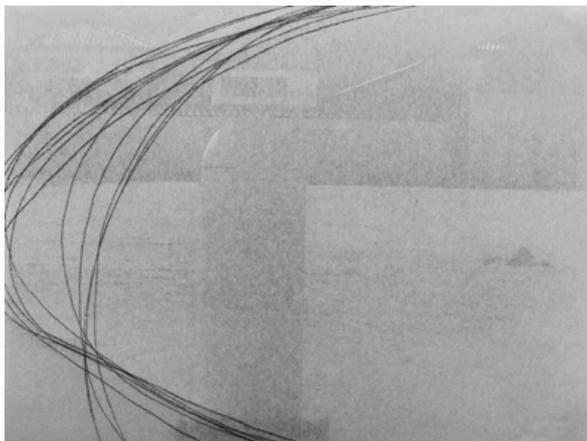
Fine art print, oil on paper, and photograph
(82,5 x 110 cm / 110 x 82,5 cm)











Konrad Paul Liessmann

A Human Desert, Made By Humans About the Fukushima-Series by Hana Usui

Philosopher Günther Anders, who, unlike any other thinker of the 20th century radically made the 'nuclear threat' the centre of his philosophy, once noted in this context that there are events of such magnitude that they cannot be reached by art. The annihilation of millions of Jews he considered to be one of them, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki another. Such practices of obliteration he referred to as 'historically supraliminal', since our imagination cannot encompass their terrible dimensions. He was therefore sceptical towards aesthetic attempts to address these horrors; the fundamentally playful aspect of any artistic expression, for him, moved even the most radical efforts into the territory of trivialisation. In the face of the severity of nuclear threat, following his provocative thesis, every aesthetic approach must be lacking in seriousness.

This fundamental objection to art was primarily motivated by the insight that the aesthetic representation or commemoration of the nuclear disasters falls short of that which is most notable

about these events, which is the self-threatening of humankind that they signify. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to Günther Anders, were not only atrocious war crimes, but established that humans themselves had developed a technology that could obliterate humanity in one fell swoop and render the Earth uninhabitable. This, however, eludes our power of imagination.

The so-called peaceful use of atomic energy is not excluded from this supraliminality. Of course: the atomic bomb is a weapon of mass destruction, the obliteration of all life on this planet is part of its innermost logic. The disasters in nuclear power plants are rare accidents, that yet owe their monstrous dimension to the same source as the bomb: an unleashed chain reaction, which will elude humanity's controlling grip for all time. The fact that an accident like that of Chernobyl cannot be forgotten after several years, but that the reactor will continue to emit dangerous radiation for thousands of years, exceeds human imagination and sense of time. We, after a few decades at the latest, want to perceive the site of the accident as a tourist attraction and not a warning sign of a hybrid technology.

In spite of that, can, may, must art not take up the subject? And how can it measure up to the challenges that arise in that context? One point must be conceded to Günther Anders, up to this day: The bold, spectacular, pathetic and aesthetically negative presentation of the horror degrades it to a cultural-industrial event and thereby mistreats it thoroughly. If at all, then approaching the sites of

a nuclear catastrophe requires a sensitivity that only reveals at second glance that the dreadful is fighting to be expressed. The works of Japanese artist Hana Usui show in a haunting manner what it means to use the sparest means of fine art to approach phenomena that in every way touch the fundamental aporias and conflicts of a self-endangering technological civilisation.

Between 2014 and 2018, the artist had dealt with the subject of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 2019 she dedicates a series of works to the reactor accident of Fukushima. What is surprising about these art pieces is their delicateness that feels strangely inappropriate considering the subject. Hana Usui, who has gone through the strict school of classical Japanese calligraphy, the 'way of writing', might have left that approach behind, the precision, mysteriousness and poignancy, however, has remained. Only when looking more closely, the traces of horror, of destruction, of obliteration will be recognised.

In the Fukushima series the artist overlays photos of the contaminated place with a semi-transparent sheet of paper. On it, delicate lines strangely overlap the picture, trembling and bold, dominant and yet restrained: the implied and broken nerve fibres of an energy current that has been abruptly disrupted by the disaster. In contrast, in the half-hidden, in the interplay of photograph and drawing, in the hinted-at, in that which is schematically thrown on paper is revealed the artist's mastery of a subject that has desertion at its centre. Radioactively contaminated areas must be evacuated and cleared, for humans

it is dangerous, eventually deadly to remain there – warning signs everywhere. And yet the documentation of such a contaminated area must not be reminiscent of landscape photography or simple industrial ruins. This can be avoided only through a stretching of the media and materials, the methods and the forms; only through the renunciation of all that is spectacular and dramatic the terror can, literally, show through.

Nothing about these works is straightforward, and the series is not to be seen as a direct political or ecological statement. This is not committed art that wants to warn against a technology that, paradoxically, is being rediscovered by many ecologically conscious consumers in the fight against climate change: nuclear power plants do not emit CO₂. In their restrained intensity, the Fukushima works by Hana Usui function more as a contemplative commentary on the current debates; nothing about them is shrill or alarmist, but in their precise restraint, in their melancholy beauty they pave the way for a reflectiveness that is maybe more necessary than ever.

And so – with a sad beauty – in these works the contours of hills and trees, industrial buildings and warning signs, utility poles and naked trees emerge, and the artist's delicate lines give them not only an accent, but a drastic counterpart. The lineament in the foreground gives the underlying photos their beautifully terrible significance: they are documentations of a human desert, made by humans.

Fukushima – 10 Years Later

House of Losing Control
VIENNA ART WEEK, 2021

Installation with nets, dried animals parts (beef ears and noses, pig noses, chicken feet, horse mouths, rabbit ears, squids, sardines), bones, dried cereals, shells, sand, ashes, etc.















