

# Mario Kiesenhofer

## *Treasure*

### NO FIXED LOCATION.

Mario Kiesenhofer's exhibition *Treasure* in the tresor of the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien

Lisa Ortner-Kreil

I met Mario Kiesenhofer in 2018 in the context of the "Spielzimmer" project organised by Michael Kaufmann and Ronald Harder, in which they open up their private premises as exhibition venue for artists. Here, Mario Kiesenhofer showed works from his *Indoor* series, for which he photographed places of queer encounter in various big cities. Since then, I have been fascinated and preoccupied by his precise gaze and the sensitive way in which he uses the photographic medium to show places that elude or remain hidden from the conventional gaze.

With his exhibition *Treasure* the artist presents a whole corpus of new works in the tresor of the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien. Mario Kiesenhofer sees the space – an actual former bank vault – not only as a display area for his art, but as the protagonist of the project. The former high-security room takes up the idea of the "protected space", a guiding principle in Kiesenhofer's artistic output, and in doing so forms much more than just the "shell" of the exhibition. The tresor becomes a safe space.

*Mario Kiesenhofer: Treasure* amalgamates photography, video and text into a spatial installation. The artist has focused on the queer electronic music scene in Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on Warsaw. In recent years, this community has formed itself into the powerfully expressive platform of an active resistance movement that celebrates the concerns of the LGBTQIA+, which are not only justified in Eastern Europe but also important for all of us. Mario Kiesenhofer's photographs are evidence of a party culture in which the techno scene of the 1990s is experiencing a revival, but which at the same time also makes a highly resistant and political claim. Like flashes of light that flare up again and again in the dark, intimate moments, he captures preparations for a drag performance, make-up, jewellery, tattoos and outfits, but also details that have almost poetic qualities, such as a still life of paper flowers, as well as architecture and lighting situations. Photographing them through blue, red, green and pink colour filters, Mario Kiesenhofer detaches spatial situations and interpersonal encounters from their original context and transfers them to the tresor. The club as an inclusive place and stage is moved to the exhibition space, which in turn is transformed into a queer treasure trove. Mario Kiesenhofer approaches the protagonists through his camera carefully and with respect. All produced in the same format and mounted in frames made of chrome, these images are restrained and at the same time incredibly cool and self-confident portraits of DJs, people who run these clubs, performers and of course the audience.

In addition to the photographs, the space is dominated above all by the video installation *Reflections* (feat. Reflektra, 2022/23). The work is a continuation of Mario Kiesenhofer's video work *Fragments* from 2021, which he already showed in the same year at Bildraum 01 in Vienna: The camera, or rather the gaze, fixes a spinning naked body. An amorphous mirror is mounted under the screen, which allows the rotation to flow into the floor, as it were. For *Reflections*, the artist has taken the idea to the next level. The screen has given way to a large wall projection, a mirror placed on the floor with jagged extensions has reached monumental proportions. The camera observes the drag queen Reflektra carefully cultivating different looks and transforming her identity, which is accentuated by details such as her fingernails and hairstyle or an elaborately decorated jockstrap. Interspersed with the shots showing the drag queen are close-ups of mysterious minerals, glowing in all colours and reflecting the light, which from time immemorial have always acted as totems and healing stones to overcome trauma. Oscillating between abstract and hyper-real representation, Mario Kiesenhofer, finds here both in the person of the drag queen and in the facticity of the stones a metaphor for hybrid identity and transformation. The rotating movement of the subject arouses desire, but also suggests a slight feeling of vertigo and a flowing or permanently changing point of view.

