

Jiajia Zhang

You Left Something Behind

22. April – 27. August 2023, Kunstmuseum St.Gallen

The first solo museum exhibition by Jiajia Zhang (*1981 Hefei, China) focuses on the relationship between private and public space, which is being redefined by social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The line between what is deemed “public” and “private” has blurred in unprecedented ways, leading to the emergence of what the artist describes as an “intimate public.” Zhang translates this notion into a spatial setting for her exhibition.

Next to three existing video works, the show brings together new video, sculpture, photography and drawing, all made exclusively for the show, within a scenography created for the specific architecture of the sublevel gallery of Kunstmuseum St.Gallen. The artist uses the lack of daylight, the crude materiality of concrete and artificial stone, and the long corridors to create a setting reminiscent of urban non-places such as underpasses or parking garages. Zhang punctuates this setting with moments of domesticity and warmth.

Social Gifts, 2023, the new video Zhang created for the exhibition, shows footage from public, urban space: people taking pictures of themselves in front of landmarks; teenagers meeting. In addition to the people who populate this space and their movements and gestures, Zhang's camera also registers the infrastructure of this space. In the light of the Christmas season, the scenery appears stage-like. Zhang is interested not only in public space as we see it in the video's images, but also in the "new public space" created by the Internet and social media - Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. She asks what kind of new, expanded public sphere is being created by these digital media and how they make public what we have traditionally viewed as private. This renegotiation is the theme of the exhibition. The artist's sculptures, drawings, photographs, and videos relate to it. Selected artworks from the museum's collection are also part of Zhang's presentation. On view are works by David Bürkler (*1936-2016, St.Gallen), Ayşe Erkmen (*1949, Istanbul, Turkey), Sylvie Fleury (*1961, Geneva), Rita McBride (*1960, Des Moines, Iowa, USA), Pablo Picasso (*Malaga, Spain 1881-1973 Mougins, France), Michael E. Smith (*1977 Detroit, MI, USA), and Andreas Schulze (*1955 Hannover, Germany).

Jiajia Zhang lives and works in Zürich. She studied architecture at ETH, Zürich, and photography at the International Center of Photography, New York, and completed her Master of Fine Arts at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste in 2020. Her work has been part of numerous exhibitions, including at Fluentum, Berlin; Swiss Art Awards, Basel; FriArt, Fribourg; and Fondation d'entreprise Pernod Ricard, Paris. She had her first solo exhibition at Coalmine, Winterthur in 2021.

Curated by Melanie Bühler



Jiajia Zhang, *Milestone/Regression*, 2023

5 lamps, installation dimension variable

With its exposed concrete walls and distinctive ramp, the exhibition space in the basement of the Kunstmuseum recalls the architecture of public infrastructure - an architecture that connects inside and outside and exudes functionality and permanence. For her exhibition, Zhang has furnished this space with artworks that reference both public infrastructure and private spaces. In this way, the artist exaggerates the architectural peculiarity of the space on the one hand, and contrasts it with a completely different spatial experience on the other. The domestic lamps she has scattered around the room are one such example. By appearing again and again in the exhibition space, they mark a path. As such, they can also be seen as a scoring system that marks the progression of a computer game. The title *Milestone/Regression* points to this as well: it is a reference to the world of gaming. However, it also denotes the milestones and relapses in the development of a baby.



Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2018

two reclining chairs, each 58 × 81 × 85 cm, installation dimension variable

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, acquired 2018

This installation by American artist Michael E. Smith consists of two chairs facing each other. They are marked by the traces of their previous life - spilled drinks, sweat stains, traces of moving. The chairs stand at precarious angle to each other on the steep ramp leading to the museum's basement. In the context of Zhang's exhibition, there is a friction between this discarded furniture, once part of an interior, and the placement of the objects on the ramp, which is more fitting for a train station underpass than a museum space.



Jiajia Zhang, *Cast (She You She I We She They You I We)*, 2023

Metal, coins, speakers, 485 × 100 × 20 cm

The sculpture *Cast (She You I We They You I We)* is a metal trough filled with coins, papers, and other small items that have been tossed out. Visitors are invited to throw money into this abstracted version of a wishing well. When a coin hits the bottom of the trough, it makes an eerie sound. It references places like the Trevi Fountain in Rome, where collective rituals are performed. Just like in this case, it is often inherent to these rituals to leave something behind.



