

MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA BADEN-BADEN

PRESS RELEASE

MARGARET AND CHRISTINE WERTHEIM VALUE AND TRANSFORMATION OF CORALS

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Margaret and Christine Wertheim and the Institute For Figuring, Pod World - Hyperbolic at the 2019 Venice Biennale, Photo courtesy 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, May You Live In Interesting Times, by Francesco Galli

Coral reefs all over the world are being devastated by global warming. In response to this environmental tragedy, artist sisters Margaret and Christine Wertheim have been creating a handicraft retort. Their Crochet Coral Reef is at once a vast simulation of colors and forms inspired by the Great Barrier Reef and a collective act of art-making that engages thousands of people around the globe. An elegant mix of art, science, mathematics and community practice – realized through the lens of craft – the project was exhibited at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Now, Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden presents a comprehensive tribute to

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the two artists' oeuvre in the form of a museum-wide installation. Udo Kittelmann, artistic director of the museum, has curated the exhibition in close cooperation with the Wertheims.

The World's Coral Reefs Under Threat

As the first living thing seen from outer space, the Great Barrier Reef stretches over 344,000 square kilometers. Yet in the past few decades 60% of this aquatic marvel has been sickened by coral bleaching, and vast areas of once vibrant life are now dead. To the traditional stressors of over-fishing, tourism, and agricultural run-off are now added the pressures of warming water temperatures and ocean acidification, both consequences of humanity's petrochemical enslavement. The Crochet Coral Reef project offers a tender reflection on this anthropogenic crisis by presenting an artistic installation that is both intimate and monumental, resulting from craftwork privately performed and publicly displayed.

Margaret und Christine Wertheim

The unusual mix of art and science in the Crochet Coral Reef project reflects the Wertheims' professional and personal lives. In addition to working as an artist, Margaret is an internationally acclaimed science writer and author of books on the cultural history of physics. Christine, a poet and former painter, has for decades taught critical studies and art theory at Goldsmith's College in London and at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. Having grown up sewing their own clothes, the sister's integration of craft with conceptual frameworks from science and art is also overtly feminist. Their project follows in the tradition of Judy Chicago's beloved artwork *The Dinner Party* and Mierle Ukeles' pioneering acts of 'social practice' art.

Since they started their project in 2005, the Wertheims have worked with communities in 50 cities and countries to craft local crochet reefs. To date almost 20,000 people – most of them women – have contributed to these installations. In Baden-Baden the project has elicited an unprecedented response. More than 40,000 corals have arrived at the museum. Across Germany, an entire community has joined together in the spirit of creativity to draw attention to the crisis facing the world's seas.

Integrating Crafts Usually Associated with Women

It is no coincidence that craft usually associated with women is the subject of numerous exhibitions and reevaluations that recognize subtle messages about self-determination, silent rebellion, and feminist protest inter-woven with easily available textile materials and practices.

At the same time, the project also encompasses a mathematical dimension – for the forms crafted here are based on hyperbolic geometry, an alternative to the Euclidean variety we usually learn. All the frilly shapes encountered in this exhibition are craft-based simulations of the mathematical forms which corals and other marine organisms embody. Through crocheting in thread, the makers who create these works are engaged in a kind of applied

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mathematics, linking craft and geometry to climate change, and also to the evolution of life on Earth. " Just as living things evolve through small changes to an underlying DNA code, so the Crochet Coral Reef evolves through small changes to an underlying crochet code. Thus, there is an emerging taxonomy of crochet coral 'organisms.'" the two sisters said.

What People Say about the Exhibition

The Californian philosopher Donna Haraway, who has drawn attention to a new definition of the relationship between human and non-human creatures, writes in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: "The crochet coral reef is a SF story of string figures, science fact, science fiction, stitched fantasies, and speculative fabulation. This hyperbolic reef is material, figurative, collaborative, tentacular, worldly, dispersed within the tissues and across the surfaces of terra, playful, serious, mathematical, artistic, scientific, fabulous, feminist, exceeding gender, and multispeciesist."

Udo Kittelmann: "The mysterious beauty and diversity of corals are endlessly adaptable; they form an entire ecosystem and hence form an essential part of our existence. Today, these artful creatures are losing their beauty worldwide as a result of dramatic climate change. It is a race against time in which humankind that has no choice but to act and take decisive measures." He continues: „In today's world, it is becoming increasingly vital for art to transcend its own frontiers and explore other disciplines and dimensions – if it is to change anything of import in this world. I regard cultural institutions, including museums, as specific places in a time in which the limits of politicians' visionary capabilities are becoming ever clearer and it is becoming increasingly important to include and integrate artists' ideas in the way we shape our society and our world

Museum director Henning Schaper is looking forward to the exhibition and is delighted with the response to the call to crochet: "The project "Crochet Coral Reef" by Margaret and Christine Wertheim, which has already drawn praise around the world, is now being presented in Baden-Baden and taken a step further in a museum-wide installation. We can expect not just an extraordinary exhibition; the creative process alone involved in setting up the exhibition is extremely dynamic and quite inspiring. The almost countless new coral crochets sent in to us are taking root throughout the entire house."

In conjunction with the exhibition, a comprehensive catalog is being published with 240 pages and many illustrations, featuring essays and articles by Margaret Wertheim, Christine Wertheim, Donna Haraway, Heather Davis, Kayleigh Perkov, Amita Deshpande, Doug Harvey, Cord Riechelmann and Udo Kittelmann. There is also an extensive supporting program, details of which will be published shortly on the museums' website.

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