The titular work *Treasure* is installed as a text work on the main wall of the room. It is composed of lettering approximately three metres wide consisting of anodised aluminium letters connected by delicate chains as they are also popularly worn as accessories by the audience at raves, and whose typography is reminiscent of Gothic aesthetics on the one hand, but also of a revival of the currently omnipresent 90s on the other. What interests the artist most about the so-called "mall goth" trend, which has been coined by young people with a gothic look who spend most of their free time in shopping malls, is the commercialisation of underground culture. The very same phenomenon, Mario Kiesenhofer tells me, is currently happening to every form of "queerness", which is being appropriated and instrumentalised in line with promoting consumer appeal. But the chain of links between the letters is also a sign of cohesion and solidarity within the queer community.

"Queer is not a fixed designation, it's not a fixed place," says Mario Kiesenhofer. He is referring to the extremely important text *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* by Didier Eribon from 1999, which says: "Someone who is queer: strange, weird, sick.... Unnormal. (...) I discover that I am someone to whom one can say this and that, someone who is the object of looks, discourses and who is stigmatised by these looks and these discourses. (...) My consciousness is taken possession of by an Other, I am powerless in the face of this aggression." Already since the end of the 1980s, the meaning of the term "queer" has undergone a massive change and was literally reclaimed and positively charged as a terminology by the queer community and thus also subjected to a re-evaluation in the public discourse. The clandestinity of queer existence, which many people encounter by fleeing to the city, as Eribon also describes in his book, is nevertheless still a fact in many places. A concrete impetus for Mario Kiesenhofer's *Treasure* project also derived from the anti-LGBTQIA+-policies, for example in Hungary or Poland, where "LGBT-free zones" were declared in order to push queer visibility out of the public space. But this sense of homelessness and placelessness is being defied by a resistant, well-organised and visually avant-garde scene, and it is this very aspect that the exhibition *Treasure* aims to shed light on, bearing witness to value and self-worth, courage, and resilience. The fluidity, the staying in motion, the occupation and conquest of ever new spaces and concepts are not understood by the protagonists of this scene as a flaw but as a liberation.

### About the artist:

Mario Kiesenhofer (born 1984 in Freistadt, lives and works in Vienna) studied photography and video art with Matthias Herrmann and Dorit Margreiter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Since 2016, numerous exhibition projects, including *Sex in Vienna. Lust. Control. Transgression* at the Wien Museum 2016/17, *Sensations. Closer to the People* at Kunstverein Schattendorf (2019), *Shifting Layers* at Bildraum 01, Vienna (2021), *Surroundings* at Peter Hay Halpert Fine Art, New York (2022), *Dispatches from a Troubled City. The City as a Novel* at MUSA Start Gallery, Vienna (2022/23) and *gmunden.photo* (2023). Mario Kiesenhofer received a state scholarship for artistic photography in 2023.

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#### Reflections (feat. Reflektra)

2022/23

4K video installation –

Projected in Full HD

6'32", loop, without sound

Jagged mirror

Approx. 450 × 254 × 204 cm

#### Treasure

2023

45 pigment prints

Mounted in chrome frames

Each 40 × 60 cm

#### Treasure

2023

Lettering made of

anodized aluminum,

chains

Approx. 300 × 160 cm

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#### The artist thanks:

Apo:lonia

Krzysztof Lubka

Lil Autotune

Michal

Gabriel

René

Zaim

Avtomat

Beata

Vladyslav

Livbertine

Mateusz

Joanna Oleksy

Jakub

Palina

Ilan

Ewa

Pont-Levis

Gael

Kasia

Olga

Anna Smoszyńska

Maksim

Danil Vitkovski

Volodymyr Yeremieiev

Oliwer

Mateusz

Aldona Relax

Jakub

DiV4

Terry Rivers

Vani Vachi

Veselka Kyiv

Michal

Dominik

Reflektra

Ciężki Brokat

K-Bar Powiśle

Queer Spaces Network

Queeriety

Fuchs2

Lisa Ortner-Kreil

Paul Mayer

Christian Zagler

Paweł Żukowski

Siggi Hofer

Sophia Hatwagner

Veronika Chambas-Wolf

Emilia Sheikhestani

Remo Cocco

Thomas Gallhuber