Jiajia Zhang, *Turning My 97 Year Old Grandma Into Me*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *What's In Your Bag?*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Once is an Accident, Twice is a Coincidence, Three Times is a Pattern*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Maybe She's Born With It (No Dress, No Phone, No Money, No Work)*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *What Utopia Do You Strive For?*, 2023

Bleistift auf Papier, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Toys'r'Us*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Without You I'm Nothing*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Nets*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Watch House*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Best Haul*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Jiajia Zhang, *Pr Pr*, 2023

Pencil on paper, 50 × 35 cm

Throughout the exhibition space, a new series of drawings is shown. Here, collages Zhang had made from Instagram and TikTok images, photos of urban space in Milan, advertisements, and photos of herself in a domestic setting, are drawn.

Depicted are domestic snapshots of caring, introspection, and "self-care": women and girls putting on makeup, the artist giving her baby a bottle, a view of the back of a head with its hair intricately braided, stuffed animals, girls looking at their cell phones or looking at themselves in the mirror. It is an intimate world that can be seen here - a private, domestic world, as it is staged on social media. The drawings were made by artists who usually earn their living by drawing tourists around the Duomo in Milan. Since the drawings carry the signatures of these artists, Zhang reveals that not only her labor went into the production of these works. As such, she brings the conditions of artistic creation into focus: the fact that an infrastructure is needed for the creation of an artwork, i.e., for example, assistants and a network of people.



Jiajia Zhang, *Fenster (Script)*, 2023

Blinds, plexiglass frame, lamp, vinyl, 153 × 300 × 20cm

Fenster (Script) is a new sculpture that Zhang made for the exhibition. It shows a framed, closed shutter that is illuminated from behind. The frame is attached to a wall as if it were a window. This creates an object that is both domestic and uncanny: it suggests a functionality that it doesn't have. Printed on the window pane is a schedule reminiscent of the opening hours of a store, which however, strangely extend far into the night. In reality, the times reflect the waking and nursing hours of Zhang's daughter at the time when Zhang began working on the exhibition. The window thus provides access to the artist's intimate world, her working process and studio, from which the life of a new parent cannot be separated.



Jiajia Zhang, *Switch*, 2023

Blueback photography, 59.4 × 42 cm

The photographs *Switch*, *Rose* and *Indivisibilité* are pasted as posters directly onto the walls of the exhibition space. They show details in the urban space.

Switch shows a button in close-up. In addition to "On" and "Off," there is, amazingly, also a button for "Mood." "Mood management" is a buzzword of our time. The fact that there is a mechanical "mood button" on the pictured device takes this idea ad absurdum.



Andreas Schulze, *Ohne Titel (Fenster London 21)*, 2014

Acrylic on nettle, 60 × 60 × 4.5 cm

acquired by the Kunstverein St.Gallen with funds from the legacy Marguerite Louise Hadorn, Münchenstein, in memory of Dr. Ulrich Diem-Bernet 2015

Andreas Schulze's sober-looking painting shows a cloudy and flattened view through an eye-catching, bulbous window frame. The painting refers to the tension between inside and outside and twists the expectations we normally associate with views and their framings, namely that the view is more important than its framing.



Jiajia Zhang, *Screen*, 2023

HD video, 16:9, 03'38", color, sound

This short video shows a view of a broken screen in public space with a street lamp in front of it. The framing is such that it is initially unclear what the viewer is looking at: whether it is a background that the artist has placed behind what is being filmed, or an actual film. Screens appear again and again in Zhang's art work, which deals with the conditioning of our lives through screens and their content.



Ayşe Erkmen, *Ring*, 2005

Chain of 260 silver rings, 440 cm

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, acquired from Kunstverein St.Gallen 2005

Ayşe Erkmen's sculpture consists of 260 silver rings. They form a chain that the artist stages in spaces in such a way that it serves as a barrier, a cordoning off of spaces. The ring, which also symbolizes marriage, thus becomes an object that marks a boundary. At the same time, the chain as a barrier becomes a decorative motif.



Jiajia Zhang, *Beautiful Mistakes (after LB)*, 2022

HD video, 16:9, 08'58", color, sound

For *Beautiful Mistakes (after LB)*, 2022, fragments of lectures by the late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant provide the soundtrack for a series of images Zhang filmed mostly in front of and inside stores. While Berlant talks about affect and how difficult it is to imagine a world beyond consumerism and capitalism, Zhang shows us people moving in and out department stores. Her camera focuses on feet, moving escalators, doors opening and closing. Brian Eno's music album *Music for Airports*, 1978 can be heard, underlining the melancholic mood of what is filmed and spoken.



Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2018

5 plastic chairs, LED lights, installation dimension variable.