Fukushima Videoinstallation

House of Losing Control
VIENNA ART WEEK, 2021

Installation of an old TV in an abandoned changing room with lockers, office chairs, old clothes and shoes, etc.

Videocredits:

Video and concept: Judith Brandner & Hana Usui

Artworks shown: 'Fukushima' series (2019) by Hana Usui

Text and voice: Judith Brandner

Music: 'Zytoyplasma' (1985) by Takehito Shimazu

Editing: Hana Usui

Translation subtitles: Monika Dittrich

Production: Marcello Farabegoli Projects

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FUKUSHIMA

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東電

Nuclear power plants are taboo in Japan.



Endless search for a final disposal site.

Fukushima – 10 Years Later

Red Carpet Showroom Karlsplatz

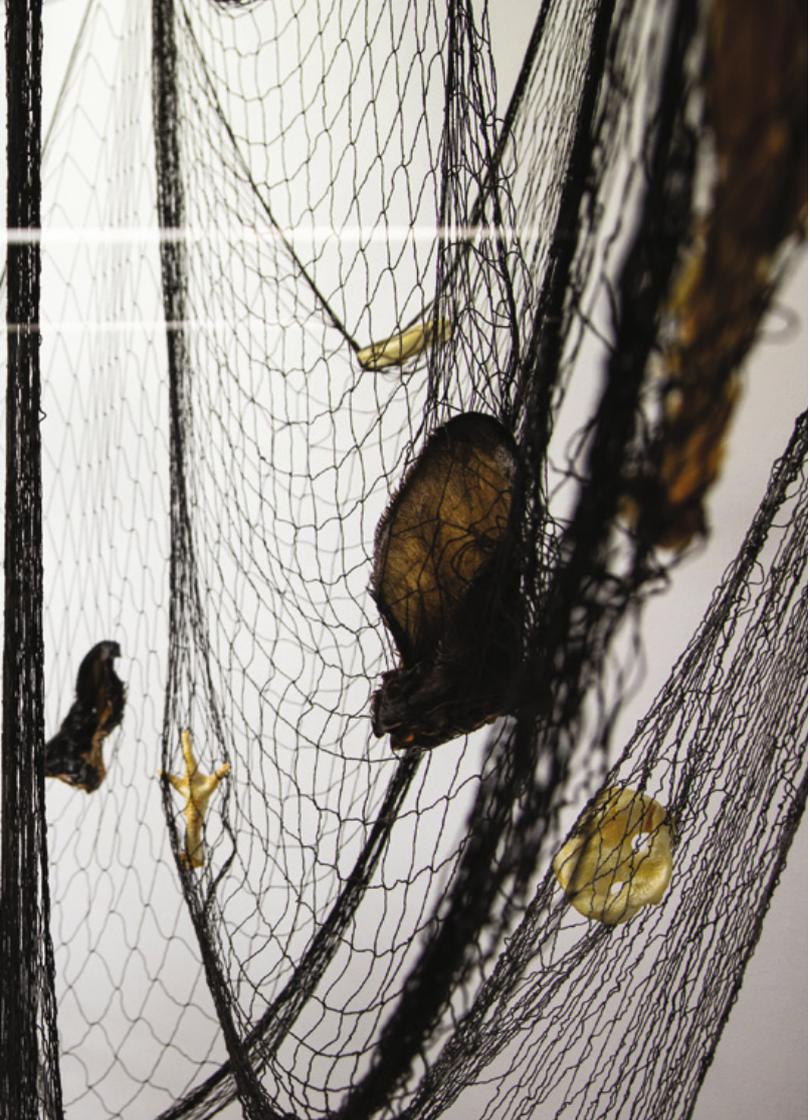
FOTO WIEN, 2021

Installation with one photo/drawing from the 'Fukushima' series, nets, dried animal parts, dried cereals, shells, ashes, etc.

← Karlsplatz



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Hana Usui (*1974 , Tokyo / JP) studied art history at Waseda University and calligraphy in Tokyo. Her abstract drawings are made with white or black oil paint, which she overlays onto inkwash or photographs. Since 2014 she has been using her artistic vocabulary mainly to address injustices in the environmental, political and social fields and has become increasingly multimedial and installational.

Exhibitions (selected): 'A Human Desert Made by Humans', Neuer Kunstverein Wien @ Foto Wien (solo, 2022), 'Fukushima - 10 Years Later', Club of polish failures @ Berlin Art Week and 'House of Losing Control' @ Vienna Art Week (2021); 'Japan Unlimited', frei_raum Q21 / MuseumsQuartier Vienna (2019); 'Show Me Your Wound', Dom Museum Vienna (2018-19); Works on paper from the collection, Kunsthalle Bremen (2017); Drawing Biennial, City Museum of

Rimini (2016); 'At the Nexus of Painting and Writing', Seoul Arts Center (2013); 'Japanese Contemporary Art on Paper', Dresden State Art Collections (2010); 'The Esprit of Gestures', The National Museum in Berlin (2010); 'Sensai', Museum Residenzgalerie Salzburg (2009); 'Works on Paper', Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, Cracow (solo, 2009); 'Keisei-ten', Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (1994-1998).

Collections (selected): Albertina Vienna, Berlinische Galerie, Dresden State Art Collections, Graphic Collection of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Kunsthalle Bremen, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, Museum für Neue Kunst Freiburg, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology Krakow, Otto Mauer Contemporary - Dom Museum Vienna, The National Museums in Berlin, and Wien Museum.

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Walter Seidl

«Menschengemachte Menschenleere – Zur Fukushima-Serie von Hana Usui»,
Konrad Paul Liessmann

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Monika Dittrich (Text by K. P. Liessmann) and Tessa Evert (Text by W. Seidl)

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