Art Museum St.Gallen, acquired 2018

The plastic chairs, each with a red light, are a work by American artist Michael E. Smith from the museum's collection. The appropriated garden chairs stand oddly in this darkened space that leads to a video by Zhang. Standing in the viewers back, when they watch Zhang's video, they also have a watchful presence. It is unclear whether they are artworks, seating, or discarded furniture objects. This ambivalence interests Zhang, raising fundamental questions such as: What is a work of art? When does an object become a work of art and what role does the context play - the space in which this object/work of art is shown?



Jiajia Zhang, *Social Gifts*, 2023

HD video, 16:9, 13'08", color, sound

Social Gifts, the new video Zhang has created, provides the theme and starting point for the exhibition. It shows the public spaces of Milan and Rome, accompanied by Gertrude Stein's 1936 text "What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," read by Martin Burr, a Swiss actor, whose recording of the text Zhang found online. Imposed onto the images are excerpts from scientific texts, marketing papers and how-to guides on the business model of influencers. Through this collaging, Zhang links the stage that is public city life in Italy, and the particular performativity of this setting, to the flattened-out, commercial performance space of the internet, for which the influencer has become the emblematic figure. By superimposing the opening sentence "What are Influencers and why are there so many of them" when the title of Stein's essay is read, Zhang connects the rarified space of avant-garde artmaking, where value is based on scarcity, to the cultural space of the internet, where profits come with mass quantity and scale of reach. One is drawn to ask: What is a masterpiece? Are they so rare because they are so hard to pin down? Are the bodies that we see moving in and out of shot, while Zhang's camera is trained on the streets of Milan and Rome, masterpieces? Or are they influencers? There are so many of them, and they look for the most part uniform, de-individualized. Yet in the light in which they are captured, in the poses they strike, as their puffy jackets reflect the cold winter light and the colorful Christmas ornaments, in the pattern they become, they look beautiful, meaningful, purposeful.



Jiajia Zhang, *Rose*, 2023

Blueback photography, 84.1 × 59.4 cm

The photographs *Switch*, *Rose* and *Indivisibilité* are pasted as posters directly onto the walls of the exhibition space. They show details in the urban space. *Rose* shows a plastic rose stuck on a branch: inorganic and organic material meet. This raises the question of which of these two elements more "genuinely" represents the idea of the rose: the perfect plastic rose or the withered "natural" branch. As such, this image is also about what is authentic - a question that brought up again and again on social media.



Jiajia Zhang, *Safe Crash*, 2023

found glass, lacquered wooden frame, mirror, vinyl, 25 × 51,5 × 5,5cm

Safe Crash encloses a found pane of yellow safety glass. This so-called "Safe Crash" glass is used for boxes in which fire extinguishers are stored. If you break such a pane with your hand in an emergency, you won't hurt yourself. The pane thus marks a special moment in the transition between inside and outside, danger and protection. Next to the "Safe Crash" logo, the artist has added the line "You Left Something Behind". This phrase is used in online shopping to inform a customer that an item has been placed in the "shopping basket" but has not actually been purchased. *You Left Something Behind* is also the title of the exhibition. The message suggests that someone cares by following up on you. In truth, it is a symptom of the reality online that meticulously tracks and registers all of our behavior.

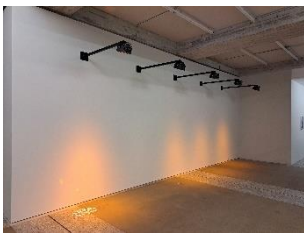


Rita McBride, *Awnings*, 2000

Metal construction, tarpaulin, 2 parts, 91 × 34 × 40 cm and 121 × 41 × 32 cm.

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, loan from private collection

Rita McBride's sculpture *Awnings* refers to the canopies seen over entrances to boutiques or restaurants. Like other artworks Zhang has selected for the exhibition, it addresses the tension between inside and outside: the object cannot be clearly assigned to one of the two spheres.



Jiajia Zhang, *Chore (1-5: care, compassion, courage, communication, commitment)*, 2023
programmed lamps, 6-piece, metal, installation dimension variable

On the right side of the ramp a row of five lamps is installed, the heads of which are directed at a blank wall. These are the type of industrial lamps used to illuminate large advertising spaces. Here in the exhibition space, Zhang has manipulated the light from these lamps so that it glows warmly and dimly. During the opening hours of the exhibition, the lamps switch on and off in a certain rhythm.

This is based on the duration of the various tasks that structure the life of a caregiver of a newborn: Changing diapers, rocking the baby, breastfeeding. The time structure thus follows a daily rhythm that has nothing to do with the exhibition space and its operations. Hence the lamps appear in the wrong place at the wrong time - and yet they reflect the rhythm in which the exhibition was created.



Jiajia Zhang, *Garderobe*, 2023

Cartel coat hook

These two designer coat hangers with their round buttons are placed in the room in such a way that they resemble a pair of eyes. Seeing and being seen and the tension between surveillance and attention inherent to social media, are central theme in Zhang's art and is given an object-like realization here.



David Bürkler, *Schachtelkörper*, 1996

Sheet steel with gray car paint, brown corrugated cardboard, 90 × 100 × 75 cm.

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, donation of the gallery Adrian Bleisch 2017

The sculpture *Schachtelkörper* by the St.Gallen artist David Bürkler, who died in 2016, is a work that confronts a familiar object, a cardboard box, with an unfamiliar materiality: steel. As a result, we suddenly see the familiar object differently. In the context of Zhang's exhibition, the box becomes a hybrid of two worlds: the cardboard packages we know from the many Amazon and eBay purchases arriving at our doorsteps and the polished steel that also shines prominently in underpasses and train stations.



Pablo Picasso, *Mère et enfants*, 1953

Etching, 25.9 × 30.8 cm

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, Deposit of the Gottfried Keller Foundation, Federal Office of Culture, Bern, Donation Georges Bloch 1973

Zhang has included an artwork by Pablo Picasso in her exhibition - the artist with whom the concept of the masterpiece is perhaps most associated. Picasso was a good friend of American writer, publisher and art collector Gertrude Stein, whose text "What Are Master-Pieces And Why Are There So Few of Them" serves as the voice-over in Zhang's new film *Social Gifts*, 2023. Moreover, the image depicts a mother with two children in her own home. The etching thus also depicts a theme (domesticity and family) that is central to Zhang's exhibition.



Sylvie Fleury, *Elite Shopping Bags*, 1997

Objects, shopping bags with different contents, installation dimension variable

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, deposit from private collection

An important theme in Zhang's art is the role of women. In her work, she repeatedly examines the role models available to women, girls, and mothers as propagated by consumerism, marketing, and via social media. Sylvie Fleury's work *Elite Shopping Bags* consists of a fashion magazine and shopping bags filled with purchases placed on the floor. The bags carry the branding of stores such as Chanel, H&M and Elite. They look like they were just put down on the floor by the artist after she came home and closed the door behind her. Fleury's work, which can be attributed to Pop Art, focuses on the female shopping experience. Like many of Zhang's works, *Elite Shopping Bags* raises questions about the forms of identity and stereotypes popular culture and consumption provides to women.



Jiajia Zhang, *Indivisibilité*, 2023

Blueback photography, 59.4 × 42 cm

The photographs *Switch*, *Rose* and *Indivisibilité* are pasted as posters directly onto the walls of the exhibition space. They show details in the urban space.

Zhang photographed this word written on the wall in Milan. *Indivisibilité* means *indivisibility*. The word contains the words "visibilité" and "individualité": visibility and individuality. It thus sums up the statements made about influencers in Zhang's new film *Social Gifts*, 2023: without individuality and without an "authentic self," as one of the quotes inserted in the film puts it, there is no visibility.



Jiajia Zhang, *Untitled (After Love)*, 2021

HD video, 16:9, 16'26", color, sound

Zhang's video collages often have a thematic reference. *Untitled (After Love)*, 2021, for example, refers to the theme of family. This work, for which the artist also uses footage from her own family archive, is about the hopes, expectations, and dreams of family members for each other and for themselves.



Jiajia Zhang, *ma, da, ah, oh, no*, 2023

Chain with pendant, installation dimension variable

The heart locks consist of two hearts flowing into each other. Sounds are written on the locks: "ma, da, ah, oh, no", the first sounds a baby makes in its speech development. Thus, they can be read as a symbol of the dependence between mother and child, and its gradual detachment. The locks are also a reference to urban space and the way people immortalize themselves in it: we know small locks like these that tourists hang on bridges and other landmarks. So this work is also about what we leave behind and how the personal becomes public.



Jiajia Zhang, *Between the Acts*, 2022

HD video, 16:9, 38'33", color, sound

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, acquired by the Society of Friends of Fine Arts 2023

In *Between the Acts*, 2022, short film sequences of varying intensities follow one another. One is taken on a journey that can be described as an emotional roller coaster: An addictive maelstrom. For example, a slapstick clip from the film "Singin' in the Rain" (from 1952 by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly) is followed by a news clip of a clothing store being looted in St. Monica. Weighty statements about the current state of the world are juxtaposed with computer-generated images. A scene from a 1970s German costume drama is followed by images of a car driving through a storm, accompanied by a child's voice explaining to her mother in poetic abstract analogies how she should behave. The result is a *stream of content* in image and sound, with whose heterogeneity of "high" and "low culture," near and far, subtle and catastrophic we have become familiar through the Internet and which eludes traditional cultural categories.

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